

An Overview of HTML-based Help

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"HTML...HTML Help...HTML-based help...WebHelp...JavaHelp...Oracle Help...what does it all mean?" There are so many online help options, it's easy to get overwhelmed and confused. This paper discusses the difference between HTML Help, WebHelp, JavaHelp, and Oracle Help. Specifically, it explains each help technology's features and limitations, the user requirements, and best use.



Figure 1. HTML Help example (Internet Explorer 5 help system)

INTRODUCTION

HTML-based help is any online help system created using HTML files. HTML-based help systems are composed of HTML content files and GIF and/or JPG graphics files. Most HTML-based help systems can run from the Web, and they can usually be extended with Web-based technologies such as Active X, Java, JavaScript, and/or VBScript. The sections below provide an overview of the four major HTML-based help technologies: HTML Help, WebHelp, JavaHelp, and Oracle Help.

WHAT IS HTML HELP?

HTML Help is Microsoft's replacement for WinHelp and the standard for HTML-based help. HTML Help is compiled into a single CHM (or "chum") file for distribution. HTML Help can be used to display context-sensitive popups and help topics for Windows applications. It is used to provide help for Windows 98 and IE 4, and it will be the help system for all near-term Microsoft products.

HTML Help's features are similar to WinHelp version 4, and their TOC, Index, and full-text Search tabs are nearly identical. A favorites tab is also available in HTML Help, and some HTML Help authoring programs allow you to add additional tabs.

Note: Version 2.0 of HTML Help is scheduled for release in early 2001. This release may include additional features that are not mentioned in this paper.

Visually, the help system is divided into a "tri-pane" window: the toolbar pane, the navigation pane, and the content pane. The Hide/Show button can be used to show or hide the navigation pane. The help author can add up to two additional hyperlink buttons to the toolbar pane.

Requirements

Users are required to have at least Internet Explorer 3.02 installed on their computer to use HTML Help. Advanced features like Dynamic HTML require IE 4+. As with previous versions of Microsoft's help engines, Windows is required.

The navigation pane and its tabs are controlled by an Active X control called hhctrl.ocx. If the user does not have this control installed or if the help is being accessed through the Internet, the control will be downloaded from the Internet. If the user's security settings do not allow downloading of Active X controls, the TOC, index and full-text search features will not appear. On the development side, HTML Help expects the author to use separate HTML files for each topic, often resulting in hundreds of HTML files.

When to Use HTML Help

If you are developing help for a new Windows product that does not currently have help and is being developed in the latest version of Visual Basic or Visual C++, you should consider HTML Help. If you are developing help for Windows 95 or 3.1 applications or if you are maintaining large legacy documentation sets, you should consider staying with WinHelp.

WHAT IS WEBHELP?

WebHelp is eHelp's cross-platform, browser-independent help solution. WebHelp can only be created with RoboHELP, but competing products such as ForeHelp offer similar formats. Unlike HTML Help, WebHelp is not compiled into one file. Instead, you have to distribute all of your source HTML, sound, and image files.

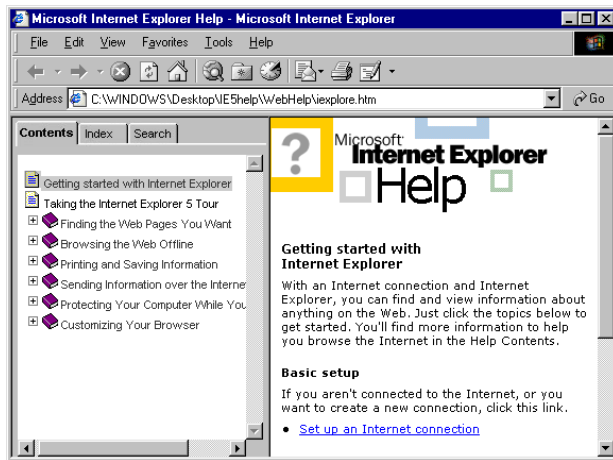


Figure 2. WebHelp example (Internet Explorer 5 help system converted to WebHelp)

WebHelp provides the same Contents, Index, and Search tabs as HTML Help. Depending on the browser, the TOC and index are created using DHTML, Java, or HTML.

WebHelp supports popups, related topics buttons, and simple browse sequences. Assuming your user's browser supports the technologies, you can also include Active X controls, Java applets, and JavaScript and VBScripts in your WebHelp systems.

Requirements

WebHelp will work with Internet Explorer 2+ and Netscape 3+. However, a version 4+ browser is recommended and required for any DHTML effects or JavaScript 1.2 scripts.

When to Use WebHelp

If you are creating help for a Web-based application, you should consider using WebHelp. It can also be used for HTML-based products that run locally on the user's computer. If you are creating help for a standard Windows application, you should consider HTML Help or WinHelp.

WHAT IS JAVAHELP?

JavaHelp is Sun's help technology for Java applets and applications. It can be distributed as a collection of uncompiled source files like WebHelp or as a single compiled JAR file. JavaHelp can be used to display context-sensitive popups and help topics for Java-based applications and applications written in other languages such as C++. JavaHelp is required for Sun's 100% Pure Java certification.

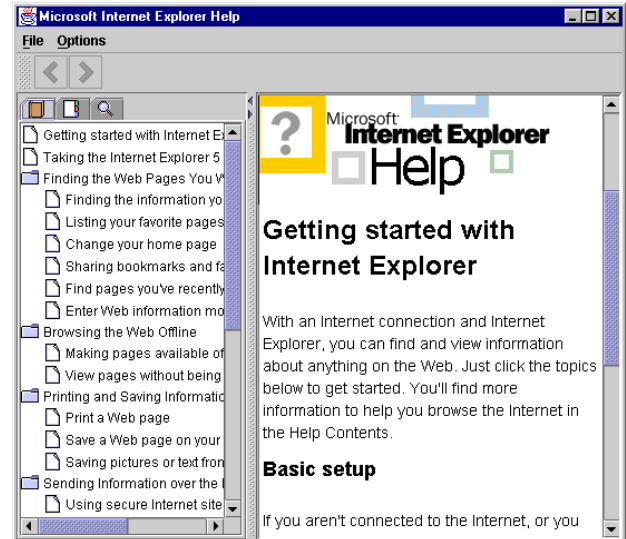


Figure 3. JavaHelp example (Internet Explorer 5 help system converted to JavaHelp)

JavaHelp only supports HTML 3.2, so you cannot use DHTML. In addition, JavaHelp does not support:

- JavaScript, Active X, or VBScript
- Image maps
- E-mail links
- .avi (video) or wav (sound) files

Requirements

To create JavaHelp, you will need the Java 2 Software Developer's Kit (SDK) and the Java Runtime Environment (JRE). This software can be downloaded from Sun's Web site (the URL is provided below in the resources section). Your users will also need the JRE, so you should distribute it with your help project.

When to Use JavaHelp

JavaHelp should be used if you are creating help for a 100% Pure Java™ application or if you need Java-based help for a C++-based application.

WHAT IS ORACLE HELP?

Oracle Help for Java (or simply "Oracle Help") is Oracle's proprietary help technology for Java applets and applications. It can be compiled into a single JAR file or distributed as individual source files. Oracle Help can be used to display context-sensitive popups and help topics for Java-based applications.

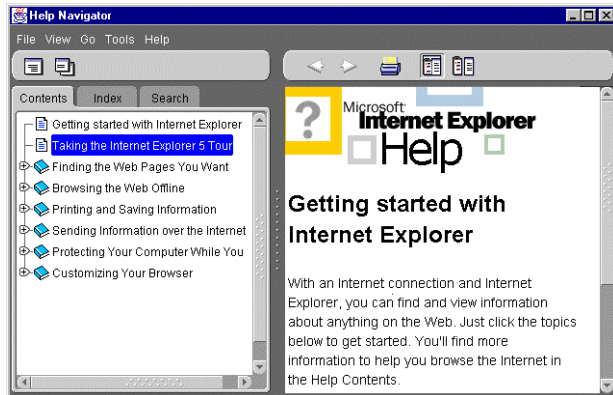


Figure 4. Oracle Help example (Internet Explorer 5 help system converted to Oracle Help)

The Oracle Help window includes a Contents, Index, and Search tab in the navigation window. Unlike the other HTML-based help formats, Oracle Help allows you to dock and undock the content and navigation windows.

Oracle Help does not support:

- Active X or VBScript
- most DHTML
- Image maps
- E-mail links
- .avi (video) or wav (sound) files

Requirements

To create Oracle Help, you will need the Oracle Help components (currently version 3.2.2 or 4.1.2), the Java Software Developer's Kit (JDK), and the Java Runtime Environment (JRE). The Oracle Help components can be downloaded from Oracle's Web site, and the JDK and JRE can be downloaded from Sun's Web site (the URLs are provided below in the resources section). Your users will also need the Oracle Help components and the JRE, so you should distribute them with your help project.

When to Use Oracle Help

If you are creating help for a Java application that is being created with EWT (Oracle's Java GUI toolkit), you should consider using Oracle Help. If you need to use HTML 4 or JavaScript, you should consider using Oracle Help rather than JavaHelp.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The following Web sites provide information about HTML-based help:

www.pobox.com/~STCOnlineSIG

Hyperviews:Online, the Online SIG's quarterly newsletter, features articles on all facets of online help development.

www.helpcommunity.com

eHelp's web-based RoboHELP discussion group. It's a great place to post WebHELP questions.

www.userfirst.net/links_fr.htm

Our Web site includes information about HTML-based help and a "links" page with links to online help tools, usability, GUI design, instructional design, and rhetoric Web sites.

msdn.microsoft.com/library/tools/htmlhelp/wkshp/download_main.htm

Microsoft's HTML Help Web site. Go here if you need the latest HTML Help compiler.

robohelp-resources.helpcommunity.com/resources/wh3_information_pack.htm

eHelp's WebHelp Information Pack provides in-depth information about WebHelp.

java.sun.com/products/javahelp/index.html

Sun's JavaHelp Web site. Go here to download the Java 2 SDK and JRE.

technet.oracle.com/software/

Oracle's download page for Oracle Help. You will need to register to download it (it's free).

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Scott DeLoach is a founding partner of User First Services, Inc, an Atlanta-based consulting company that specializes in designing and creating user assistance. Scott has received two STC International Online Competition Awards for interactive user assistance systems, and he currently serves as the STC International Online SIG Manager. He holds a Master's degree in Technical and Scientific Communication from Miami University.