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# Help Formats

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# Help Formats

## ...An Overview

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*Plain Words' Senior Consultant*

Online Help is an instant and effective method of providing the user with relevant technical assistance. Help can be displayed in a number of different ways. But it usually consists of a toolbar, content pane, and navigation pane. Help topics are displayed in the content pane in direct response to the user's request for assistance.

Beyond this, Help systems offer a variety of symbols and icons to help people navigate through the information and display the parts they want to read. Many software packages have context-sensitive Help, which brings up definitions and instructions relevant to the task the user is carrying out.

Lets take a look at the main Help formats in use today:

## WebHelp

Developed by eHelp Corporation, WebHelp can be used with Websites, intranets, extranets, and with web-based application software (and normal applications too if you want to). A cross-platform solution, it runs on Windows, Macintosh, Unix, and Linux operating systems. And WebHelp files can be viewed in both Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, along with other popular browsers, such as Opera.

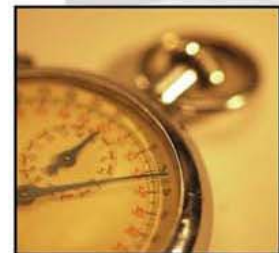
WebHelp supports standard HTML, as well as all key Help functions, including:

- **Table of contents**
- **Multi-level indexes**
- **Full text search**
- **Context sensitive Help** (help that is relevant to a specific field or screen)
- **Related topic controls** (e.g. if you're looking for information about running a search, there will also be links to information explaining how to customise a search and work with the results)

WebHelp is not a compiled file. The HTML files that make up WebHelp are stored individually in the WebHelp output folder on the application or Web server. This means individual HTML files can be changed with any standard HTML editor.

## HTML Help

HTML Help is a Microsoft Help format (Microsoft CHM files), and shouldn't be confused with HTML-based Help. With the release of Windows 98, Microsoft made a major transition in the way it provided



online Help; it started using HTML Help instead of the long-standing WinHelp format. Microsoft now uses HTML Help for all new software releases.

HTML Help integrates HTML and Microsoft's ActiveX technology. It is displayed using the HTML Help display engine built into Windows 98 and Windows 2000. HTML Help systems can also be displayed on other 32-bit Windows platforms - Windows 95 and NT. But there's one proviso: the HTML Display engine, Internet Explorer 4.0 or later, or Microsoft Office 2000, must be installed on the user's computer for it to work.

HTML Help is a compiled format, which means all the individual HTML files, plus navigational aids, are compressed into a single deliverable file. Because of this, users can't customise it - not unless they de-compile, then re-compile the file.

Compiled HTML Help doesn't run over the Internet. But you can incorporate links from HTML Help to an intranet or to the Web, so that "live" content can be displayed inside a compiled Help system.

## WinHelp

The WinHelp format is the "original" Windows Help format. It is used to display application Help or stand-alone Help on early versions of Windows. But it's still very popular; statistics show that WinHelp is running on more than 100 million PCs, and the WinHelp standard is recognised and understood by all Windows Help authors and software developers.

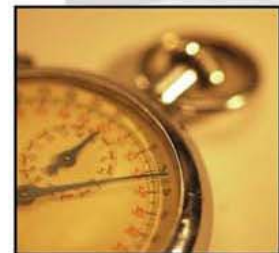
What's more, virtually all Fortune 1000 companies and independent Windows software developers have a significant investment in WinHelp systems and their development (many companies continue to produce WinHelp based Help systems for their software products). Because of this, Microsoft has stated that it will provide the current level of WinHelp support for its operating systems for many years to come.

As a bonus, help authors using RoboHelp can give a fresh look to existing WinHelp systems and provide users with the HTML Help (Windows 98-style Help) look and feel by quickly converting the Help system into WinHelp 2000.

## JavaHelp

JavaHelp is Sun Microsystems' standard for providing user help and electronic documentation for applications written in Java. JavaHelp integrates HTML, XML, and 100% Pure Java™ technology to create electronic documentation that can be integrated with Java applications or provided standalone.

The content pane in Java Help uses HTML (3.2) as its format for displaying topics. Java components can be used within the content pane to add extra navigation and display capabilities. Like other Help systems, the navigation pane can contain a table of contents, hierarchical



index, and a full text search interface. Java Help also supports popup and secondary windows. Most of the other features that users expect in a Help system are supported in JavaHelp, however there are a number of unsupported features which may favour the use of WebHelp if a cross-platform solution is required.

*(Popup windows allow you to display extra information - such as a glossary definition - in a small window that can be dismissed by users when they have finished reading it. Secondary windows are typically used to display supplementary content that is meant to remain visible while the user explores the rest of the Help system).*

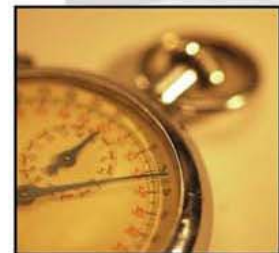
## Java Runtime Environment

The Java Runtime Environment (JRE) is needed to run the Java Help system. For Java applications, the Java developer will provide the JavaHelp classes along with the proper JRE in the application. JavaHelp systems themselves can be provided in an encapsulated format, meaning that all the individual HTML and XML files are packed into a single deliverable file (a Java archive, or JAR file). This file can also be compressed. Help authoring tools automate the generation of the JAR file from the Help project source files.

## Oracle Help for Java

Oracle Help for Java is Oracle's standard for user assistance in Java applications. But it's not Oracle-dependent. It's a 100% Pure Java solution that can be deployed anywhere. Oracle Help for Java provides powerful functionality for developer and user. Most notable is OHJ's unique ability to merge table of contents, index and search from other Help projects into your existing Help projects via links — and without adding the actual content to your project.

If you have any comments about Help formats, or would like to share any experiences you've had working with them, then please email me at: <mailto:feedback@plainwords.co.uk>



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