Abstract

Introduction

Information Mapping® is a structured writing method with a long and successful history. It has proven its worth in thousands of companies all over the world, and stands the test of time and technological evolution.

DITA, on the other hand, is the rising star in the world of XML-based authoring. I’m sure you have come across the term already, or maybe your company considers moving to DITA for its technical publications.

Information Mapping® and DITA are often juxtaposed. Some consider both as tools, others consider both as methods. Both groups are wrong.

In this white paper, we will compare Information Mapping® to DITA and explain why it does not make sense to move from Information Mapping® to DITA, or vice versa. Information Mapping® and DITA both have their strengths and weaknesses, and combining them may lead to the best results for an organization. Let’s find out how.

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Do Not Confuse Information Mapping® and DITA

**Definitions**

Information Mapping® is a structured writing method that helps writers analyze, organize, and present information based on the audience’s needs and the purpose of the information.

The Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) is an XML-based architecture for authoring, producing, and delivering information.¹

**Similarities**

Information Mapping® and DITA are often – wrongfully - considered as similar tools or methods. We understand where that confusion comes from:

- DITA based some of its concepts on work done by Robert E. Horn on Information Mapping®, in particular the concept of information types:

  "Information typing is part of the general authoring approach called structured writing, which is used across the technical authoring industry to improve information quality. It is based on extensive research and experience, including Robert Horn’s Information Mapping, and Hughes Aircraft’s STOP (Sequential Thematic Organization of Proposals)."²

- Both Information Mapping® and DITA define basic units of information that allow for modular writing and information reuse. The units of information in Information Mapping® are Maps and Blocks, in DITA they are referred to as Maps and Topics.

- Both Information Mapping® and DITA promote writing reusable, modular, and topic-based content.

**Difference**

Watch out never to confuse Information Mapping® and DITA because

- Information Mapping® is a *method* supported by technology, and
- DITA is a *technological solution* for structuring content.

In other words,

- Information Mapping® is *not* a tool or technology, and
- DITA is *not* a method.

Let’s dive into the similarities and differences in more detail now by means of a side-by-side comparison.

Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA

In the table below, we will compare the following aspects of Information Mapping® and DITA:

- premise
- subject matter
- writing principles
- units of information
- information types
- specialization, and
- outputs.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Information Mapping®</th>
<th>DITA</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tr>
<td>Premise</td>
<td>A proprietary method for analyzing, organizing and presenting information.</td>
<td>An open XML-based architecture and technology framework for reusing information and single-source publishing.</td>
<td>This is the most important difference: method versus technology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject matter</td>
<td>Subject matter independent: Information Mapping® supports technical as well as business-oriented content.</td>
<td>Task-based: DITA is designed to structure technical content related to product use. However, an OASIS subcommittee is moving towards business communications.</td>
<td>This difference relates to the origin: DITA was originally developed by IBM, Information Mapping® was conceived by cognitive psychologist Robert E. Horn.</td>
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<td>Writing principles</td>
<td>6 research-based principles:</td>
<td>No principles defined except for the concept of a Topic standing on its own.</td>
<td>Information Mapping®’s principles provide guidelines to writers to ensure that their content is organized and presented in a useful and effective way for the reader. There is no equivalent in DITA.</td>
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<td>• Chunking</td>
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Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA, Continued

Side-by-side comparison (continued)

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<th>DITA</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Units of information</td>
<td>Writer- and reader oriented units:</td>
<td>Structure-oriented units:</td>
<td>The size, content and nature of a DITA Topic is more loosely defined than the Information Mapping® Map and Block. The latter are designed to help writers apply the 6 research-based principles to their writing. Although DITA does not have a real equivalent for Blocks, Information Mapping® Blocks can be simulated by means of sections in DITA.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Block: a relevant chunk of information with a label</td>
<td>• Topic: small enough to answer a single question and large enough to stand on its own</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Map: a group of related Blocks with a title.</td>
<td>• Map: an organizational structure of topics, often in a hierarchical sequence</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Information Types</td>
<td>6 information types:</td>
<td>3 information types:</td>
<td>DITA’s information types are more loosely defined, which may confuse the writer (e.g. “where to put process information?”). DITA allows specialization of information types, whereas Information Mapping® says that nearly all information can be classified into the 6 information types.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Principle</td>
<td>• Task</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Structure</td>
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### Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA, Continued

#### Side-by-side comparison (continued)

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specialization</td>
<td>No specialization required because</td>
<td>DITA allows adding new elements and attributes through specialization of base DITA elements and attributes, e.g. for specific industries.(^3)</td>
<td>Information Mapping® is more explicit in Information Typing than DITA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outputs</td>
<td>The Information Mapping® method is a method and can as such be used in any tool to generate any output.</td>
<td>The open-source DITA Open Toolkit produces several output formats, including PDF, XHTML, Microsoft Compiled HTML Help, Eclipse Help, Java Help, Oracle Help and Rich Text Format.</td>
<td>The DITA schema and Open Toolkit are already integrated in several leading XML editors and content management systems. The DITA Open toolkit is the most used publishing engine: 73.3% of respondents to a DITA survey indicate they use the Open Toolkit.(^4)</td>
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Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA, Continued

Strengths and weaknesses of DITA

**Strengths**
DITA was designed to enable single-source and multi-channel publishing. As such, it can be a great solution for (primarily large) organizations to:

- increase content reuse
- reduce localization costs, as reused content does not have to be translated anymore, and
- reduce DTP costs, because rendering the deliverables is managed by XSL style sheets.

With DITA, writers can focus on the content, which is completely separated from the publishing format.

**Weaknesses**
Implementing DITA can have a huge impact on an organization:

- The total project cost can be high (licenses for authoring and/or publishing tools, technical consultancy, training, conversion of legacy content), so you need a strong business case before you can start such a project.
- The change management should not be underestimated: new workflows for authoring, reviewing and publishing content often have to be implemented.
- Converting legacy content is often a major challenge, as the speed and cost of the conversion depends on the structure of the existing content.

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Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA, Continued

Strengths and weaknesses of DITA (continued)

The impact on the authors is significant too. They do not necessarily write better content when they use DITA, and they have to

- become familiar with topic-based authoring:

“Moving to the DITA oriented paradigm is a challenge. [...] DITA is not just about tools or wrapping content into DITA elements (although the latter seems to be an issue as well). It is about making a major change in the document-centric mindset and moving to the topic-oriented approach.”

- learn hundreds of DITA tags and attributes to structure the content correctly. This requires some technical background as well as training and coaching.

“DITA offers significant advantages in publishing utility and easy information re-use, but it provides very little useful guidance for authors. It professes that writing DITA content is simple, but this really means “simple for highly trained technical people who are familiar with DITA and XML.”

Or, as a speaker at DITA Europe 2010 put it: “The best technology in the world is only as good as the user.”

Strengths and weaknesses of Information Mapping®

Strengths

Information Mapping® is a method designed to solve the challenges readers, writers and organizations face. It helps

- readers to find information easily and understand what they read immediately
- writers to analyze complex information, structure it according to the reader’s needs and purpose of the content, and present the information in a clear and accessible way
- organizations to increase productivity and operational efficiency, reuse content, communicate clearly and in plain language, get compliance documentation under control and capture employee knowledge and best practices.

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6 DITA and Information Mapping® – Achieving the Best of Both Worlds, by Doug Gorman, Simply XML.
Comparative analysis: Information Mapping® versus DITA, Continued

The Information Mapping® method is industry-, output- and tool-independent.

**Weaknesses**
Information Mapping®

- works best when it is embraced by the entire organization. When only a handful of writers use Information Mapping® in their writing, their content will be better, but not necessarily consistent within an organization. To achieve best results, Information Mapping® needs to be adopted throughout an organization.
- Is still often perceived as a paper-only solution:

  “Today IM is still considered very paper-centric and adapting it to an electronic medium requires more effort than simply using it in its native context.”

- misses a strong technological pillar in order to constitute a complete end-to-end solution. Information Mapping®’s FS Pro software is an add-on for Microsoft Word allowing users to apply the method in their writing and save content as HTML or XML. However,

  “[...] its XML solution lacks the completeness of technical structure necessary to promote higher end publishing and information re-use. FS Pro does not enforce the XML document structure during the authoring process, which means that authors can unknowingly create and save invalid content.”

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7 Source: [http://blog.platinumsolutions.com/node/246](http://blog.platinumsolutions.com/node/246)

8 DITA and Information Mapping® – Achieving the Best of Both Worlds, by Doug Gorman, Simply XML.
When Information Mapping® and DITA Meet

Embrace the differences

It is important not to draw the wrong conclusions from our side-by-side comparison of Information Mapping® and DITA. They are essentially different and both have their strengths and weaknesses. For you, however, it is important to embrace the differences between both.

Building on Information Mapping® and DITA

Have you ever considered combining Information Mapping® and DITA?

- DITA is a solid XML architecture that allows you to author and publish content in a uniform way.
- Information Mapping® provides the necessary guidelines and principles to allow a team of writers to write in a clear, modular and accessible way for all readers.
- Both promote topic-based writing and information re-use.

Your organization can only benefit from the combination of Information Mapping® and DITA. Before you start your DITA project, train your writers in Information Mapping®. This will make them feel more at ease during the conversion to DITA, because they will

- already understand the concept of topic-based writing, and
- possess a crucial skill set that guides them in writing in a clear and user-focused way within the DITA topic.

Becoming familiar with Information Mapping® is a necessary first step towards a successful DITA implementation. Forgetting this step may jeopardize the project because authors may feel lost:

“Questions about the people who create, edit, manage and architect DITA content? What are their skills sets? How did they make the move to writing topic-based content? Did they get training? What classes?”

I am not just making this up: there are organizations who have already successfully combined Information Mapping® and DITA.

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When Information Mapping® and DITA Meet, Continued

Case Study: ITT Flygt

ITT Flygt implemented a new dynamic publishing system to improve information quality and lower costs and time. One of the keys to the success of their project was combining Information Mapping® and DITA:

“The new system is based on Information Mapping (IMAP), a methodology of structured writing built on behavioral science, and the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) as the data structure for capturing information. The combination of DITA and IMAP makes it easy for ITT Flygt to author and present content in a consistent manner. [...]”

The topic-based approach required some changes to the organization. In the past, technical writers were responsible for all documents related to a particular product line and did not collaborate with one another. Now, each writer is responsible for one or more topics used across multiple product lines. The advantage of DITA and Information Mapping is that the author does not need to know how or where the information will be used when creating it.”

Setting the example

In order to assist Information Mapping® writers who want to write in DITA, Information Mapping® is developing – in collaboration with some of the most renowned technology vendors – an Information Mapping® specialization of DITA. This specialization will then be integrated in leading XML authoring and content management tools to provide the perfect environment for documentation projects to become a success.

About Information Mapping International

Who are we?  
Information Mapping International nv is a privately-held company that delivers the Information Mapping® licenses to corporate clients and organizations through the worldwide Information Mapping® Partner network.

The method  
We are the originator of the Information Mapping® method, a systematic, research-based approach for capturing information and knowledge and developing high-quality, structured content.

Global Partners  
Information Mapping® is represented in over 20 countries servicing the international community in many different languages.

The Information Mapping® Partners provide Information Mapping® training and technology, as well as writing and consulting services. Please visit our website for a comprehensive list of Information Mapping® Partners.