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CyberText Consulting Pty Ltd

# AuthorIT:

## What's it all about?



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# AuthorIT: What's it all about?

*As other Help authoring tools (HATs) fall by the wayside or the scuttlebutt about their demise gets stronger, one HAT that continually gets favourable mention is AuthorIT. Maybe you've heard about it, but don't know what it is or how it is different from traditional HATs. In this article, I'll cover some of the main features of AuthorIT so you'll have enough information to investigate further.*

## What AuthorIT is

AuthorIT is a documentation solution that includes content management, single-source publishing to various outputs, content reuse, and much more.

Unlike HATs based on a word processing model, every information chunk in AuthorIT is an object stored in a database. Objects can include graphics, topics, index entries, glossary items, paragraphs, even reusable sentence fragments. Because all content is 'chunked' and stored in a database, you can reuse any information object in any document an infinite number of times. And because you only have one object for a single information chunk, when you need to make a change, you change only that object and the change ripples through the documentation set next time you publish. No more 'find and replace' across many documents when something changes – change it once in AuthorIT and republish. That's it.

Objects are brought together at publishing time to create one or more output documents. Documents as you know them don't exist within AuthorIT – you publish them when you need them, then distribute them through your normal channels. The output formats that AuthorIT publishes to are: Microsoft Word (DOC), WinHelp (HLP), HTML Help (CHM), HTML, XHTML, Java Help, and Oracle Help. At the moment (late 2004), you create PDFs from the Word document, although it is rumoured that AuthorIT is working on a direct-to-PDF output option.

AuthorIT removes formatting from content creation. Once you set up your output templates (and you don't need to – you can use the default ones that AuthorIT provides), it is all about creating content. Within the AuthorIT authoring environment you **MUST** use styles – you can't do any manual formatting. And in a large organisation, the AuthorIT administrator can set it up so no-one else can change the styles used – you can see and use the styles but not change them unless you have permission to do so.

Finally, AuthorIT is local – it is designed and developed in New Zealand by AuthorIT Software Corporation.

## What it isn't

AuthorIT is not a document management system (it doesn't store documents – only objects), and it is not based on Word or any other word processor. You write within the AuthorIT environment and publish to whatever output you choose.

AuthorIT is not expensive. Even the most fully featured edition (Enterprise) is less than \$1300 AUD, while the Desktop edition is just over \$600 AUD. Other single-sourcing content management systems are designed for large corporations with big dollars – I understand the price for solutions such as Arbortext and Documentum starts at \$50,000 USD and goes up from there. A traditional HAT such as RoboHelp X5 is over \$1600 AUD. (**Note:** All prices taken from their respective websites in November 2004; Arbortext and Documentum don't make their pricing information public.)

## What benefits AuthorIT brings to your documentation process

You'll find that you'll achieve time savings almost immediately. You can use AuthorIT straight 'out of the box' with its publishing templates, or you can customise the Word or HTML publishing templates to match the 'look and feel' you want. You define style information for all outputs in AuthorIT (except Word), and, unlike other HATs, you won't need to tweak any of the outputs after publishing – including the Word output.

Other time savings come from:

- Reusing common content (for example, procedural topics in a Getting Started Guide and a User Manual; or a topic about the product that is used in the manuals, marketing material and on the company website)
- Reusing common graphics objects (for example, a toolbar icon or drop-down list button, or the corporate logo)
- Reusing Book objects within other Book objects (for example, reusing a generic section about creating Reports and Graphs in two or more manuals)
- Using variables to replace long text or text that changes often (such as product names)
- Writers no longer do any formatting – and no longer have to fight Word's bullet and numbering schemes!

As well as time savings, AuthorIT's content reuse and variables means that your writing is consistent throughout the documents produced. For example, if you have a common set of steps used in many procedures (such as steps at the beginning or end of a procedure), create those steps as a topic in their own right, then drag and drop that topic into any other topic where you want to include those steps. The wording remains the same in every instance, because only one piece of content is used – and if the steps change, you only change the information in one place. If you use variables for long text that you often mistype, you'll save correction time as well as typing time, and improve consistency as the information is the same every time. For example, using a

variable such as **< cs >** for the term "Configuration Specification" saves some 23 keystrokes every time (29 keystrokes for the phrase in full [including spaces and SHIFTS] against only 6 keystrokes for the variable [including SHIFTS]). If you used this phrase only 100 times in a document set, you've saved some 2300 keystrokes, and got it right ... every time.

Saving time by removing such time-consuming activities doesn't mean that writers lose their jobs. What it does is free them up to add value to the existing documentation and to increase the range and type of documents produced. You know all the "Gee, it'd be neat if we could provide screen videos of how to do ...." types of comments you've heard over the years – well, now you should be able to do some of them.

## Who uses AuthorIT

Some very large global corporations use AuthorIT to manage their vast documentation sets, yet a lone writer in a small organisation can also use AuthorIT to manage just a few documents.

As an example, Computer Associates is rolling out AuthorIT to their 130 writers scattered throughout the world, while Coca-Cola Enterprises uses it for all their SAP online Help, training and support materials. For a list of some of the companies using AuthorIT, go to: <http://www.author-it.com/index.mv?sampleclients>

As a lone writer, I get enormous benefit from using AuthorIT with my clients. One client has a documentation set that includes four software manuals and other sundry documentation, allowing me a good level of content reuse. Other clients don't care what I use to produce the documents - they just want good-looking and well-written deliverables. AuthorIT can't help with the actual writing (yet!), but as it removes all the formatting issues from the writing, I can create a great-looking document with little effort on my part – all I have to do is write the content.

## What you need to do

As with any new software tool, there is a learning curve. If you've never worked with objects before, your learning time is likely to be longer than for someone who is familiar with them. Writers who have worked with traditional tools based on linear word processing models may find that it's tough getting a handle on the concept of objects in AuthorIT – at least initially. But once you 'get it', you really can't create user documents the same way again. Your thinking changes.

If you have a large documentation set, you may need to think big but start small. Triage your documents and make business decisions about what legacy documents need to be brought into AuthorIT, if any. Some organisations import and convert all their documents; others import only the current documents and leave the legacy ones as they are. Some leave all existing documents in their current formats, and start using

AuthorIT with new documents only. By the way, AuthorIT allows you to import documents from any of these formats: DOC, RTF, HTML, HPJ, HHP, and MIF.

Once you have identified the documents you'll import, you should identify elements in those documents that you'll make reusable (graphics, content, etc.). There's not much point in having a whiz-bang tool for content reuse but not using its powers – you may as well stay with your existing authoring tool.

If you are part of a writing team, prepare your team for the changes. There'll be plenty for everyone to do – importing documents, identifying and creating reusable content, identifying other groups in the company that can advantage of content reuse (such as training and marketing), setting up corporate styles and templates, and so on. Take a look at Ann Rockley's *Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy* (ISBN 0-7357-1306-5) for some great ideas on how to identify content for reuse across an organisation.

## Where do I get a copy of AuthorIT?

AuthorIT has a free evaluation version of their Enterprise edition available for download from their website (<http://www.author-it.com/download.mv>).

Unlike evaluation software from other companies, the AuthorIT evaluation version is not time-bombed or feature-crippled. You can use it for years if you want, but you won't be able to publish a usable output – you can publish, but you'll get "AuthorIT Evaluation" strings of text randomly overwriting your text. With the evaluation version, you can import documents, set everything up as you want it, play with it for ages, get training in it, and so on. When you purchase it and get your licence key, all the content you imported and experimented with, and all the settings you changed, are ready to go.

## Other modules

AuthorIT has extra modules available for purchase for those who need them. These include:

- **Project Manager:** An integrated project and task management tool that allows you to manage your writing projects, including assigning tasks to writers, editors, and reviewers through all stages of the writing workflow.
- **Localization Manager:** Helps you manage your translation projects. Localization Manager is NOT a translation tool; it is a management tool that allows you to check out and check in projects from your preferred translation company, while only sending them the changed content (thus saving you thousands of dollars).
- **Offline Library:** If you are collaborating on writing projects with others around the country or around the world, or need to work away from the main database, you'll need the Offline Library facility. Offline Library allows you to work on your content objects independently, then synchronise your work with the work of others when you check your objects back in.

## About Rhonda Bracey

Rhonda has worked as a technical writer specialising in online Help for more than seven years. She has worked in various industries and with many HATs, including ForeHelp, RoboHelp, HDK, and, most recently, AuthorIT. She was one of the first AuthorIT Certified Consultants and currently uses AuthorIT with a growing list of clients. In 2004, Rhonda won an STC Excellence award for an online Help system created with AuthorIT, and was a judge for the Technical Publications category. She presented sessions on training at the STC Annual Conferences in 2002 and 2003, and jointly presented a session on AuthorIT with Char James-Tanny in 2004. In 2005, Rhonda is presenting a session on "Time-saving techniques using AuthorIT" at the WritersUA conference in Las Vegas (formerly WinWriters). She is the webmaster for the Lone Writers SIG of STC and the Australia Chapter. Rhonda has her own business in Perth, Western Australia providing contract technical writing, consultancy, and training services. More information from: <http://www.cybertext.com.au> or [rhonda.bracey@cybertext.com.au](mailto:rhonda.bracey@cybertext.com.au)



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