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Summer 2009

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# Doc-To-Help 2009 version 2

Robert Meijer checks out the latest version of the oldest commercial Help authoring tool and finds it up to today's challenges.

## Introduction

*Doc-To-Help is a hypertext word processing utility for Microsoft Word for Windows that will help you write commercial-quality documentation and convert that documentation into Windows on-line Help automatically.*

That's how my WexTech brochure started when this first tool of its kind was introduced in 1991. Since that time Doc-To-Help has changed dramatically. As a tool driven by Visual Basic and Word Macro, it saw the end of its technical lifetime with version 2000. ComponentOne took over and created a totally new product without compromising on any of the existing features. The various intermediate editions show that this conversion was quite a job but it resulted in the current version 2009 — an excellent tool indeed! Doc-To-Help still delivers the support for Microsoft Word that made it famous but it has also evolved into a state-of-the-art authoring and publishing tool.

## Interface

Starting Doc-To-Help has become very easy through the introduction of the Getting Started Wizard (Figure 1).

Content can be created in Doc-To-Help or imported. Whether it is a manual written in Microsoft Word, a RoboHelp project or an old Help system, Doc-To-Help gives you tools to convert existing content to a Doc-To-Help project.

Editing content and configuring the project can be done directly in Microsoft Word, FrontPage or Adobe Dreamweaver using installed Doc-To-Help

toolbars (ribbons in Word 2007) without ever needing to convert to a Doc-To-Help format. When authoring in HTML, any other editor can be used, although without the help of Doc-To-Help toolbars.

New is Doc-To-Help's XML-based Editor, which has the ease of Microsoft Word while automatically creating standards-compliant source code. An intuitive style editor helps you with formatting. You can drag and drop items that you want to edit. The editor checks your spelling as you type, indicates misspelled words and suggests changes. It also includes a converter for transforming Word and HTML content to XHTML. The source code of XHTML documents can be validated using **Validate** and **Fix** buttons.

Doc-To-Help provides a ribbon style gallery much like the one in Microsoft Office 2007 (Figure 2). All settings are easy to find on the ribbons, although some of the buttons could be larger (such as the one on the Home tab leading to the definition screen for the Help targets and the one on the Projects tab leading to the Project settings).

All the information that Doc-To-Help needs to process outputs is stored in a special set of styles called Doc-To-Help Markup Language (D2HML). Doc-To-Help provides these styles in Word templates and cascaded style sheets and provides toolbars or ribbons to apply the appropriate styles. Since D2HML is only a set of styles, the use of the content is, therefore, not restricted to any one environment.

## Dynamic Help

An eye-catching feature of the Doc-To-Help interface is the use of Dynamic Help. Some ten years ago, Doc-To-Help introduced HelpXtender, an ActiveX control to let developers integrate online HTML Help into an application thus providing performance support in the context of that application. Now ComponentOne has made available a Dynamic Help Control for embedding Help in .NET applications. It enables developers easily to embed a dynamic Help pane in the application's interface. Authors use the available visual topic mapping feature to associate topics with the interface elements. Since the help is always present, the information is provided immediately in the context of task performance. As one might expect, this Help window can be removed and activated at will (Figure 2).

Doc-To-Help uses Dynamic Help itself to provide user assistance and you should see it at work by downloading a trial version.

## Publishing formats

Doc-To-Help can be used to create online Help for software applications in all Microsoft Help formats, including context-sensitive Help. It can be

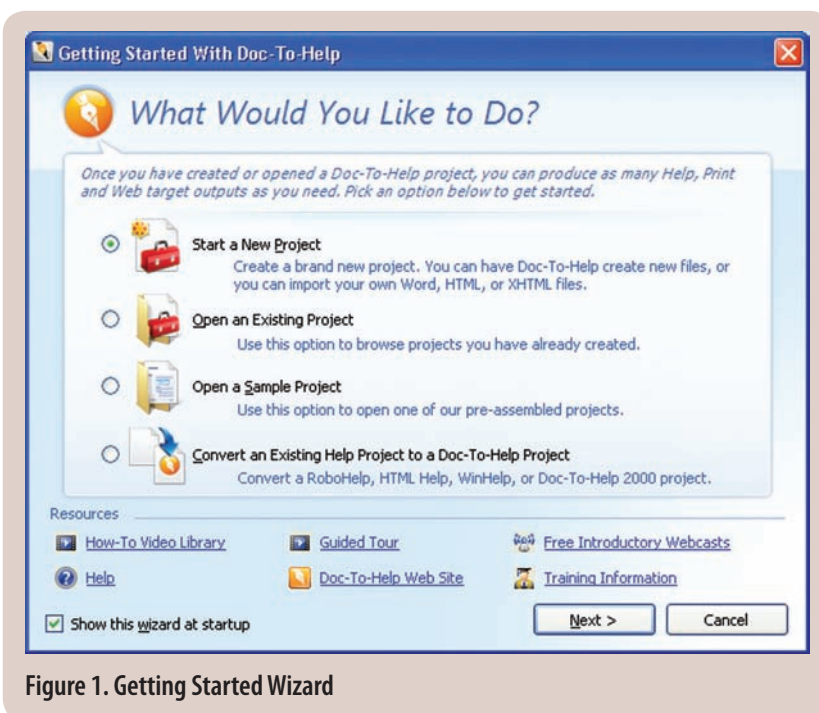


Figure 1. Getting Started Wizard

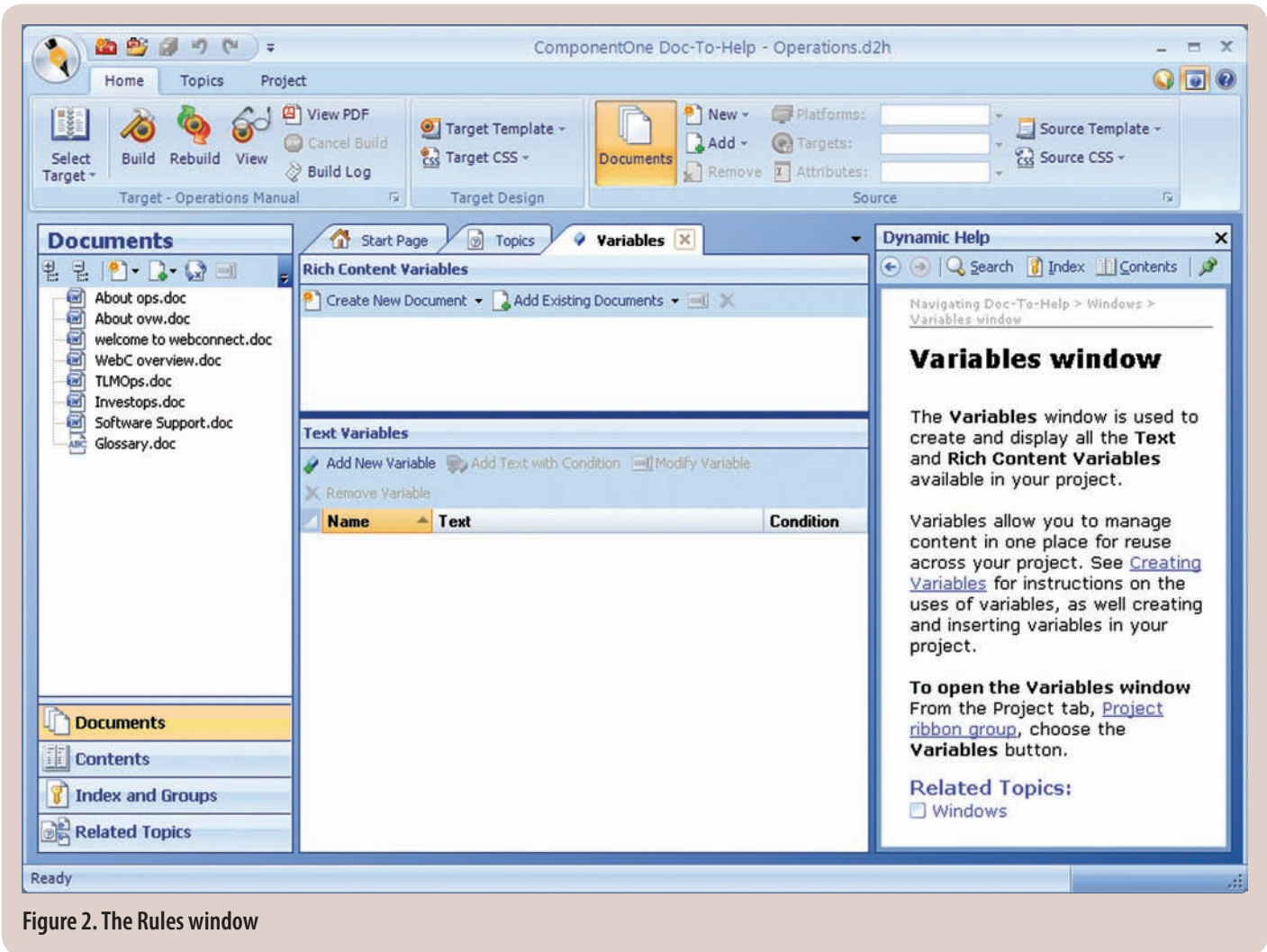


Figure 2. The Rules window

used to convert existing Word-based documents to searchable, topic-based content for the web. Creation and conversion of documents related to quality management and training is an important example.

Doc-To-Help can be used to publish various standards-compliant formats:

- **HTML Help.** Doc-To-Help covers all the features of this compiled Help format (recommended by Microsoft for more than ten years).
- **Web-based Help** (also known as browser-based Help or uncompiled HTML Help). Doc-To-Help calls it NetHelp and features the navigation options of HTML Help. NetHelp enables you to create a self-contained, fully customisable website. It can be used for web-based Help, stand-alone sites, intranet sites or blended into existing sites. Doc-To-Help's own user assistance is delivered in this format.
- **WinHelp.** This legacy format has to be supported as it was so widely implemented.
- **MS Help 2.0.** Microsoft's attempt to improve on HTML Help resulted in a Help format to be used only by Visual Studio .NET application.
- **JavaHelp.** Supported to cover the whole range of Help formats.
- **Press-ready manuals in PDF or Word formats.** Doc-To-Help has long been used to create printed publications in its users' house-styles.

The look and feel of online publishing formats can be customised using editable style sheets and a Theme Designer that allows for creative layouts and appearances. Doc-To-Help has always been a great tool for creating slick-looking printable publications and this version retains this capability, including editable templates.

### Single sourcing

Doc-To-Help's strong suit has always been its ability to create help and printed documentation from the same source. It is no surprise that the current version enables you to publish to all supported formats from the same content—and with just a single mouse-click! Source content (text or graphics) can be tagged for inclusion in or exclusion from specific outputs with easy-to-use conditional tags. Tags are available to mark for use in different combinations of platforms (online or printable), targets (any of the publishing formats) and custom attributes. Attributes make it possible to assign user-defined build criteria to text, topics, documents and styles, which in turn makes it possible to single source one project in several different ways. For example, you could create both a beginner's and an expert's version of a manual and/or help system from the same project.

Doc-To-Help uses information from the source content to automatically create a table of contents (TOC) and an index. Both can be customised or created from scratch. Customised TOCs can even be created for different outputs.

### Established features

Doc-To-Help provides easy addition and sorting of glossary terms. It can automatically create a popup link to the glossary definition every time that term is used in a Help project. Margin notes in print automatically become pop-ups in on-screen outputs. Hyperlinks become cross references in print.

A strong point of Doc-To-Help is, and has always been, the provision of tools to create impressive deliverables without design or development expertise. A single click takes you to functions for inserting graphics and videos, creating image maps, defining collapsing sections, creating pop-ups, creating expanding or drop-down text, inserting custom buttons and adding breadcrumbs for navigation. To map topics to an application context, identifiers can be specified or generated automatically.

### New and improved

I'm very pleased with the introduction of variables that can be used to manage strings of text or formatted blocks of content for reuse across a project. Another great addition is the ability to use the settings of an earlier project in a new one. This will not only save time setting up a project but also ensure consistency over various projects.

Of course, full text search can be implemented in all online outputs. A new feature is that searching can be annotated on a topic-by-topic basis.

Doc-To-Help automatically creates 'See Also' links to related sub-topics based on the style hierarchy. Its Related Topics Editor makes it easy to form these topic relations and to add custom ones. Drag and drop linking of topics, keywords and documents extends the number of ways in which hyperlinks can be created.

Expert users and developers will certainly enjoy the support for .NET or XSLT transforms for output, and the support for scripting to create additional features.

Reference documentation created with Microsoft's Sandcastle utility can be integrated into a Doc-To-Help project to create a Microsoft Help 2.0 system for Visual Studio .NET.

The user assistance has been extended outside the product as well. Users can see Doc-To-Help live in action by joining one of the regularly scheduled free webcasts. Additionally, a library of video tutorials is available on the Doc-To-Help website. On the Doc-To-Help forum, questions are answered by ComponentOne personnel and other experts.

### Team authoring

Team authoring is a basic source-control feature in which authors work on their own local copy of a

project on their machine (called the working copy), while the master (or team) project is located on the organisation's network or on a web server.

Doc-To-Help team authoring makes it possible for Help authors to work together on a single project. Project changes are available to the entire team and changes made by one author will not be overwritten by those made by another. Each author works on his or her own working copy. When a document is checked out and is being edited by one team member, it is locked so that others cannot edit it at the same time. Until changes are checked in, they remain local to the author's machine, appearing only in his or her working copy of the project. Likewise, changes made by other authors cannot be viewed until they are retrieved from the repository. Doc-To-Help provides special commands to check-in changes to the repository and to get other authors' changes from the repository.

### Modular TOC facility

A separate wizard-type program helps the setup of a modular help system (that is, a Help system consisting of more than one help file, yet appearing to the end user as a single Help system). It can be applied in situations where software is sold as separate modules (each with its own help file), in cases where only parts of the Help system is subject to changes over time (and are delivered separately) and in cases where multiple authors work on parts of a Help system.

Modular Help systems can reference Help files that are not installed (for example, Help for a software module that the user has not purchased) and still look seamless. The TOCs and the index simply omit the missing information without displaying error messages. If the user later installs the missing module, the Help will be added in the proper position.

### Conclusion

Doc-To-Help has become an excellent tool once more. Its great user interface and many time-saving features make it easy to work with—so easy, in fact, that only users of Doc-To-Help 2000 and earlier may have a problem because they have to forget their accumulated knowledge.

Doc-To-Help is suitable for a wide range of users. Writers who want to concentrate on content can create a perfect Help system without needing much knowledge of the conversion process, whereas users who want to get more deeply in the mechanics of Help creation will find that Doc-To-Help offers every possibility to do so. That makes it a great (and fun!) learning tool as well. Without doubt, Doc-To-Help will become a front runner once more. **C**

**Robert Meijer** has 20 years of experience in the oil industry and an additional 15 years as user assistance professional in the software industry. Since 1991 he has collected information about more than 250 help authoring tools, current and extinct. He runs his own Netherlands-based training and consulting company that specialises in online Help design and technology for clients all over Europe.  
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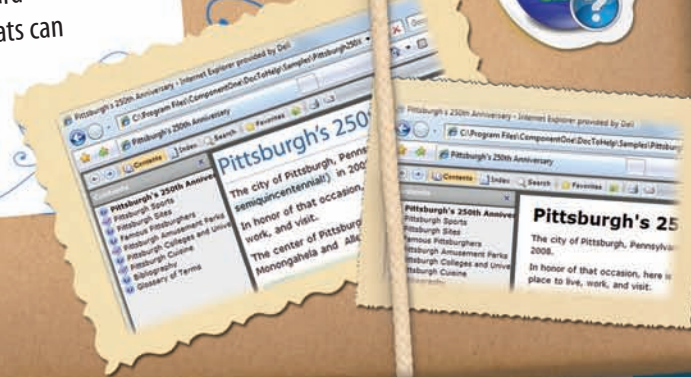
SINCE 1991

## Doc·To·Help® 2009

AUTHOR. EDIT. PUBLISH.

Doc-To-Help is all you need to create commercial grade online and print documentation. Doc-To-Help has an XML-based editor built right in, but it also supports everything from Microsoft Word to Adobe Dreamweaver. You can even import a variety of existing content, including RoboHelp projects. The content is instantly ready for publishing to any standard Help formats, Web-based Help, and press-ready manuals. All formats can be generated from one project and one application, Doc-To-Help, eliminating the need for multiple applications.

<XHTML>



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