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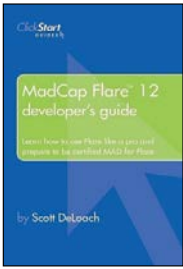**Give feedback in the classroom and in practice**

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# MadCap Flare 12 developer's guide

By **Scott DeLoach**
ClickStart (2016), Paperback: 450 pages. ISBN 978-0578180632. Reviewed by **Jack DeLand**.

*"Invaluable for reminders of functionality. A terrific refresher and a great tool for those just starting out."*

MadCap Flare is remarkably flexible, and is based on XML tracking and management files. Topics are created in XHTML. It can import and output to PDF, Word, DITA, and Epub, as well as the standard HTML5. Responsive text can be created and tested on the spot with simulators. It uses snippets and conditioning to single-source text and graphics. The output can be placed on a server, or run locally. In short, modern Help systems can do anything that can be accomplished using HTML5, and that's a lot.

The user interface takes a little getting used to, but once learned, it is highly seductive. Like a car that wants to go faster, Flare makes you want to experiment more with its capabilities. There are other tools that provide roughly the same functionality, but none with the results or light touch experienced with Flare.

Enter Scott DeLoach. Scott is possibly the world's most knowledgeable expert on Flare outside of MadCap. He directs the certification program for Flare Advanced Developers, and has created all of the course books used in Flare's training program. He also does a great deal of training himself, and speaks at a lot of conferences. A lot.

Scott's *Flare Developer's Guide* has been available for several versions now. It's directed toward those who want certification, as well as the user who wants to learn everything possible about Flare. The guide does a great job of covering the new-for-version 12 options and how to make the most of them. How to find only the new sections? Easy: they're marked "new" in the table of contents and headings.

Take note that the "developer" target audience is an author/developer of Flare projects, not programmers. *MadCap Flare for Programmers*, by Tregner and Owens, is what your coder would be interested in, if he/she were interested in Flare.

The guide covers the material needed for MAD certification (www.madcapsoftware.com/services/certification) for the advanced and soon-to-be-advanced user. (MadCap puns on the word "mad" a lot; as well as MAD certificates there is a MadCamp boot camp, and an annual conference named MadWorld). Practice questions at the end of each section help you prepare for the test. Some of the questions are a little tricky; all of them require thought, but you have 75 minutes to answer 50 questions. However, if you're stumped while going through the book, don't worry: the answers are also provided in a separate chapter.

I used the *version 12 Developer's Guide* as a study aide for my own certification test. (It worked.) The book was invaluable in reminding me of functionality, like relationship tables, that I had used far too little, and in advising on the best practices for Help development. It's a terrific refresher, and a great tool for those just starting out. It's pithy.

Like all good trade books, this one explains essential functionality in a clean, concise manner, with just enough detail to be understood and then checked off as an "of course" in the back of your mind, plus assorted instances of "I didn't know that!". For example, did you know that Flare's table rows and columns can now be sorted at compile time? It's true. It's an invaluable time saver (toss the stuff into the table, and don't worry about sorting while writing), and it demonstrates the thoughtful approach that MadCap has taken since its inception in developing Flare functionality.

Among the many new features that Scott covers:
- Style sheets and master pages can now be applied to individual topics.
- A "runtime" option lets the user choose from multiple skins on the fly for a customised look.
- Snippets can be pinned and conditionalised.
- Multiple languages in one output can now be targeted (a nice bit of coding on MadCap's part).
- Importing and disconnecting a project from source control is now covered.

The book's content is laid out in a consistent, easy to skim fashion. You may, however, wish to slow down, as there are nuggets of wisdom in every chapter. Flare is a remarkably powerful and flexible tool, and every little bit of knowledge helps. Don't overlook the MadCap Software site; it is chock full of resources, with forum links, recorded webinars, a blog, and free trial downloads.

Quibbles? A couple. The guide is a little heavy-handed in pushing the certification program. And lulu.com's paper quality is not exactly stellar. On the other hand, trade books come and go at a pretty rapid pace, so this is not exactly a major consideration.

And then again there's cost: $32.50 (£23.15) seems like a lot more than $29.99 for some reason. It just looks like a fat number. Would it sell more at the lower price? Maybe, but my recommendation is to suck up the $2.51 difference. This book is well worth the investment in time saved and knowledge gained. **C**

**Rating:** ★ ★ ★ ★ ☆

**About the author:**
**Scott DeLoach** is the Founder and CEO of ClickStart. Scott is a MadCap Certified Instructor and consultant for Flare and Doc-to-Help.

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