Benefits and Liabilities of Microsoft HTML Help

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What we'll cover in this session

- What's special about HTML Help?
- What are the alternatives to HTML Help?
- What are the advantages of HTML Help?
- What are the limitations and risks of HTML Help?
- To what extent does Microsoft itself use HTML Help?
- How should I decide whether to use HTML Help?

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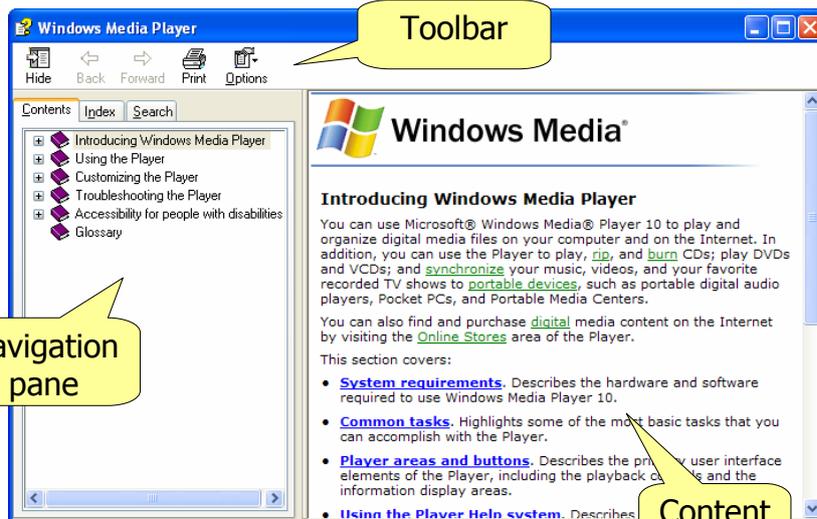WritersUA • ANNUAL CONFERENCE

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What's special about HTML Help?

- It's a proprietary Microsoft format that runs only on the Windows (95+) platform
- It's compressed/compiled into a single (.chm) file
- It relies on an ActiveX Control (HHCTRL.OCX) for much of its functionality
- It's displayed in its own dedicated Help viewer

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A typical HTML Help system

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Special files associated with CHMs

- CHI
- CHW (see later)

CHI File

- Saves index in external file
- Used by MSDN
- May speed up access of Help from CDROM
- But: stops CHMs being merged successfully in modular Help systems
- Not supported by HATs
- Add to project (.hhp) file:
  ```
  [OPTIONS]
  Create CHI file=Yes
  ```

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What are the alternatives to HTML Help?

- Standard HTML
- Turnkey browser-based Help:
  - WebHelp (Adobe)
  - WebHelp (MadCap Software)
  - NetHelp (ComponentOne)
  - WebWorks Help (Quadralay)
- Help requiring proprietary viewer
  - DotNetHelp (MadCap Software)
- Microsoft Help 2
- Eclipse Help (Eclipse Foundation)
- Java-based Help
  - JavaHelp (Sun)
  - Oracle Help for Java (Oracle)

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What are the advantages of HTML Help?

	HTML Help	Turnkey Browser-based Help	Standard HTML
Single compiled file	✓	✗	✗
Expanding/collapsing TOC	✓	✓	✗
Multi-level index with keyword entry box	✓	(✓)	✗
Boolean full-text search with keyword highlighting	✓	(✓)	✗
Fully supports dynamic merging (modular Help)	✓	(✓)	✗
Supports shortcuts (calls to executable files)	✓	✗	✗

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What are the advantages of HTML Help?

	HTML Help	Turnkey Browser-based Help	Standard HTML
Supports dynamic links (ALinks)	✓	(✓)	✗
Has own API for linking from software applications	✓	(✓)	✗
Provides "Close Window" command	✓	✗	✗
Supports Training Card Help	✓	✗	✗
Provides built-in support for (text-only) popups	✓	✓+	✗

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One of HTML Help's Unique Selling Propositions: Dynamic Merging

- Enables **Modular Help**
- Multiple CHM files merged at run-time so they behave as a single seamless Help system (apparently one CHM)
  - Merged TOC
  - Merged index
  - Full-text search across all merged CHMs
  - Dynamic links (ALinks) potentially target all CHMs within the merged set

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Typical Configuration

Main.chm

> May have very little content

Typically: single directory

Sub1.chm

Sub2.chm

Sub3.chm
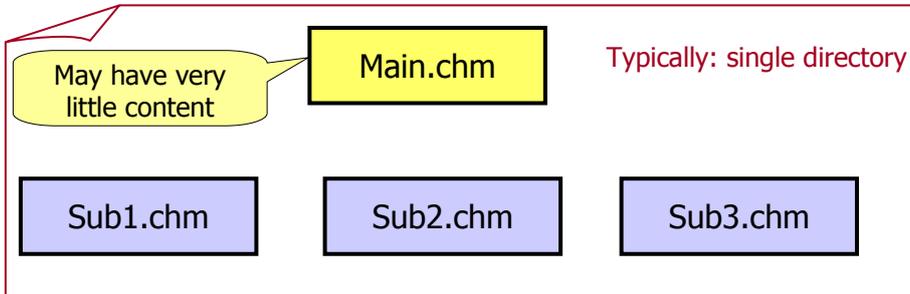
- Opening any CHM within the set displays the full merged navigation (TOC and Index) within the left-hand pane
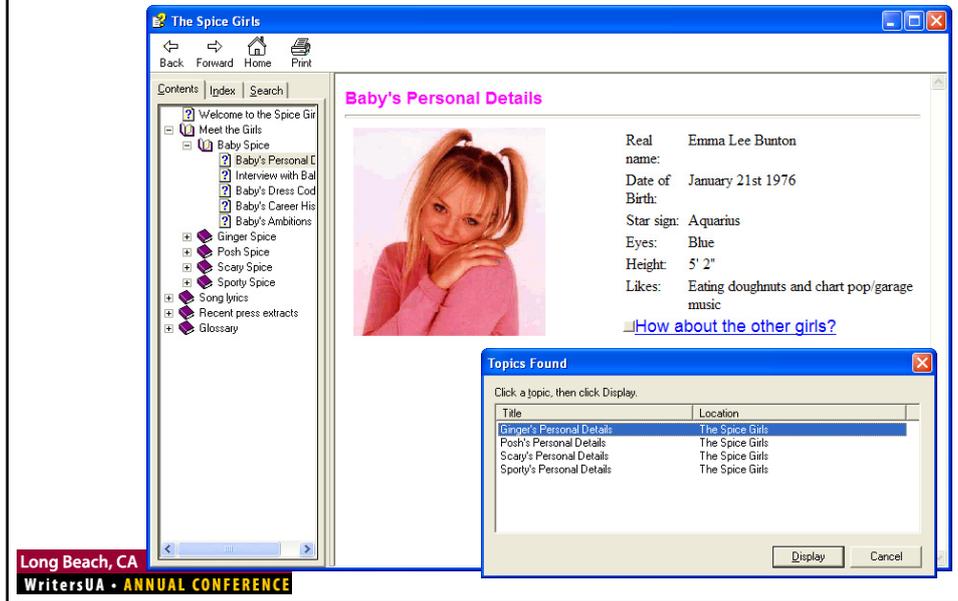
Applications of modular Help

- Each sub CHM might contain:
  - Help for a specific (optional) software module
  - Help for a plug-in
  - Help written by an individual team member
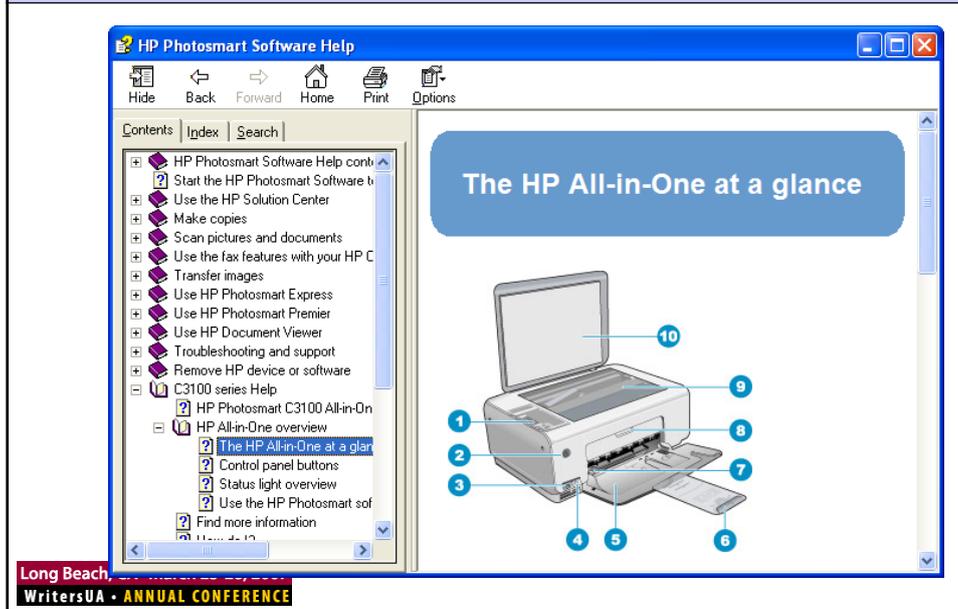 - Help for a specific hardware device

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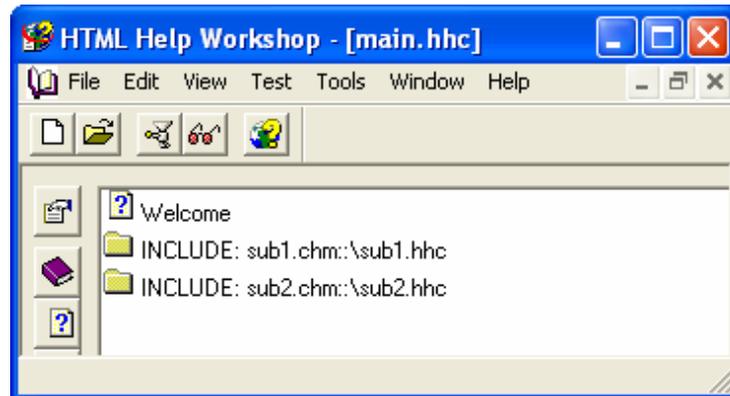
Example 1: Spice Girls

Example 2:
Merged software and device Help for HP products

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Technical details (1)

- Main TOC file (.hhc) includes sub TOC files

HTML Help Workshop - [main.hhc]

File   Edit   View   Test   Tools   Window   Help

Welcome
INCLUDE: sub1.chm::\sub1.hhc
INCLUDE: sub2.chm::\sub2.hhc

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Technical details (2)

- Sub CHMs link to main TOC in Window definition within project (.hhp) file

Window Types

Navigation Pane | Styles | Extended Styles
General | Buttons | Position | Files

Window: tripane

TOC: main.chm::/main.hhc

Index: Sub1.hhk

Default: Topic_a.htm

Home:
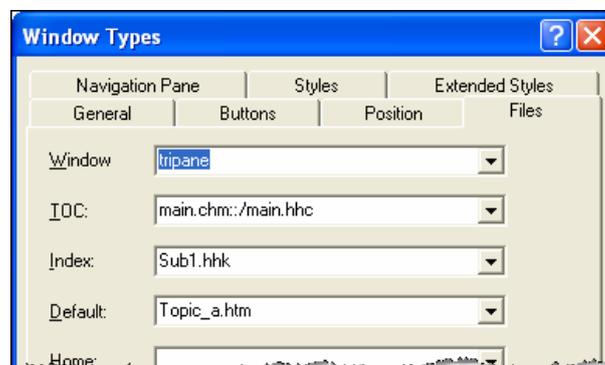
Sub1.hhp

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Technical details (3)

- Each CHM in the set lists all the *other* CHMs in [Merged Files] section within project (.hhp) file

List can include CHMs that will be added to the set in the future
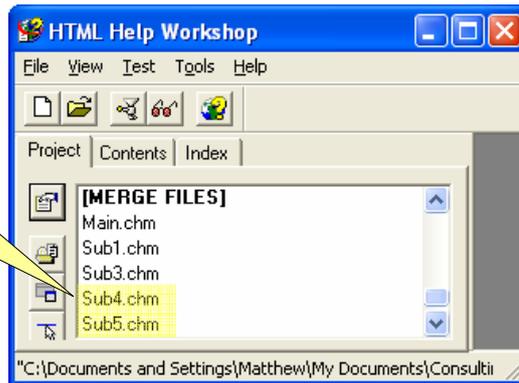
Sub2.hhp

CHW file

- Uncompressed version of CHM containing merged index
- Generated on the fly when there are merged files and you select:
  - Index
  - ALink command
- Can be shipped with the CHM – if so, makes sense to compress it

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What are the limitations and risks of HTML Help?

	HTML Help	Turnkey Browser-based Help	Standard HTML
Can be opened via a Web connection	✗	✓	✓
Can be opened via a LAN	✗	✓	✓
Platform independent	✗	✓	✓
Navigation and toolbar UI can be easily customized	✗	✓	✓

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What are the limitations and risks of HTML Help?

	HTML Help	Turnkey Browser-based Help	Standard HTML
Zero dependency on installed file(s) on users' computer	✗	✓	✓
Straightforward to link to external files in relative directories	✗	✓	✓
Straightforward to link from HTML to a specific Help topic	✗	✓	✓
Supports incremental update	✗	✓	✓

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Specific issues

- Error:
  The window name "tripane" passed to HH_GET_WIN_TYPE has not been specified
- Anecdotal evidence of HTML Help ActiveX problems with:
  - specific versions of IE6 on Windows 2000
  - Specific Windows XP product IDs
- Limitation on number of CHMs that can be merged (1000+)
- Other quirks experienced when coding HTML Help directly (not using a HAT)

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General risk – Security

- In the past 3 years: 5 critical-level security bulletins relating to HTML Help and its ActiveX control
- Most recent (MS07-008) issued on February 13th, 2007
- As a result of security concerns Microsoft has purposely disabled features and restricted access to HTML Help files
  - Shortcut command restricted to specific folders
  - Can only run CHM files on the Desktop
  - Unknown CHM files blocked

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Microsoft's migration away from using the HTML Help ActiveX control

- Microsoft still uses HTML Help to support many of its current applications
- However:
  - Trend toward using server-based Help (for example: Microsoft Money 2007)
  - Microsoft rarely uses HTML Help features that depend on the HTML Help ActiveX control
  - Windows Vista uses a new XML-based Help technology (Assistance Platform Client 1)
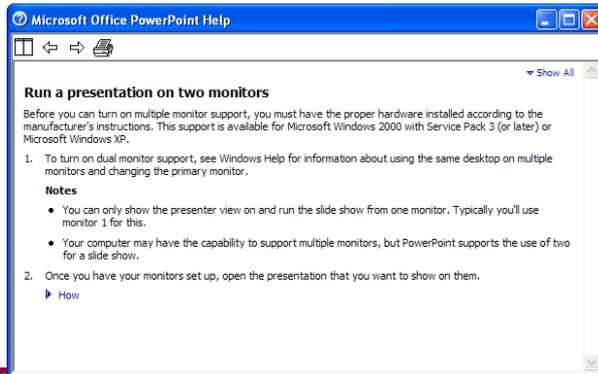
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Examples of how CHM files for some popular Microsoft applications implement Help navigation...

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Office 2003 (offline Help)

Click the table to make it active, then click the table placeholder (placeholders: Boxes with dotted or hatch-marked borders that are part of most slide layouts. These boxes hold title and body text or objects such as charts, tables, and pictures.).

DELETE.

Microsoft Office PowerPoint Help

▼ Show All

Run a presentation on two monitors

Before you can turn on multiple monitor support, you must have the proper hardware installed according to the manufacturer's instructions. This support is available for Microsoft Windows 2000 with Service Pack 3 (or later) or Microsoft Windows XP.

1. To turn on dual monitor support, see Windows Help for information about using the same desktop on multiple monitors and changing the primary monitor.

   Notes

   • You can only show the presenter view on and run the slide show from one monitor. Typically you'll use monitor 1 for this.

   • Your computer may have the capability to support multiple monitors, but PowerPoint supports the use of two for a slide show.

2. Once you have your monitors set up, open the presentation that you want to show on them.

   ▶ How

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- No popups (definitions displayed as expanding text)

- No related topics

Business Contact Manager

Business Contact Manager for Outlook Help

Contents | Search

- Welcome to Business Co
- Accounts
- Business Contacts
- Opportunities
  - About Opportunities i
  - Create an Opportunity
  - Add Items to an Oppo
  - Edit an Opportunity re
  - Open an Opportunity
  - Delete an Opportunity
  - Restore an Opportun
  - Troubleshoot Opportu
  - Restore a record from
  - Delete a record perm
- Sharing Business Contac
- Product and Service Item
- Working with History Item

▼ Show All

Edit an Opportunity record in Business Contact Manager

1. On the **Business Tools** menu, click **Opportunities**.
2. Double-click the Opportunity record that you want to edit.
3. Type the new information.
4. Click **Save and Close**.

Related Topics

About Opportunities in Business Contact Manager

Create an Opportunity record in Business Contact Manager

Delete an Opportunity record in Business Contact Manager

Troubleshoot Opportunity records

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- No popups (definitions displayed as expanding text)

- Regular hyperlinks for related topics

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Digital Image 2006

- Definitions implemented as JavaScript popups

- Regular hyperlinks for related topics

Windows Defender

- Regular hyperlinks for related topics

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Windows Media Player

- Definitions implemented as JavaScript popups

- Regular hyperlinks for related topics

Microsoft Management Console (XP)
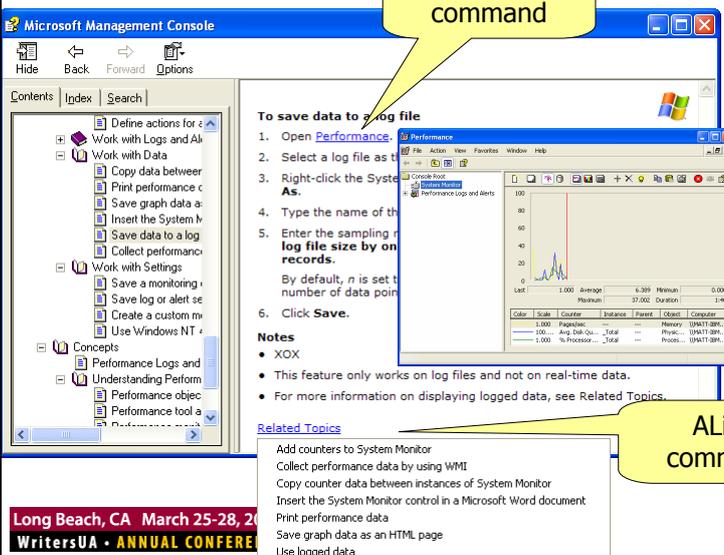
- Unusual: uses features that depend on HTML Help ActiveX Control

How should I decide whether to use HTML Help?

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Question:
Which Help do you feel does a better job?

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The most compelling reasons to use HTML Help for Windows Desktop applications

- File space is at a premium
- You need a modular Help architecture with dynamic merging
- You require a shortcut command
- Your developers are comfortable and familiar with the HTML Help API
- Microsoft recommends it, and is therefore under some obligation to continue supporting it natively within the Windows operating system

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The most compelling arguments against HTML Help

- The HTML Help control is potentially subject to future restrictions as a result of new security issues
- HTML Help looks dated, and the UI can't easily be customized
- Topics can't be updated individually on users' PCs

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Conclusion

- HTML Help offers a standardized feature-rich mechanism for delivering user assistance for Windows desktop applications
- Its compiled/compressed format makes it lean and easy to deploy
- Its key differentiating feature is its support for dynamic run-time merging

But…

- Dynamic links (a key feature of modular Help) depend on the HTML Help ActiveX control, which has an uncertain future

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Questions?

Please complete your evaluation forms – thank you!

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