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Help Tools

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Help Tools - a Comparison

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There are four main tools used to design Help systems. Most developers have a working knowledge of all of them, but specialise in one or two. The major Help tools are expensive, which can be off-putting for a beginner needing to gain experience. But they can all be downloaded for a free trial period. Which means you can at least try before you buy.

Doc-To-Help 2000

Website: www.wextech.com

Doc-To-Help is an add-on to Microsoft Word. It adds templates to your Word installation, and uses macros to automate help authoring tasks and functions. With Doc-To-Help, you write a source manual first, using Doc-To-Help's tools to add links, glossary and index information. When you've finished, Doc-To-Help converts and compiles your manual into any of the following formats:

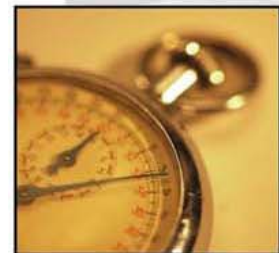
- Compiled HTML Help
- ActiveX enabled HTML Help
- Java enabled HTML Help
- Standard HTML
- Java Help
- Windows 3.0 Help
- Windows 3.1 Help
- Windows 95/NT Help

Doc-To-Help's single-source approach lets you create and maintain Online Help and printed documentation from one source document - *without having to compromise in either medium*. You can format your document and Help independently from a single source document, and can set material as print only, online only, WinHelp only, HTML only, or HTML Help only. Revisions made to the source document are reflected in both your re-compiled Help and printed output.

Other useful features include the ability to embed sophisticated graphics and video inside Help windows, and the Doc-To-Help Navigator, which tracks your table of contents.

Doc-To-Help Pro

If you're willing to pay more, some additional powerful features come with Doc-To-Help Professional 2000. These include HelpXtender and AnswerWorks.



With the HelpXtender ActiveX control, you can host HTML pages and HTML Help topics within an application. For example, you can easily embed Help inside a dialog box and have the content of the Help change automatically when the user clicks different controls. It also allows you to create applications where the Help appears automatically (if the user makes an error, for instance).

AnswerWorks brings natural language processing to Window's Help or HTML Help. Users simply type in questions using their own words. AnswerWorks analyses each question and lists the most pertinent Help topics. The result is faster, easier, and more accurate access to the Help system without having to guess the terminology most likely to bring a result.

RoboHelp Office (Version 9.x)

Website: www.ehelp.com

RoboHelp has a high price tag, but is a popular choice amongst Help developers who need to produce highly professional-looking help files.

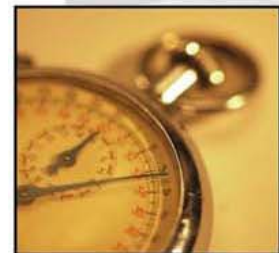
The user interface is straightforward. The main screen consists of well-organised views and tabs and well-integrated context menus, along with the standard drop down menus and button bars. And if you're new to creating Help files, RoboHelp Office 9's newbie-friendly tutorials run you through building an example Help system, which has all the main features of a real Help system - contexts, index, browse sequences, etc. It takes about an hour to complete. And once you're done, going it alone and setting up your own help file from scratch should be relatively easy.

Even then, you're not left to your own devices. RoboHelp's support tools and wizards simplify the process of constructing a Help system. Plus they automate the more tedious tasks, like building an index or mapping context IDs.

RoboHelp covers the major help system platforms - WinHelp 4 and HTML Help - and provides its own browser-based platform independent help system, WebHelp. It produces "Microsoft Standard" help systems flawlessly and even complex JavaScript can be dropped into a topic and work first time.

RoboHelp Enterprise

RoboHelp's Enterprise is the ultimate Help solution. It features all the benefits of RoboHelp Office, plus it is able to uncover how people are using your Help system and application. This is a very powerful feature as it provides the intelligence reports you need to improve the effectiveness of both your product and Help system.



ForeHelp 5

Website: www.ff.com

ForeHelp is a stand-alone, WYSIWYG Help tool. You don't need Microsoft Word and you can view and edit your project just as it will appear in the final version.

Using ForeHelp's fully featured word processor, you can format paragraph and character styles, including bullets and numbering. And you can create and edit links, macros, and other WinHelp features with no delays for parsing RTF codes. Plus you can convert text to tables using the Table Editor.

Another bonus is you can test your work instantly and often, using the Test Mode feature. This simulates WinHelp, and allows you to test all Help features, including multimedia, links, macros, CNT file, secondary windows, etc. You only need compile your Help when you've completed it.

ForeHelp can be used alone to create WinHelp projects. Or you can add ForeHTML Pro to extend ForeHelp to include HTML-based Help authoring - for Microsoft HTML Help and CE Help, Sun Microsystems' Java Help, and ForeFront's cross-browser, cross-platform Web-based Help, InterHelp.

ForeHelp is very intuitive and has an easy to learn interface. And if you're stuck, its Online Help and tutorial are comprehensive.

HDK (Hypertext Development Kit)

Website: www.virtualmedia.com.au

The Hypertext Development Kit (HDK) is another Word for Windows add-on - and is fully integrated with Word 2000, Word 97, and Word 95. At its most basic level, HDK can operate within Word as a powerful document conversion system. In this mode, the author simply uses Word to write the document, then HDK automatically converts it into the desired online format. This is useful if you want to maintain the same document for both paper and online output.

In advanced mode, HDK operates as an interactive editing tool with Word. When writing your online document in Word, you click on the various HDK buttons to define online functionality - perhaps inserting an animation here, or a hypertext link there. This authoring method gives you the greatest level of control over the functionality of the document and still lets you produce a printable version.

Single Source

HDK gives you the ability to seamlessly deliver your documentation system in any format - from traditional paper manuals, to WinHelp, HTML, HTML-Help, and Java enhanced HTML. HDK uses a powerful fuzzy-logic engine to enhance documents, so they are optimised for each medium.



Large Documents

When building an online document, you soon have thousands of pages of text, graphic files, links, buttons, indexes, etc. To deal with this, HDK creates a database of all these elements and the relationship they have with each other. HDK uses this to automatically repair errors - saving you time dealing with maintenance chores.

Another big strength of HDK is it allows you to change the whole look and feel of a project on the fly. With HDK's Project Themes feature, you can automatically change the appearance and functionality of your documentation by simply changing the project template. This is excellent for updating the look-and-feel of your existing documentation and for ensuring a corporate-wide standard of appearance.

If you've got any comments about Help tools, or would like to recommend some not mentioned here, then please email me at: feedback@plainwords.co.uk



Plain Words – The Big Picture

Technical Writing & Course Development

Planning, writing and producing Help systems, HTML, on-line material, traditional manuals. Designing and writing bespoke courses for your products and services, whether tutor-led, CBT or e-learning. Presenting 'train the trainer' or end user courses.



Specialist Search & Selection

Helping you to recruit permanent or contract documentation staff:

- Technical Authors & Editors
- Trainers
- Localisation Specialists
- Information Managers
- Documentation Managers
- Copy Writers
- Project Managers
- Project Coordinators
- Instructional Designers
- Bid & Proposal Writers
- Web Content Developers
- Knowledge Managers

Writing Skills Training Courses

- Structuring & Writing Reports
- Designing & Writing Help Systems
- Writing Winning Bids & Proposals
- Writing Effective Letters & Emails
- Designing & Writing Technical Documents
- Indexing On-line & Printed Material
- Estimating & Planning Technical Documents
- Writing for the Web



Bids Consultancy & Training

Bidworker, a division of Plain Words, is dedicated to providing bids consultancy and training. Writing, editing and formatting of bids and proposals. 'How to Write Winning Bids and Proposals' training course. Plain Words own **bid**worker™ software to automate much of the process of compiling proposals.

"Excellent service, highly skilled authors. All deadlines have been met!"
Giovanni Calamida, European Patent Office

Catalogues

Plain Words **catalogue**worker™ enables you to create high quality printed or online catalogues in minutes. This is a simple and speedy way to create large catalogues that would otherwise need to be built, fully typeset and formatted. It also caters for multi-currency, multi-languages and different discount schemes.



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Inject selling power into your communications with Plain Words' advertising and PR services. Writing or editing sales copy, web content, articles and newsletters. Publicity campaigns and promotion via the media or through your website.

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