

Introduction to Help Basics

Ever wonder just what Help is? What you can use Help for? How a Help file is created? Or maybe you've wondered what your choices are or what the different pieces are that make up a Help system. You've probably heard about HTML Help and WinHelp, but you might want to know more about what they are and when you might want to use one over the other.

Help Basics is intended to introduce and explain the basic concepts of Help. Every author should have at least a rudimentary understanding of Help before trying to create a Help system. Help Basics walks you through the "inner-workings" of Help at its simplest level.

Help Basics is intended to:

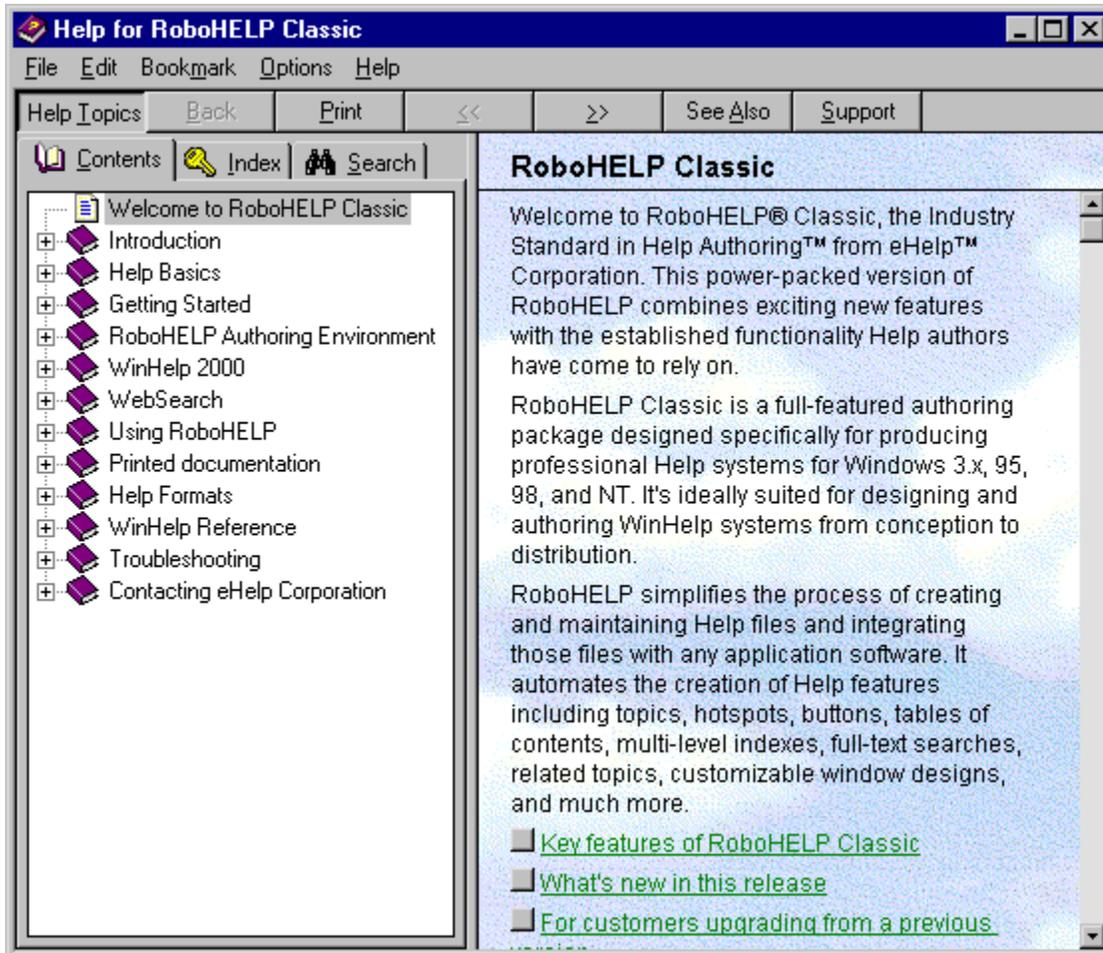
- Explain the concepts of Help systems — what they are, how they're used, and what makes a Help system
- Provide you with the basic steps for creating a Help system
- Offer some guidelines for managing Help projects

About Help

In the broadest sense, Help is information online – groups of related topics connected by electronic links (hypertext links) accessed using a computer.

In many ways, it is information-at-your-fingertips. Rather than searching for a long-forgotten book on a dusty bookshelf, Help makes information accessible from the primary home and office tool used worldwide – the computer. It's a powerful, flexible way to communicate and publish information electronically.

Help users (the people who read the online information) interact with the documents. They are in control because they can quickly and easily move around at will through the electronic hypertext links from subject to subject. They also have a lot of different ways to find the information they're looking for – they can read, learn, browse, or get an answer and get back to work.



Example of a Help system

Why create Help?

What are the benefits of using Help to communicate your message? Why should you consider publishing online? The benefits of Help systems include:

- **Instant access.** Users don't have to hunt for printed materials. As long as they're at the computer, Help is literally at their fingertips.
- **Increased control.** Help puts the reader in charge. The reader determines where to go next and what paths to take, limited only by the ways the author has set up and linked the information. Help encourages exploration and can aid learning.
- **Decreased costs.** You can increase the bottom line by decreasing the paper, printing, production, and distribution (shipping) costs.
- **Rapid publishing.** Help systems offer timely and rapid publication because it eliminates the printed production process. You distribute the product electronically. You can even update the product electronically. If you use the Internet or intranet, you can offer your readers automatic updates. Or you can allow them to download updates at their leisure.
- **Added features and functionality.** You add images, sounds, videos, buttons, automatic page-turners (called browse sequences), and more. Help allows you to take the printed book idea into the next level by taking advantage of electronic design and delivery.
- **Increased reader base.** Publishing online often means reaching more people – especially if you're publishing on the Internet or intranet. Even if you're distributing your Help on CD-ROM or diskette, it's much quicker and more portable than a book.
- **Improved support.** Help systems are proven to add value to software applications because they integrate the application with the documentation. Help systems provide quick and easy support for users. Help can even anticipate questions by "knowing" the context of where the user is in the application – what screen or where on the screen. You can lower support costs by providing application Help or knowledge-based Help systems.
- **Related documentation sets.** You can combine more than one Help system to deliver a unified set of documentation.
- **Up-to-date information.** You can quickly create and easily maintain shrink-wrapped Help systems for software applications, as well as in-house information systems and online books.

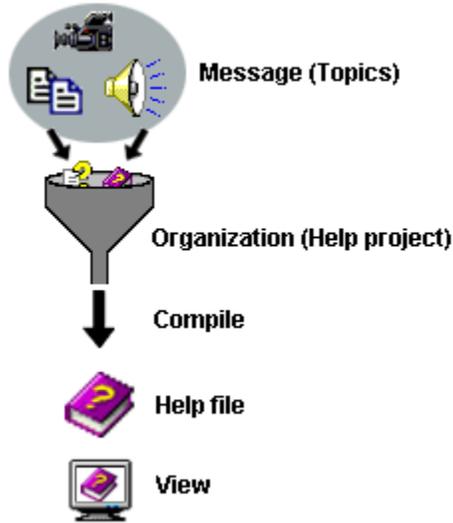
How Help is used

You can create a Help system for just about any type of online document you can think of. With the availability of the Internet and intranet, the possibilities are limited only by your imagination. Here are just a few examples:

- **Application assistance.** This is probably the most familiar use of Help. Software applications usually come with a built-in Help system to provide its users with assistance and instructions when using the application. Often, these Help systems include context-sensitive Help – or information specifically designed to help you understand or use a specific feature or function of the application.
- **Tutorials and computer based training.** Online training can cut costs and allow individuals to learn at their own pace on their own schedule. Tutorials and computer-based training allow individuals to interact with an application in a controlled, safe environment. This type of Help can teach general techniques, features, or capabilities of a product or application.
- **Manuals and handbooks.** Because of the rapid publishing and cost benefits, many companies are placing their manuals and handbooks online – user guides, employee manuals, policy and procedure books, human resources handbooks, standards and practices, and more. It allows companies to become more paper efficient and provides more timely updates. Instead of recalling and shredding manuals, you simply provide the updated Help system.
- **Online books.** There's a wide range of online books now available – everything from cookbooks to "how to" books to published fiction to travel guides. Help systems are an easy and efficient way to package and publish online books because they broaden the scope and range of books. Online books can be interactive. They can easily incorporate images and multimedia. They can be updated immediately. And they reduce costs and publishing time.
- **Sales and marketing materials.** More and more, companies and individuals are using Help systems for sales and marketing materials. They're publishing everything from up-to-the-minute in-house sales reports to newsletters, brochures, catalogs, company profiles, and product demonstrations.
- **Catalogs and price lists.** Another great way to use a Help system is to provide catalogs and price lists. Users can browse the catalog, see and hear the merchandise, and purchase immediately.

What makes it Help?

A Help system is actually the result of a process called Help authoring:



The message (topics)

These are the parts that make up a Help system. There are many other features you can add, specific to the Help format and application you're using.

- **Topics** are the basic units of a Help system. They communicate the message, mainly through text and images.
- **Windows** display the topics so users can view them.
- **Links** connect topics so users can navigate from one to another.
- **Styles** determine the layout and appearance of topic text.
- The **table of contents** presents an outline of the contents of the Help system (much like a printed book).
- The **index** contains keywords and phrases enabling users to find information (much like the back of a printed book).
- **Full-text search** provides a way for users to search for particular words or phrases to find topics.

Organization

Authors create Help projects in a Help-authoring tool such as RoboHELP HTML or RoboHELP Classic to create the message files and a **Help project file**. The project file (*.HPJ file) allows you to manage and organize all the topics, images, sound, video, and appearance files that go into the Help system.

Compiling

After the project is created, you combine all the files into a single Help system file (*.HLP file) with the **compiler**. The compiler uses the information in your project to determine what the Help system contains and what it looks like.

Compiled Help files

The Help file and the contents file are the result of the compilation process. Help systems may contain one or both of these files, depending on your format:

- **Help file (*.HLP)**. Contains topics, images, and other information that communicate the information in the Help system. For WinHelp and HTML Help, the project files are compiled into a Help system file (called *.HPJ in WinHelp and a .CHM file in HTML Help).
- **Contents file (*.CNT)**. For WinHelp 4, a contents file is also created. It contains the Help system's table of contents. (HTML Help includes the TOC file in the compressed Help system file.)

Viewing

A special window known as a **Help viewer** is used to display the Help system. This viewer resides on your

computer. Sometimes Help viewers are called Help engines, because they display (or "run") the Help system. Some Help systems are displayed in browsers that function like a Help viewer when the Help systems are running.

Creating Help

If you're new to Help authoring, try creating a small Help system to get the feel for how everything works. eHelp authoring tools come equipped with tutorials to provide a quick and easy way to experience Help authoring while learning the features and power of your Help authoring tool.

Basic steps for creating Help systems

Here are the basic steps to creating any Help system:

- **Select an authoring environment.** Decide which Help format best meets your users' needs. Then select the Help authoring tool suited for that environment. You can create several Help systems in different formats from the same project files.
- **Create a Help project.** Using your selected Help authoring tool, set up the Help project. The Help project allows you to manage and organize all the source files that go into creating the Help system. It also allows you to decide overall things – like the title of the Help system and the appearance of the Help windows.
- **Create topics.** Next, create your topics using text, images, sound, video – anything that helps you to communicate the message of your Help system in ways that are meaningful and interesting to your audience. When creating your topics, you'll also use styles, which are named formats that affect the layout and appearance of your topics.
- **Link the topics.** When your topics are created, you need to connect them. Your audience uses these links to access the topics. There are many different types of links that show relationships among topics, and your linking strategy can take advantage of the various types.
- **Create a table of contents.** The table of contents is one of the first things your user sees. It's also an important way users access the topics in your Help system. With that in mind, create a table of contents that not only shows what information your Help system contains, but also clearly demonstrates how that information is organized. Topics need to be accessible, or your audience will never see them.
- **Create an index.** You'll also want to give careful thought to the index. Some studies show that Help users use the index to find topics more than they use the table of contents. To create the index, you'll create the keywords and phrases that your users will most likely search for to find information. You associate keywords with your topics, so that when users search for a keyword, they instantly see the topic or topics associated with the selected keyword.
- **Compile the Help system.** When you're ready to see the results of your efforts, you compile the source files into the Help system.
- **Test the Help system.** To make sure the Help system looks and acts the way you planned, you need to test it. Testing can be as simple as opening the Help system and looking at every topic or as complicated as using testing your topics by clicking Help buttons and pressing F1 in a software program. The important thing is that you can get to the topics inside your Help system and that those topics display without errors. If you find problems, resolve them in the source files and compile the Help system again.
- **Deliver the Help system.** When you're satisfied with the way your Help system looks and acts, you make it available to your audience. That may mean creating a diskette or CD-ROM. If you plan to distribute the Help system over an intranet or the Intranet, you'll need to work with your system administrator.

Managing Help projects

Managing a Help project is similar to managing other types of projects. Here are some tips to get started.

- **Define the plan.** Like the old adage says, "No one ever planned to fail. They simply failed to plan." A plan communicates your vision for the Help system – like the blueprint for a house. It defines the intended audience, the purpose of the Help system, and the Help system's content and design. A good plan also includes ways to measure the effectiveness of the Help system, including how you plan to test your Help system. If you're working with a team, it's a good idea to spell out the roles and responsibilities of each team member, including those who are providing subject matter expertise.
- **Estimate the work effort.** Before implementing your plan, you need to know how long it will take and how much it will cost. You should also know what resources you need and how many are required to meet the deadline. You'll also want to have a plan to track the progress and manage the resources and costs.
- **Implement the plan.** Begin developing and authoring your Help system, following your plan. This is where the planning, designing, and managing come together. Create the Help project, write the topics, create windows and links, and integrate the design elements you've planned. Once you've compiled the Help system, test it to assure it meets your stated quality goals and communication objectives. Then distribute the system to your audience.
- **Evaluate the project.** Lastly, assess what you did and how well you did it. Did you create the Help project on time within budget using the allocated resources? What factors affected the development process? What did you learn? This can be an internal evaluation of your Help authoring process or it can include feedback from your audience. Evaluation is an important step. It allows you to learn from your experience and adapt your process.

Help components overview

When you open a Help system, you access the information in the Help system from one file. This file is the result of combining many different files together – usually working with a Help authoring tool.

Every Help system starts with ideas for communicating a message. The ideas may include text to explain concepts and tasks, images to show screens, and video and sound to illustrate a point. As the author, you work with a Help-authoring tool to create and use the elements that best suit your message.

- **Topics.** The basic unit of a Help system is its topics. Topics communicate the message of the Help system, mainly through text and images. You decide the content, format, and organization of your topics.
- **Image and multimedia files.** By adding images and multimedia files to your Help system topics, you take advantage of the power and color of Help. Depending on the format you've chosen for your Help system, you can add graphics, sound, video, animation, and more.
- **Windows.** Windows are the frames that display topics. Each Help format has at least one default Help window in which topics automatically appear. You can customize the window's appearance and attributes. You can also design new windows to suit your content.
- **Links.** Users navigate through your Help system through links. You design the strategy that connects your topics together. The most common links are from one topic to another. But links can also take users outside the Help system, to a topic in a different Help system (even in a different Help format), to a Web or intranet site, or to an application, for example.
- **Styles.** Topics are formatted using styles. Styles are named formats that you design and apply to control the layout and appearance of text.
- **Table of contents.** When users open your Help system, they usually see a Contents tab. It looks and functions much like a table of contents in a printed book. It presents a hierarchical outline of what the Help system contains. You create the table of contents and users can browse and select topics to view from the Contents tab.
- **Index.** Users also see an Index tab when they open the Help system. The Index tab is equivalent to the index in a printed book. It displays a multilevel list of topics and keywords or phrases that you've specified to direct users to topics.
- **Full-text search.** Another tab present in the Help system is the Find or Search tab. This tab allows users to search through every word in the Help system to find topics containing that word.
- **Organization.** All those idea files and other components (called source files) come together in a Help project. Your Help-authoring tool creates one file that contains the information about the location of your topics, images, and other files. Help project files also contain the settings that affect how your Help system looks and acts.
- **Help compiler.** The Help compiler isn't actually part of the final Help file, but you need it to create one. The compiler takes all the source files and other components of your project and creates one Help system file that you distribute to end-users. The compiler reads information in the project to determine what the Help system contains and how it looks and functions.
- **Help viewer.** Users work with the Help system from a Help viewer. Sometimes called a Help engine, the viewer opens and displays the Help system. You work with different viewers, depending on the Help format.

Topics

The most basic unit of a Help system is its topics. When users view a Help system, their destination is a Help topic. Topics communicate the information or provide the assistance users are looking for. As a Help author, your job is to decide which topics meet your users needs and then organize them by "chunking" together like groups (or related sets) of topics. The chunking relationship can be based on many types of organization – frequency of tasks, related subject matter, job functions, and so on. However, the way you chunk topics affects not only topic organization, but it often affects the way topics are linked.

Topic types

You can design the styles for your topics based on the purpose of the topic. Here are some common types of topics:

- **Context-sensitive.** These topics allow you to provide additional assistance to users inside a software application. Users can click a Help button or select a menu command, and the application brings up a topic specific to where the user is and what the user is trying to do. There's even a special kind of context-sensitive Help called What's This? Help. It provides information about a specific item at a dialog or window such as a button option or checkbox setting.
- **Procedures.** Sometimes known as task topics, these provide step-by-step instructions for performing tasks.
- **Overviews.** Overview topics provide explanations to Help users understand new ideas and concepts. They usually begin with the familiar, then lead the user into information they don't know, explaining terms and providing examples.
- **Definitions.** These topics usually define unfamiliar terms, but they can also define industry terms or jargon used throughout the Help system. They are often called Popup topics, because they usually appear in a small window that "pops up" when accessed.
- **Reference.** Reference topics provide non-procedural information or explanations. They often include lists of commands, shortcuts, values, parameters, or other information the user needs.

Your Help system can contain as many topics and as many topic types as you want.

Connecting topics

Help topics are connected by hypertext links – commonly referred to simply as links. Links organize topics into groups and allow users to move around the Help system and display topics. You can use many different linking strategies to creatively organize and connect your topics. One of the benefits of a Help topic is that you can "reuse" the topic over and over again without copying it – simply create a link wherever you want the topic to be accessible.

Displaying topics

Whenever a user selects a topic, from a link or from the table of contents or index, the topic displays in a window. You can add and customize the Help windows in your Help system to best suit your topic design needs.

Images and multimedia

Images and multimedia communicate ideas – sometimes better than text. By adding pictures, sound, video, and animation to your topics, you can add interest and flair to your Help system.

Images

You can include screen shots, icons, scanned photographs, background pictures (also called watermarks), logos, and more in your Help system to give it interest and color. You can even create clickable images – images that are actually links to other topics or to Web sites on the Internet or intranet.

Keep in mind that each Help format supports different image formats, but there are many image tools available to Help you create or convert images into the format you need. (Most Help authoring tools contain image tools for that reason.)

Multimedia files

It's fun and easy to add sound, video, and animation to your Help systems. Some users aren't satisfied with just text and regular images – they want the next dimension. Multimedia files can be used to communicate concepts in a more interactive way.

Windows

Windows are the "containers" that display topics in the compiled Help system. You can control and customize the way your Help system's windows look and act:

- **Color/images.** You can add interest to your Help system by choosing background colors for your Help windows or by using images as window backgrounds (like watermarks, images that appear "beneath" the text).
- **Size and location.** You can quickly adjust the size of a window or the location in which it appears on the screen. For example, you can make Help windows overlap and position them in a specific corner.
- **Title.** Each Help window can contain a title or caption that appears in the window's title bar. You probably want the main window in your Help system to have the title describing the product or subject. For example, if you were creating an employee handbook for the XYZ company, you might title the main window something like, "XYZ Employee Handbook."
- **Buttons.** Buttons on Help windows usually control the actions users can do from the window. They also control the way users move around through topics. For example, the Print button allows users to print the current topic.

Links

Links are the way users navigate throughout the topics in your Help system. Links connect topics and make them accessible. Links also group topics, so users can see the relationships between them.

Types of links

There are many different types of links that you can create, but here are the most common:

Jumps. These are the most common and most familiar type of link. They are called jumps because when the user clicks one, the Help system "jumps" to another topic. You can use jumps to link topics within the Help system, from one Help system to another, or even to a site on the Internet or intranet.

Popups. Popups are so named because they "pop up" in a little window over the main window. Often, popups are used to define words or display notes or tips. Popups are also used to display context-sensitive Help topics from inside an application — users click on the Help button and the application displays a topic relating to the context of where they are in the application or what they're trying to do.

Hotspot images. You can create clickable images that display a topic or jump to one or more topics. These images can add interest and spark to your Help system. You can also take advantage of the truth that "a picture is worth a thousand words" by using clickable images consistent with your design. For example, rather than using the word "tip" in your content, you can include a picture that consistently represents a tip (such as a light bulb). This image provides a quick visual clue to users that the information is a tip.

Browse sequences. You add browse sequences to provide a path for viewing topics in a certain order. You group the topics in a particular order, and then you make that order available using the browse buttons in the Help window. Browse sequences provide a way for users to see and move around a group of Help topics. They are especially useful for tutorials and online training guides where users read information and perform actions in a specific order.

See Also and Related Topic links. See Also and Related Topic links provide you with another way to show the relationship between similar topics. You can use them to group topics that might be necessary or interesting to users.

Buttons. You can use existing buttons (like buttons on Help windows) or create custom buttons to help users move from one topic to the next. The most common linking buttons are the Previous and Next buttons that appear on the Help window. Using these buttons, users can move forward and backwards through a set of topics grouped into a browse sequence.

Strategies for designing links

After you decide the types of links to include, plan an overall navigational linking strategy. Make make sure your links compliment each other and work together.

Here are some basic considerations for developing a navigational linking strategy:

- **Keep it simple and consistent.** "Less is more" is a good design rule, regardless of whether you're designing the Help interface or its navigation. Clearly identify the navigational elements — make them easy to recognize and as visual as possible. And be consistent — if you're using a button to take them to Related Topics, each time the button appears it should contain the same label and appear in the same general location. Consistency is the best way to train users how to use your system. But make sure navigation doesn't get in the way of the information. Remember, what users really want is the information. The navigational tools are simply a means to an end.
- **Provide a home base.** Give users a reliable place to begin and end. This is especially handy if users get lost. Typically, the point of entry is considered "home base", which is why the table of contents and index are so visible. Make sure users can go home from any place in the Help system.
- **Avoid over-navigating.** Although it's important to provide a variety of pathways, do not offer too many choices to avoid overwhelming users. Make sure your navigational aids aren't just repeating topics in an effort to appear comprehensive.

Styles

Styles control the layout and appearance of your topics. They are a set of character and paragraph formats — like font, font style (bold, underline, italic), font color, font size, alignment, spacing, and more.

You can quickly create a consistent look and feel to your Help system by creating and applying styles for text items. Here are a few text items you might want to use styles for:

- Normal body text
- Headings
- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Tips, notes, cautions, and warnings
- Tables
- Links

Table of contents

Users are familiar with a table of contents because they are standard in printed materials and in most online documents. Tables of contents (TOCs) allow them to get an idea of the overall outline and organization of the Help system. Users can browse through the TOC to find a topic or to see the relationship between topics.

The Contents file and Contents tab

The Help system's table of contents is contained in a file called the Contents file. This file controls the appearance and attributes of the Contents tab — the tab that displays the Help system's contents. The Contents file uses the books and pages metaphor:

- **Books.** Group topics into chapters or sections. Users click on a book to display its contents — pages.
- **Pages.** Represent individual topics. Users click on pages to display topics.

You can arrange the books and pages in any order. You can include all the topics in your Help system or only those topics you think users are most likely to need.

Index

Users often search through the index of a printed book to find the page containing the information they're looking for. In a similar way, your index allows users to search for information too, but much more interactively. In fact, studies show that the index is used more frequently to find information than the table of contents or full-text search. An index allows users to quickly get to the information they need and want.

The Help index displays a multilevel list of topics and keywords or phrases that you create. There are two ways users get to topics using the index:

- **Typing.** Users can type a keyword or phrase and go directly to a topic or to a list of topics containing that keyword or phrase.
- **Browsing.** Users can also browse through the index, then select a keyword or phrase. They either go directly to the topic or to a list of topics containing the selected keyword or phrase.

You can have as many keywords and phrases as you want or need. When creating an index, don't just limit yourself to terms inside the Help system. It's a good idea to cross-reference keywords with synonyms. Carefully consider the words or phrases according to your users' ways of thinking.

Full-text search

Another quick way for users to find information in your Help system is through the full-text search. The full-text search allows users to search every topic in the Help system for a particular word or phrase. It's different from the Help index because the index contains keywords or phrases that may or may not be included in the actual topic, even though they are associated with the topic. The full-text search only finds topics containing the actual word or phrase the user is looking for.

You don't have to create full-text search. It's automatically created for you when you compile the project files into the Help file.

Projects

Help projects are files that bring together all the elements of a Help system. The project file contains information about the content and properties of your Help system.

- **Content.** Help project files assist you in managing and organizing the files and components that make up your Help system. It contains information about the location of your topics, images, and other files.
- **Navigation.** Projects also consist of tables of contents and indexes – methods used to navigate (or move around) the Help system.
- **Properties.** The project file also contains the settings information – such as window location — that makes your Help system look the way you designed it. When you create a new project, the basic (or default) settings are already made for you. You can modify these settings — such as adding custom windows or changing the size or location of a window — to suit your preferences and design needs.

Compilers

The Help compiler takes all the source files and components (topics, images, windows, and so on) located in the Help project and processes them into one compiled Help file. The compiled Help file is your final Help system. Once compiled, you can test and distribute the Help system to your users — by placing it on a local hard drive, a disk, CD-ROM, or a network. You can also make the Help system available to download from an intranet or the Internet.

You can compile a Help project as many times as you want. Most Help authors compile as they go, rather than waiting until the entire project is complete. The "compile-as-you-go" method allows you to test your design and content ideas first, giving you plenty of time to explore other methods and make adjustments. It's also a good way to manage a project — compile after each section of the Help file is complete. Then you can test the file a little at a time and make sure it looks and acts the way you designed.

When the compiler completes the process, it displays a report that displays the statistics about compilation. The report displays information such as compilation time, names of files compiled into the Help system, number of images, topics, links, and compiler messages.

Compiler messages

As the compiler is processing the information, it checks the Help project source files to make sure it can complete the process. If the compiler finds problems, it generates messages to alert you of potential problems. There are different kinds of compiler messages including:

- **Note.** A note alerts you to a condition you should be aware of, but one that probably won't cause a serious problem in the compiled Help file. You can determine whether or not to address a note.
- **Warning.** A warning signals a condition that results in a defective Help file. You should address the warning and correct the condition as soon as possible. For example, if the compiler can't locate an image, it displays a warning and continues the compilation process. You won't notice the problem in the compiled Help file until you go to a topic that should display that image where a "missing graphic" image appears, making it evident there's a problem with the topic. (Good for you, but bad if you ignore the warning and distribute the compiled Help file.)
- **Error.** An error indicates a condition that prevents the Help file from being compiled. If the Help compiler encounters an error, the process stops and the compiler immediately alerts you about the problem. You won't be able to create the compiled Help file until you correct the error.

Viewers

The viewer is the component that allows users to open and display the compiled Help file. Viewers reside on the user's computer — as either part of an operating system or an application.

WYSIWYG

Stands for **W**hat **Y**ou **S**ee **I**s **W**hat **Y**ou **G**et.

What is WinHelp?

WinHelp stands for Windows Help and is a Help format used for Help systems that runs on a Microsoft Windows operating system.

The WinHelp format uses a WinHelp compiler to process the final Help file and views that Help file using the WinHelp engine viewer. The WinHelp engine viewer is distributed with every copy of Microsoft Windows and installed in the \Windows directory.

WinHelp primary targets

There are two types of WinHelp – WinHelp 3 and WinHelp 4. The main difference between them is the Windows operating system on which they are targeted to run:

- **WinHelp 3.** WinHelp 3 is the original Windows Help. It was primarily developed for Windows 3.x and Windows 3 applications, which use 16-bit technology. WinHelp 3 features and functionality are fully supported on all Windows operating systems – Windows 95 and later.
- **WinHelp 4.** WinHelp 4 was introduced with Windows 95. It uses an expanded 32-bit technology and includes newer features and added functionality not available with WinHelp 3. WinHelp 4 Help systems only run on Windows 95, 98, and NT operating systems. WinHelp 4 expands the features in WinHelp 3 and offers several additional features, including:
 - Help topics browser user interface (containing the Contents, Index, and Search tabs)
 - Hierarchical table of contents that uses the books and pages metaphor
 - See Also links to easily display related topics

What is RTF?

RTF stands for Rich Text Format. It's the programming language used to code and format WinHelp. The WinHelp compiler understands and processes the Help file based on the RTF formatting and instructions from the Help project file.

You can identify topic files created for WinHelp because they have an *.RTF extension. RoboHELP Classic allows you to use Microsoft Word to develop your topics so you don't have to know the RTF language. By using Word, you create your content in a familiar word processing environment. The files you work with are Microsoft Word's DOC files. RoboHELP Classic uses those DOC files to create the RTF files needed by the WinHelp compiler to create the final WinHelp system.

WinHelp components

WinHelp systems are made up of the components described in [Components of Help systems](#). But there are some differences in how WinHelp uses and handles these components, and there are a few components unique to WinHelp. This section describes the basics of each component:

- [WinHelp topics](#)
- [WinHelp images and multimedia](#)
- [WinHelp window](#)
- [WinHelp links](#)
- [WinHelp styles](#)
- [WinHelp tables of contents](#)
- [WinHelp indexes](#)
- [WinHelp full-text search](#)
- [WinHelp projects](#)
- [WinHelp compilers and viewers](#)
- [WinHelp macros](#)

Additional features of WinHelp

eHelp Corporation offers several ways to expand the functionality of both WinHelp 4 and WinHelp 3 Help systems using RoboHELP Classic and RoboHELP Office.

WinHelp 4

RoboHELP's WinHelp 2000 takes WinHelp 4 systems into the next millennium by enabling them with new capabilities:

- **Tri-pane WinHelp window.** You can extend the look and feel of Microsoft HTML Help to your WinHelp 4 systems. WinHelp 2000's Explorer View Help transforms the main window into a tri-pane view – complete with Contents, Index, and Search tabs. The Contents tab is synchronized with the topic pane so users never lose their place.
- **Watermarks.** You can add images, textures, logos, and more to the background of the Explorer View Help window.
- **Smart See Also button.** This is the fastest, easiest way to link related topics. Simply create See Also keywords (A-keywords), associate the keywords with topics, and enable the Smart See Also button. Once the Help system is compiled, the Smart See Also button appears on the Help window button bar. When users display a topic included in one of the See Also keyword groups, the button is automatically enabled. By clicking on the Smart See Also button, a drop-down list of the related topics appears for easy selection.

WinHelp 3

RoboHELP Office assists Help authors in boosting their WinHelp 3 Help systems, too:

- **WinHelp Compatibility Wizard.** Use the WinHelp Compatibility Wizard to transform the look and feel of your WinHelp 3 Help systems. This simple wizard adds the Help Topics browse dialog complete with Contents, Index, and Find tabs in just a few easy dialogs.
- **WinHelp HyperViewer.** Use the WinHelp HyperViewer to quickly add Contents and Find (Full-text search) tabs to WinHelp 3 systems.

WinHelp topics

WinHelp topics have the *.RTF extension because WinHelp uses the formatting language called RTF (Rich Text Format). The WinHelp compiler uses the RTF files to create the Help topics in the compiled Help file.

Topic handling

WinHelp assigns a topic ID to each topic that uniquely identifies it. Think of a topic ID as an address – each time the topic is referenced (as a hotspot link, for example), WinHelp locates the topic based on its topic ID. WinHelp projects are based on RTF source files. In RoboHELP Classic, you use RoboHELP inside Microsoft Word to create document (*.DOC) files that contain your topics, so you don't have to know RTF code or use RTF document formatting. RoboHELP Classic automatically creates the RTF source files for you from the DOC files. Your topics contain text, images, hotspots, buttons, macros, multimedia, and so on.

Topic organization

You create, maintain, and organize your topics inside Word DOC files. You can have as many topics in each document as you'd like and as many documents in your project as you'd like. It's up to you to determine the best way to organize topics to suit the needs of your project. You might decide to divide topics by content, organizing all topics about a similar subject or feature into one Help document.

WinHelp images and multimedia

WinHelp supports a variety of image formats and multimedia files.

WinHelp supported image file formats

- .BMP (Windows bitmap)
- .MRB (multi-resolution bitmap)
- .WMF (Windows metafile)
- .SHG (Segmented Hypergraphics) hotspot images

RoboHELP Classic allows you to convert other types of image files formats (including HTML image formats into bitmaps (.BMP format) to use in your WinHelp systems.

Hotspot images

Hotspot images are commonly referred to as SHED images, because they were associated with Microsoft's Segmented Hypergraphic Editor – called SHED for short. These images contain graphical links to other topics. The clickable areas in the image are referred to as the "hotspots." When users click these hotspots, the WinHelp window displays the target topic. SHED images have a *.SHG extension.

WinHelp supported multimedia file formats

- .AVI (Audio Video Interleave) video or animation
- .WAV (Windows native sound format) sound files

WinHelp Help windows

WinHelp windows are compatible with Microsoft Windows operating systems. They are standard windows, except they display Help topics. Help windows contain navigational buttons at the top to help users move around the Help system. You can customize the way the Help window looks and acts. You can even create your own Help windows.

In WinHelp, there is one main window. The main window is the default window – all topics automatically display in the main window unless you specify otherwise. You can create other custom windows called secondary windows. You can also customize the appearance and attributes of the main window to make it fit into your overall Help system design.

WinHelp primary targets

There are differences in WinHelp windows, depending on the primary target (Windows operating system) for the Help system:

- **WinHelp 4.** WinHelp 4 systems allow you to create up to 255 custom windows and can display up to 9 windows at one time. WinHelp 4 windows also allow a wide range of buttons for both the main and secondary windows.
- **WinHelp 3.** WinHelp 3 systems are more limited. You can create up to 6 custom windows, but you can only display up to 2 windows at one time. Only the main Help window can contain buttons.

WinHelp links

Links (or hypertext links) enable users to navigate throughout the contents of your WinHelp system. Links appear as specially marked text, images, or objects in a topic. When users click a link, they go to the destination topic specified as part of the link. The link users click can be text, images, multimedia objects (sound or video clip), and more.

Hotspots

In WinHelp, hypertext links are often referred to as hotspots. Hotspots indicate text or images that are "hot" – they perform an action when clicked. Hotspots can jump users from one topic to another, pop up another topic, or run a macro that performs an action, like taking users from a WinHelp topic to a Web site. Hotspot text is traditionally green and underlined.

There are several types of hotspots used in WinHelp systems:

- **Jumps.** Jumps link text or images to topics. When users click on the hotspot text, the Help system "jumps" from the current topic to the destination topic. The topic can be within the Help system or part of another Help system.
- **Popups.** Popup links display the destination topic in a small self-sizing window that "pops up" on the screen. Usually, popup links are used to display definitions, tips, or other helpful information not essential to the topic.
- **Macros.** WinHelp macros are special scripts that enable Help authors to customize and closely control their Help system's functionality. For example, using a WinHelp macro you can create and customize buttons for the Help window's button bar.
- **HTML links.** HTML links allow you to connect your users to topics in HTML Help systems, Internet Web sites, and intranet sites. These links take users directly to a destination HTML topic or page.

Other WinHelp supported links

- **Mid-topic IDs.** Mid-topic IDs allow users to jump to different sections within the same WinHelp topic, like a bookmark or inter-topic jump. They're helpful for breaking up long topics, so users can go right to the information they want.
- **Browse sequences.** Browse sequences allow users to move forward and backward through a series of topics in an order defined by the Help author. They allow users to "flip the pages" of the Help system, skimming or reading as they go.
- **See Also (related topic) links.** See Also links allow Help authors to control and organize related topics in WinHelp 4 systems. Users can click a button or link and see a list of all topics related to the currently displayed topic.
- **Buttons.** Buttons allow users to go from topic to topic with just a click. There are two types of buttons: window buttons and topic buttons. Window buttons are contained on the Help window's button bar. (For example, the Print button.) Topic buttons allow you to package hotspot functionality into a custom button for a topic. (For example, you can insert buttons in topics so users can go to a procedure for a certain computer configuration.)
- **Hotspot images (SHED).** Hotspot images are called SHED images and use the .SHG image format extension. They contain one or more "clickable" hotspots that jump to other topics, display topics in popup windows, link to HTML pages, and so on.

WinHelp styles

In WinHelp, you use Microsoft Word styles to control the layout and appearance of your topic text and elements. Styles affect the layout specifications for WinHelp topics such as font style and size, line spacing, tabs, and paragraph indents. Word styles are contained in templates that are applied to documents. In RoboHELP Classic, WinHelp styles affecting your topics are part of the robohelp.dot template.

You can alter the appearance of WinHelp topics by changing or adding styles in the robohelp.dot template. You can copy styles from other templates into robohelp.dot using Microsoft Word's Style Organizer.

WinHelp tables of contents

End-users access WinHelp tables of contents depending on which primary target you've selected for your Help system.

- **WinHelp 4.** Tables of contents for WinHelp 4 systems display topics in a hierarchical outline with an expandable/collapsible view. You indicate the hierarchy of the TOC by creating books and pages: books represent heading levels; pages represent the topics grouped under a book. The WinHelp 4 table of contents is contained in a text file called the Contents or CNT file and is accessed through the Contents tab.

Typically, the Contents tab is part of the Help Topics browser dialog, which is separate from the Help window. When users select topics from the Contents tab, the selected topic displays in the Help window and the Contents tab disappears. However, WinHelp 2000 in RoboHELP Classic offers an HTML-style Help window that displays the Contents, Index, and Search tabs alongside topics.

- **WinHelp 3.** Tables of contents for WinHelp 3 systems usually consist of a topic (designated as a contents or default topic) that contains lists of links to the topics in the Help system. You can create and link several contents topics together to simulate an outline hierarchy. However, because you must create the hierarchy and links yourself, this table of contents is more time consuming to develop and involves more testing.

WinHelp table of contents organization

The instructions for the organization and appearance of the Contents tab are part of the contents file (CNT file). In WinHelp, you use the CNT file to combine multiple Help files by including each file's tables of contents in a master CNT.

WinHelp indexes

In WinHelp, you create index entries by creating keywords based on topic titles and words or phrases that help users find topics. But there are differences in how the index is implemented in the Help system based on the WinHelp primary target:

- **WinHelp 4.** Help system indexes use multilevel lists of topics and keywords. The keyword list is hierarchical (like the kind you find at the back of a book) and accessed using the Index tab. The Index is accessed through the Index tab on the Help Topics browser. Typically, the Index tab appears as part of the Help Topics browser dialog, separate from topics. Once a user selects a topic from the Index tab, the selected topic displays and the Index tab disappears. However, WinHelp 2000 in RoboHELP Classic offers an HTML-style Help window that displays the Contents, Index, and Search tabs alongside topics.
- **WinHelp 3.** Help system indexes are limited to single level lists of topics and keywords. The index is accessed through the Search tab. You can use the Index tab functionality of WinHelp 4 if you use a special program, like RoboHELP Office's WinHelp Compatibility Wizard.

WinHelp index organization

Index keywords are part of topic properties. You can create and update index keywords at either the topic level or at the Help file index level (RoboHELP updates the topic properties for you).

WinHelp full-text search

In WinHelp, full-text search capability depends on the primary target:

- **WinHelp 4.** WinHelp 4 supports full-text searching through the Find tab on the Help Topics browser dialog. Once a user selects a topic from the Find tab, the topic displays and the Find tab disappears.
- **WinHelp 3.** WinHelp 3 does not support full-text searching unless you use a special program like RoboHELP Office's WinHelp Compatibility Wizard.

Unlike HTML Help, if the WinHelp project has full-text search, it is automatically created during the compile process.

WinHelp projects

The Help project file for a WinHelp Help project has the .HPJ file extension. This file is a text file that contains all the project settings and instructions that the WinHelp compiler uses during compile to create the Help file. While you can use any text editor to edit the .HPJ file, you'll find it much easier and much safer to let RoboHELP track and update the information for you.

Organizing project files

RoboHELP automatically organizes your project source files using the Help project (.HPJ) file. The settings and instructions in this file come from your settings such as project settings, window definitions, map files in the project, Help documents in the project, and images and image folders.

WinHelp compilers and viewers

Because WinHelp uses the RTF language, it uses its own WinHelp compilers and viewers. The compiler and viewer depends on the selected WinHelp primary target. Each compiler and viewer supports the features and functions of its selected primary target.

WinHelp compilers

The WinHelp compilers process all the project source files associated with WinHelp. These files include the .RTF files (topic files), .HPJ file (Help project file), image and multimedia files, and map files.

There are different WinHelp compilers, depending on the primary target selected for your Help system:

- **HCW.EXE.** This is the WinHelp 4 compiler. When you select WinHelp 4 as your primary target, RoboHELP uses this compiler to process the Help system.
- **HCP.EXE.** This is one of two WinHelp 3 compilers available. HCP.EXE is the protected mode version of the original WinHelp 3 compiler. It makes better use of system memory resources when compiling. When you select WinHelp 3 as your primary target, RoboHELP selects this compiler to process the Help system.
- **HC31.EXE.** This is the original WinHelp 3 compiler. If you want to use this compiler for your WinHelp 3 project, you can select it as part of your project settings.

WinHelp viewers

The WinHelp viewers used to display the Help system are automatically built in to every Microsoft Windows operating system. Windows opens the appropriate Help viewer to display the Help system depending on the compiler used to process it and the features the Help system contains.

WinHelp macros

You can extend the functionality of your WinHelp Help system using macros. Macros are coded scripts that perform certain functions, like providing access from a topic to a Web site on the Internet. Both WinHelp 3 and WinHelp 4 Help systems support macros, although WinHelp 4 systems support a wider range of WinHelp macros.

What is Microsoft HTML Help?

Microsoft HTML Help, developed by Microsoft, is a completely new online Help standard based on the Hypertext Markup Language format. Designed for Windows 98, Microsoft intends HTML Help to eventually replace the WinHelp format, although they've stated a commitment to including the existing WinHelp engine in Windows 98 for backward compatibility.

The Microsoft HTML Help format that was introduced in August 1997 can be utilized on existing 32-bit Windows platforms and is Microsoft's Help standard for Windows 98, Windows 2000, and future Microsoft operating systems.

What is HTML?

HTML files are pure ASCII text and can be read by many applications. HTML is actually a set of codes or "tags" that are embedded in these text files between angle brackets. HTML can be regarded as a browser programming language – along with information that tells the browser what part each piece of text plays in the file, HTML commands can also tell the browser to load other files, run scripts (similar to macros), and find and run external programs.

Microsoft HTML Help components

Microsoft HTML Help systems are made up of the components described in the [Components of Help systems](#) section. But there are some differences in how HTML Help uses and handles these components and there are a few components unique to HTML Help. This section describes the basics of each component and its differences from WinHelp:

- [Microsoft HTML Help topics](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help images and multimedia](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help window](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help links](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help styles](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help tables of contents](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help index](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help full-text search](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help projects](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help compilers and viewers](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help information types](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help scripts](#)
- [Microsoft HTML Help objects and ActiveX controls](#)

Microsoft HTML Help topics

Microsoft HTML Help topics have the .HTM or .HTML extension because they use the HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) formatting language. But you don't have to know the HTML language, since RoboHELP HTML provides you with a special [WYSIWYG](#) word processor to create your .HTM topics.

Topic handling

HTML Help projects are based on the idea that you have one main topic per file that may or may not include numerous subtopics, known as bookmarks. Your topics are saved as HTML files, using the .HTM extension. Each topic file contains text, images, hyperlinks, multimedia, ActiveX controls, Dynamic HTML, HTML Help objects, etc. Unlike WinHelp that assigns unique Topic IDs, HTML Help identifies topics by their titles that you define when you create each topic.

Topic organization

There is more than one way to create an HTML-based project and organize the information. It's up to you to determine how to organize your contents to suit the needs of your project. You can have one topic per HTML file, one main topic with numerous subtopics within a single file, or a combination of both. You can even create custom folders and subfolders to organize and manage your HTML topics.

Microsoft HTML Help images and multimedia

Microsoft HTML Help supports a wide variety of image formats, multimedia files, and effects.

HTML supported image file formats

- .JPG, .JPEG (Joint Photographic Expert Group)
- .GIF (Graphic Interchange Format):
- .BMP (Windows Bitmap)

Image maps

HTML Help also supports image maps (similar to WinHelp's hotspot images). This type of image contains graphical links to other topics. The clickable areas in the image are referred to as the "hotspots." When users click these hotspots, the HTML Help window or browser displays the target topic. HTML image maps are actually a set of files that work together – mainly the image file and a Map file that defines the clickable areas and their associated targets (topics).

HTML supported multimedia and effects

- .AVI
- .AU
- .MID
- .RMI
- .WAV
- Animated .GIFs
- Other formats available on the Web such as Dynamic HTML (allows you to overlay different parts of the topic to create exciting 3-D effects) and Marquees (an area in a topic that displays a horizontally scrolling text message).

Microsoft HTML Help window

In Microsoft HTML Help, the Help window is a combination of the standard Help window with the added functionality of an Internet browser. The window is called the tri-pane window because it contains three panes:

- The left pane contains the Contents, Index, and Search tabs to help users move around the system.
- The right pane contains the selected HTML Help topic.
- And the top of the window has navigational buttons to help the users move through the Help system.

You can revamp the window to suit your needs, as well as add your own custom windows.

Microsoft HTML Help links

Hyperlinks (links) enable users to navigate throughout the contents of your Microsoft HTML Help system. Links appear as specially marked text, images, or objects in a topic. When users click a link, they go to the destination. The link users click can be text, an image, and a multimedia object (sound or video clip).

There are two main types of links used in HTML Help systems:

Hyperlinks. Hyperlinks are the HTML equivalent of a jump – they jump users from one topic to another or to a Web site. They can be text or images.

Bookmarks. Bookmarks are the HTML equivalent of WinHelp's Mid-Topic IDs – they jump users to different sections within the same or other HTML Help topics.

Other HTML supported links

- Popup links (separate from hyperlinks)
- See Also/Related Topic links
- Button links.

(Browse sequences are not currently supported in HTML Help.)

Microsoft HTML Help styles

In Microsoft HTML Help, you use Cascading Style Sheets to control the layout and appearance of your topic text and elements. These style sheets allow you to define a full array of layout specifications for HTML topics such as font style and size, line spacing, paragraph indents, and more. Similar to templates used by Microsoft Word and other programs, a style sheet is a template that controls the formatting of HTML Help topics. You can alter the appearance of an HTML Help topic by changing the formatting assigned to it from a style sheet.

There are three ways to work with style sheets and styles:

- **External style sheets.** Style definitions are stored in a style sheet file (.CSS) that is separate from the HTML topics that use it. A single style sheet can be linked to any number of HTML topics. The individual styles that are defined in the style sheet are available to all topics that use the style sheet. When you modify a style, all topics that are linked to the style sheet are automatically updated.
- **Embedded styles.** Style definitions are embedded (saved) in an individual HTML Help file. If the file is linked to a style sheet, all embedded styles override the the styles in the style sheet that are applied to the text.
- **Inline styles.** A block of text within a single HTML Help file is formatted directly in the WYSIWYG Editor. If the file is linked to a style sheet, all inline styles override styles in the style sheet and any embedded styles that may have been saved within the file as well.

Cascading style sheets is the term for HTML styles developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). "Cascading" refers to the hierarchy of the three styles (external style sheets, embedded, inline), when they are used in combination.

Microsoft HTML Help tables of contents

In Microsoft HTML Help, the Contents tab is on the left side of the HTML Help window. Not only is the Contents tab always available, but it can "track" where the user is in the Help system. Whenever the Contents tab is selected, it shows the location in the table of contents of the currently selected topic. (The topic text appears on the right side of the window.)

HTML tables of contents organization

The instructions for the organization and appearance of the Contents tab are part of the .HHC file. HTML tables of contents use the book and pages metaphor, just like WinHelp Help systems. But unlike WinHelp, you can replace the book and page icons with other images of your choice to customize the Contents tab.

Microsoft HTML Help indexes

In Microsoft HTML Help, the Index tab is on the left side of the HTML Help window with the Contents and Search tabs. Users click the keyword they want and then click **Display**. If there is only one topic associated with the keyword, that topic displays in the topic pane on the right. If there is more than one topic associated with the keyword, a popup box appears so users can select the topic they want.

HTML index organization

The HTML Help Index is a separate file – the .HHK file. All instructions for the index are contained in this file. Unlike WinHelp, HTML Help indexes can be more than two levels.

Microsoft HTML Help full-text search

In Microsoft HTML Help, full-text search is part of the HTML Help window. It appears on the Search tab on the left side of the window, along with the Contents and Index tabs.

However, unlike WinHelp, you must generate the full-text search as part of the compile process.

Microsoft HTML Help projects

Help project files for Microsoft HTML Help projects have the .HHP file extension. HTML Help projects also contain many more files than WinHelp projects, since each Help topic is a separate file.

Organizing project files

RoboHELP HTML allows you to create custom folders for your HTML Help projects to organize project files and make it possible for several Help authors to work together on modular Help systems and multiple projects. Custom folders reside on your system and support relative paths — paths from the project folder to files in your custom folders.

Microsoft HTML Help compiler and viewer

Microsoft HTML Help uses its own compiler to process HTML Help projects into HTML Help files. It also uses an Internet browser to display the compiled Help file.

Compiling HTML Help

HTML Help has its own compiler to process the files associated with HTML Help and the HTML language. These files include the .HTM and .HTML files (topic files), .HHP file (Help project file), along with the image, multimedia, and other types of HTML Help files. HTML Help files are usually less than half the size their WinHelp HLP file counterparts because the HTML Help compiler offers better compression.

Viewing compiled HTML Help

HTML Help uses Internet Explorer 4 to display the Help system topics inside the HTML Help window. If your users don't already have Internet Explorer 4 installed, you'll need to distribute it along with your Help system.

Microsoft HTML Help information types

Information types are filters used by the Microsoft HTML Help system to display the relevant topics in the table of contents. They provide a great way for Help authors to customize topics to define how information in the Help system will accommodate the needs of end users. Information types dictate what books and pages users can access from the Contents tab in the HTML Help window or browser.

HTML authors assign information types to topics and users can select different combinations to customize their display. For example, you could differentiate different user levels by marking topics with information types – Manager, Supervisor, and Clerk. Another useful example is creating an HTML Help system that contained three different languages – English, Spanish, and French. By marking the topics with information types, your users could select which language they wanted to see.

Microsoft HTML Help scripts

Scripts are to Microsoft HTML Help what macros are to WinHelp, although scripts can be more powerful. The script contains coded instructions that tell the Help window or browser what to do after a user performs an action or even – like clicking a button.

Two common scripting languages that are supported by HTML Help include VBScript and JavaScript. The scripting used in HTML Help is the same kind of scripting that is used by Web pages. Scripts are uncompiled and you can view them in the TrueCode Editor. Since they are not compiled, they do not require any DLLs — everything needed to make them function is built right into the Help topic.

Microsoft HTML Help objects

ActiveX controls are reusable Microsoft HTML Help objects that add special functions to your topics such as calendar controls, charts, and banners. HTML Help objects are special navigation controls for HTML Help such as Splash screens, Related Topics, and Shortcut buttons.

ActiveX controls

ActiveX controls are special applications that you can plug into your HTML Help project. They are designed to be small, precompiled, modular and reusable, and there is an ever-growing number of them available. Web developers have been using ActiveX controls to extend the functionality of their HTML pages and they can also be used by HTML Help authors to extend the functionality of HTML Help topics.

HTML Help objects

HTML Help objects are really ActiveX controls specifically designed for HTML Help functionality. Examples of HTML Help objects include closing the HTML Help window or browser and displaying the HHCTRL version, which shows the version number for an ActiveX control used in a topic.

{ewl RoboEx32.dll, WinHelp2000, }

