



I was recently asked to review the latest version of Dr.Explain (version 4.10.822). As a long time Adobe RoboHelp user who recently flirted with Madcap Flare, I was intrigued by what it has to offer.

It would be fair to say that to most Technical Writers Dr.Explain would not be top of their “must have” list, but I wondered why. I last looked at what the tool could do nearly 15 years ago when I was selecting a help authoring tool at a start-up. Our profession has changed immeasurably in that time, so surely it was time for another look. Could our profession’s impression of Dr.Explain be misguided?

This review is split into the following sections:

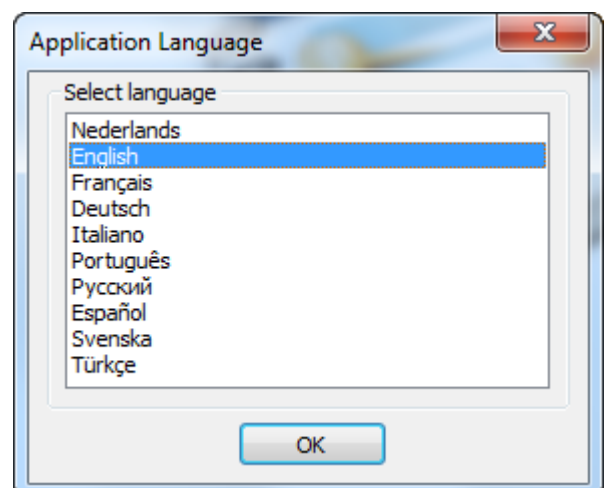
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Installation

Installing Dr.Explain was simple enough. Downloading and extracting a zipped file revealed a single setup.exe file. A simple install wizard led you through the install with little need or no need to change any options. That is not to say that there aren’t any options. Once inside the application you’ll discover an Options menu with options split into sections for projects, importing and the application.

Part of the install (and the options once installed) is to select the language you want to use. Ten languages are supported, all left to right. This is significantly less than other help authoring tools on the market.

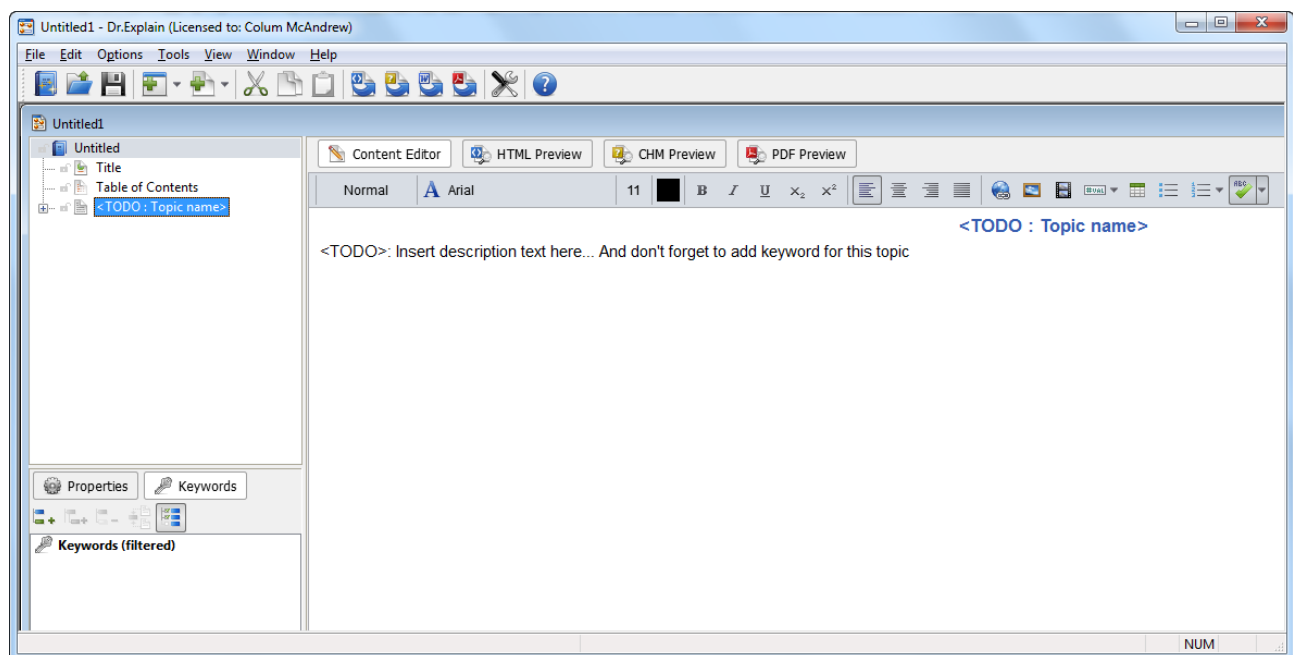
At first sight it appears there is no differentiation between dialects or regional differences (e.g. US and UK English). However things are not quite as they seem. In the spelling options you can at least



define whether to check against a US or UK dictionary. This is as far as the functionality goes though.

Initial Impressions

Getting used to a new application is always a bit of an adventure, especially when you spend so much time in one designed to work in a different way. I was surprised at just how easy it was to create a project, add some content and generate the output. In fact I pretty much got the hang of how most things were done in an afternoon. There aren't many help authoring tools that you can say the same about.



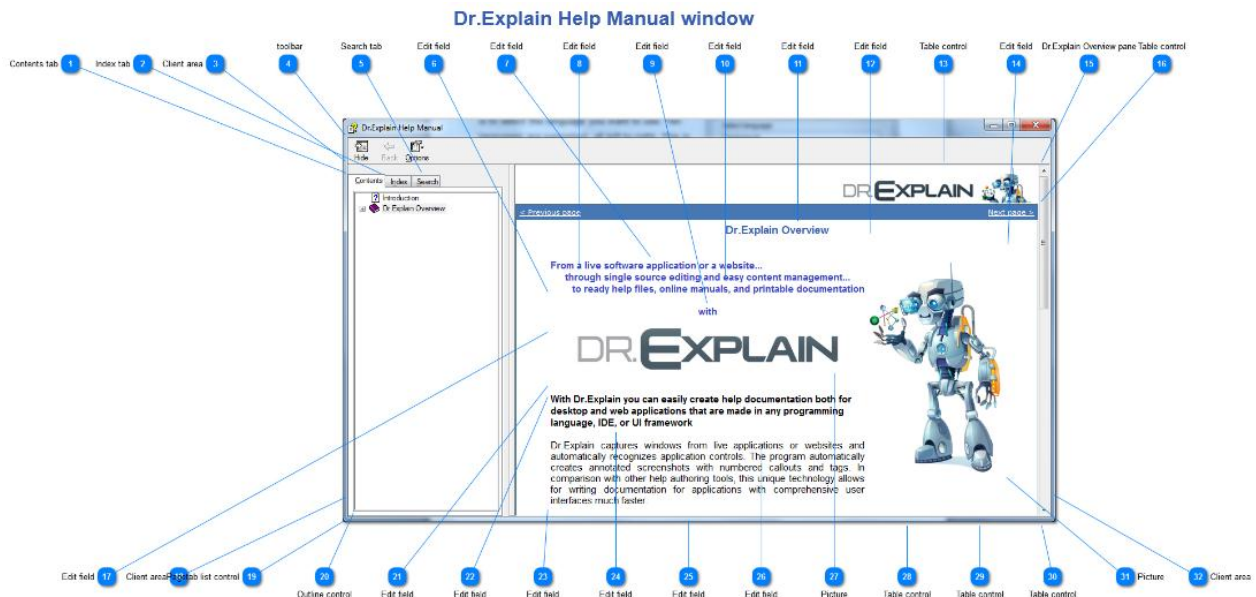
Dr.Explain's UI is uncluttered with functionality accessed through a series of toolbar icons, menu items and right click menus. There are even keyboard shortcuts although some appear a little bizarre. The lack of a ribbon interface is a little dated, but it didn't detract me from what I was doing.

A big plus point for a new user were the proliferation of tooltips and bubbles that appear in various locations throughout the application. However I couldn't find a way of turning off the help bubbles. I could see these becoming slightly annoying after a while.

Adding Content

Dr.Explain allows you to add content in all the usual ways, but one of its strengths is the way it allows users to generate annotated screenshots. All you have to do is open up the application window being documented, create a new window, select the UI element and let Dr.Explain do the rest.

The tool does everything you'd expect, perhaps even more than you'd expect. Like a screen reader looking for links and text, I suspect it trawls through the UI looking for anything it can identify. The results you get may well depend a lot of how the application you are capturing has been developed.



The results above are taken from the Dr.Explain help file. As you can see it has captured 32 different UI elements, many of which have no function! This means that inevitably you will have to do some post capture editing. In this case this means removing numerous UI elements called "Edit Field". However this is easy enough.

One nice feature is the ability to lock various project elements preventing changes from being made. I'm not sure whether this would be too useful in the cold light of day, but it got my attention. Maybe I was reminded of those occasions when I've deleted or irrevocably edited the wrong topic.

Another feature is the "To Do List" that automatically appears in each new topic. By default it says, "Insert description text here... And don't forget to add keyword for this topic". Perhaps I'd forgive the grammatical and punctuation errors (sic) if you didn't have to remove the text in every topic in order for it not to be displayed in the output.

You can add video to a topic. However this either requires you to have it located on a hosting site like YouTube or Vimeo or have the embed code to display it.

Reusing Content

Variable functionality is available allowing you to change a value wherever it is used in the project. Unlike most other tools, this functionality is limited to text values. It also seems to be

Variables	
Variables	
Variable	Value
Product Name	Dr.Explain
Version	4.10.822
Year	2013
<New variable...>	

limited to topic text. It would have been nice if this had been extended to topic titles, the TOC and elsewhere.

There is also no snippet functionality.

Personally I have always been a little sceptical of the real benefit of having snippets available

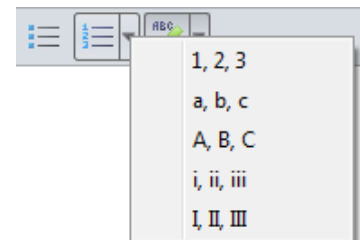
if they can't be positioned inside another project element (e.g. a paragraph). That aside, I do use them on a limited scale. I also recognise that with the right use case, they can be useful.

Formatting Content

One of the strengths of any content curation tool is its ability to allow the look and feel of the content to be changed. What follows are a few observations of some of Dr.Explain's formatting functionality.

Tables: Dr.Explain may not have the table functionality of more expensive applications, but it allows you to do many of the things you'd want. Its limitations are mainly around not being able to define a table width to anything other than a percentage value. Yes you can click and drag a table width using the mouse, but the physical pixel or other measurement value is hidden from view. The same goes for column width and height. I really missed not having the same level of control as found in other applications.

Bullets: There is a means of adding unordered and ordered lists, but this is limited. Unordered lists offer only one level of bullet. Ordered lists offer three levels. Whilst this maybe all some people want, I'd want a lot more control over the look and feel of my bullets.



Styles: Dr.Explain comes out of the box with five styles, including a useful Courier font "Code" style and an italicised "Quote" style. It is easy enough to change or create styles, although the style properties are limited to font, size and colour. If you thought you could create new bullet styles to address my previous point, you'd be wrong as you can't define the bullet symbol or tab position.

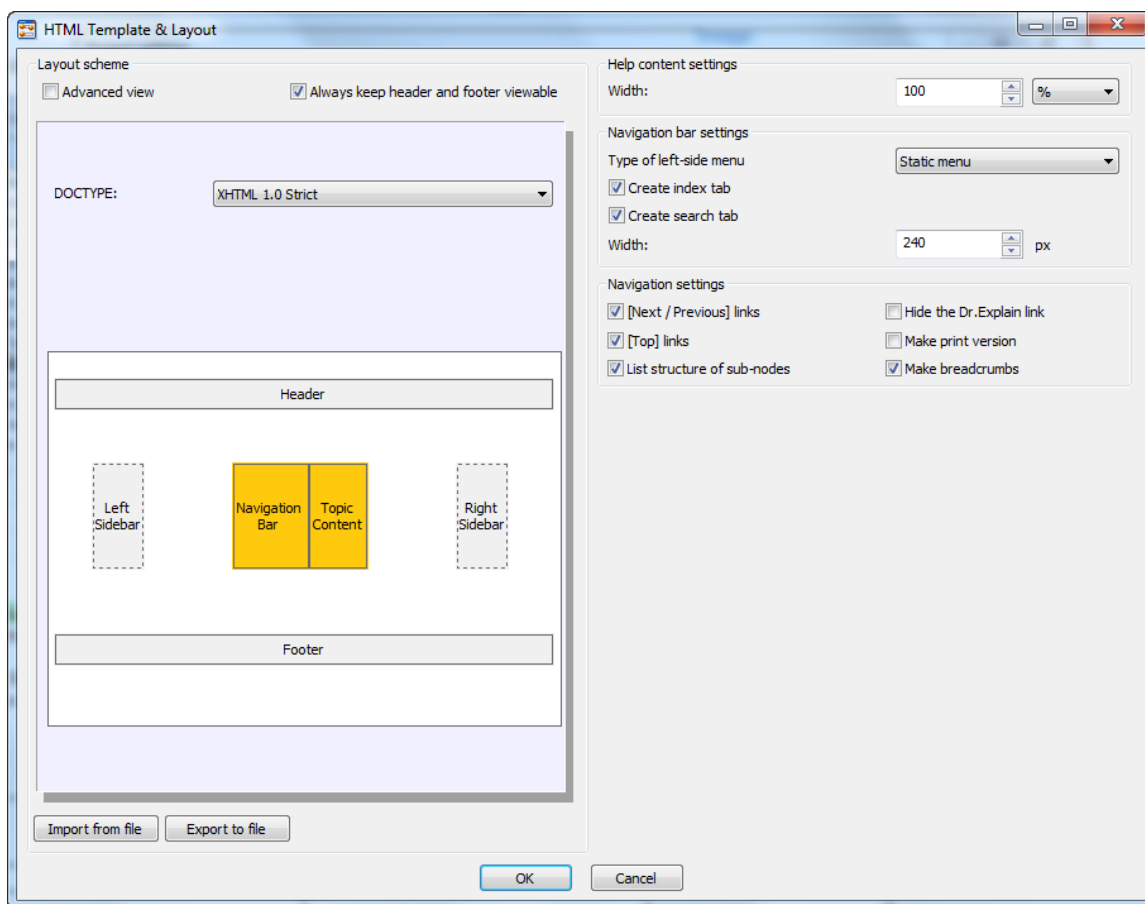
Generating Output

Arguably generating your output is one of two key areas that will help you decide to go with Dr.Explain or another help authoring tool, the other being the ability to generate annotated screenshots (see above).

With Dr.Explain you are limited to outputting to:

- .PDF
- .CHM
- .RTF
- HTML

I mostly tested the HTML output as it is what I normally use. The ease with which the output was generated was welcome. There is even a validation tool that can be run to check for any potential problems. This can be run standalone or as part of the output generation process. You can specify whether your output's code standard is XHTML 1.0 or HTML5 according to your specific requirements.



You can specify and change a skin to change the HTML's appearance and specify a layout, something that also exists with CHM output. However changes are mainly limited to changing the colour of skin elements. Additionally you can add additional CSS at generation time to override Dr.Explain's defaults.

The HTML output has the added functionality of being able to enable Facebook and Disqus commenting out of the box. It can also add the ability to share content to various social media channels. A nice touch if you require this sort of thing.

Miscellaneous

Other useful features of Dr.Explain are the ability to:

- Import settings from another project. Are you listening Adobe and Madcap?
- Create a Google sitemap.

Summary

Dr.Explain is an easy tool to use once you get your head around how the various elements work. It certainly helped me having knowledge of other applications, but a first time Technical Writer should be able to get up and running fairly quickly. The help file is pretty good for those occasions when you trip up as well.

It would be fair to say that Dr.Explain's market is not the same as Adobe RoboHelp's, Madcap Flare's or AuthorIt's. It lacks the heavy duty functionality of these players, but copes pretty well with what it offers. It has some nice touches, but if you want an all singing all dancing help authoring tool, this is not for you. If however you just want to create a simple help file with minimal effort and are not too worried about being limited to a few types of output, Dr.Explain is definitely worth a look. At £180 for an advanced licence, it is 4-5 times cheaper than the main players in this market. For the price it is a capable product well worth looking at.