

# Textual help system based on vim

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I describe a reference system I use to index and find textual information quickly. I wanted the following things for my reference system:

1. Minimize coding
2. Use hyperlinks
3. Highlighting by color coding
4. Fast navigation
5. Self-contained
6. Run on many platforms

I'd been mulling this reference system over for a number of years in the 1990's. I'd been using my help files for a few decades, but I had to open them up manually and remember their names. I used a shell script to do this work on UNIX boxes. I was thinking I was going to have to write a tool in C and I didn't want to do all the work for this.

One day in the early 2000's it struck me that I was already using a good tool for the job, vim, an improved version of the vi editor. I could adapt vim's help system to view my help files, as they were all plain ASCII text (however, vim works well with Unicode and these files can contain most Unicode characters you'd want to use). Navigation would be easy because I would be using a tool I was already familiar with.

In an hour or so, I had my reference system set up and working. I already had around 20000 lines of reference text set up. I was viewing that information with hyperlinks after another hour or two of fiddling. Now I could focus on content rather than generating the tool.

Some of the advantages of this solution are:

- ◆ Most of the needed functionality was already available. I used to use a mish-mash of various tools (C programs and shell scripts/functions), but in Mar 2022, I wrote a single python script to do the work.
- ◆ Once the hyperlinks (tags) are set up, navigation is fast. These "hyperlinks" must only contain characters used for identifiers in the C programming language.
- ◆ My help files are free form. I can put in whatever textual information I want.
- ◆ vim allows you to customize your solution through its many options and scripting capabilities.

A disadvantage is that I'm limited to Unicode text. This isn't a severe problem, as I use other tools I've written for stuff that needs a GUI to display.

## How to use

If you have the git repository installed, run the `build.py` script. This will populate the `output` directory with the help files. Move this directory to wherever you want it. To read the help, open the file `output/index.hlp` and press `control-[` on any of the words to open the file associated with that word.

Use the `-h` option to the `build.py` script to learn about the script and how to modify the help files.