

The LAKESHORE WRITER

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Wisconsin STC Chapter

December 1998

Recommendations from the Trenches

Reference Materials for Technical Communicators

Julie Bommarito

In the whirlwind of deadlines, technical communicators often don't have the time to catch up on their professional reading. Most STC members I know have a reading pile that contains at least two copies of *Technical Communication* and *Intercom*.

Family, home, job, then—maybe—catching up on reading. And where in this list does evaluating new reference materials fall? Maybe nowhere. Given this lack of time, many technical communicators have to rely on recommendations from peers as to what is worth reading and what is valuable to use at work. In addition, many references are expensive, and no one wants to waste money on an unknown quantity.

Survey

In the course of putting together conference presentations about core skills, Karen Bachmann (president of the Suncoast chapter) and I e-mailed surveys to 200 working technical communicators. We received approximately 40 responses.

The people surveyed answered questions about visual and verbal communication, industry specialization, technological adaptability, and other essential skills. In addition, each person was asked the following questions:

- ▶ What reference materials do you use for the industry you work in?
- ▶ What reference materials do you use for preparing/understanding the application of visual communication?
- ▶ What style and grammar guides do you use at work?

From these surveys, we compiled a handout for our presentations that listed recommendations for style guides and grammar references, visual communication, and sites on the World Wide Web.

Results

Style Guides and Grammar References

Although the technical communicators surveyed spanned a variety of disciplines, we found that many technical communicators use the same style guides and grammar references. The following are the five top style guides and grammar references from our survey:

1. *The Chicago Manual of Style*
2. Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*
3. *The Gregg Reference Manual*
4. Microsoft Word's online thesaurus and spell-checker
5. *The Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications*

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An STC Member Profile

Spotlight

Lisa Orvis

Managing several teams of writers can offer many challenges and opportunities for senior STC member Barb Hermans. As an M&I Data Services employee for the past eight years, she is responsible for teams supporting five product lines.

The teams are made up of entry-level to very experienced writers. In managing these groups, one of the challenges Barb sees is “ensuring that writers have new work experiences and opportunities to grow their professional skills.”

To help managers meet challenges like this, M&I Data Services, a leading technology solutions provider for the financial services industry, offers a comprehensive management development program. Barb has taken advantage of the curriculum by completing courses in coaching and development and creating an inclusive work culture.

Barb has many occasions for coaching and fostering an inclusive culture. Her largest project is managing a team of online help developers for a suite of Windows-based banking products. When members are added to the team, Barb’s responsibility is to bring them up to speed in a short time.

Coordinating efforts with contacts at another location has also been a challenge. “With out-of-state subject matter experts juggling multiple priorities, we had to be able to come up with options for staying on track.” In her free time, Barb teaches country line dancing. She is also a member of the dance corps section of the Carroll College Project Create Drum Brigade. The group practices once a week during the summer and performs in community Fourth of July parades. They are also the lead unit for the Great Circus Parade.

Most recently, though, Barb has discovered the thrill of flying small airplanes. With about fifty hours of airtime already under her belt, Barb is working on obtaining her private pilot license. ~~~

Technical Communication Trends

The Winds of Change

Jan Wefler

Our recent November weather reminded me of a line from *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, “The winds of change are blowing across the land.” The same could be said about the ever-changing field of technical communication, where there are continuous changes in methods, equipment, and media.

When asked about historical industry changes, Ken Cook, past president of STC and executive vice president of Ken Cook Co., provided the following highlights in the history of Ken Cook Co.:

- ▶ 1944 – Ken Cook Co. was founded.
- ▶ 1950-1965–Justewriter recorders and reproducers (paper tape) were the primary means for producing typeset copy.
- ▶ 1965 – MT/ST magnetic disk composers were added.
- ▶ 1975 – The first video display terminal with hard disc storage was installed.
- ▶ 1978 – A Computer-Aided Drafting (CAD) System was purchased.
- ▶ 1978-1981 – AM electronic typesetters replaced Justowriters.
- ▶ 1982 – A COMP/EDIT system was installed which provided formatting, image preview, multilanguage and telecommunications capabilities.
- ▶ 1985 – A Data General Eclipse MV/8000 replaced the CHI 2130 mainframe.
- ▶ 1987 – Advanced Graphics Systems replaced the AD/380 CAD system.
- ▶ 1988 – Adobe Illustrator and Apple Macintosh computers were used to create 4-color graphics.

Today, Ken Cook Co.’s mission is to become more digital while continuing to offer total capabilities of design, writing, photography, art, electronic publishing, computer graphics, phototypesetting, telecommunications, foreign language translation and production services, and high-quality printing and binding.

When asked what’s ahead for the industry, Cook sees an increase in CD-ROM, web site e-commerce, purchasing online, browse and buy systems, more print-on-demand, lower inventories of printed literature, interactive electronic technical manuals, and customization of technical information.

Hold onto your hat—the winds of change are blowing across the land. ~~~

STC Chapter Information

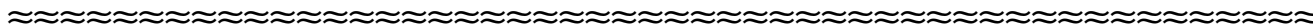
If you're looking for information on chapter activities or job possibilities, you'll find what you need with one of these information sources:

Chapter Voice Mail

414-299-0048

Chapter Web Site

<http://stc.org/region6/mwc/www/>



A Message from the Wisconsin Chapter President**The President's Corner***Mollye Barrett***A Couple of Announcements****Video Competition**

STC invites you to participate in its annual International Technical Video Competition (ITVC). This competition recognizes excellence in video communication related to technology, training, science, medicine, or government. Entries must be received by January 15, 1999. The Best of Show Award will be presented at the STC 46th Annual Conference in Cincinnati, OH, May 16-19, 1999. Other award winners are honored at the competition exhibit, where extracts from the winning entries are shown. Competition rules and entry forms are available at www.stc-va.org.

International Competitions (Heartlands Competitions—Region 6) will call for competition committee members, dates, and categories for the competitions and a list of reasons to enter. You may already have this information from Mankato State/Kathy Hurley.

Scholarships in Technical Communication

STC scholarships are available to assist students pursuing established degree programs in some area of technical communication.

Eligibility

- ▶ Applicants must have completed at least one year of post-secondary education.
- ▶ They should be studying communication of information about technical subjects.
- ▶ Students should have at least one full year of academic work remaining to complete their degree programs, although under exceptional circumstances an award may be granted for the final half-year.
- ▶ Applicants must be full-time students. They may be either graduate students working toward a master's or doctorate degree, or undergraduate students working toward a bachelor's degree.

Awards

Fourteen awards of \$2,500 each will be granted toward school tuition and expenses. Seven awards are granted to graduate students, and seven to undergraduates.

Schedule

Applications must be postmarked by February 12, and arrive no later than February 20 of the year for which they will be granted. Graduate students must notify the committee of acceptance in a graduate program by March 20. (Students enrolling in a graduate program may not know their status by February 20. They will be evaluated like accepted students, but their eligibility is contingent upon acceptance and notification by March 20.) Applicants will be notified by mail of committee decisions by April 15.

*Continued, page 5***Wisconsin Chapter STC Officers****▶ President, Mollye Barrett**e-mail: mbarrett@dataforms.com

phone: 414-393-0105

▶ Vice-President, Barry Glasforde-mail: barry.glasford@mail.mei.com

phone: 414-362-3127

▶ Secretary, Pat Mellere-mail: pat.meller@whittman-hart.com

phone: 414-798-1078

▶ Treasurer, Amy Nelsone-mail: amy.nelson@whittman-hart.com

phone: 414-270-7866

▶ Membership, Lauri Gerlache-mail: lauri.gerlach@deluxedata.com

phone: 414-341-5377

▶ Job Exchange, Todd Evanse-mail: todd.evans@whittman-hart.com

phone: 414-270-7831

▶ Webmaster, Mike Hubere-mail: nax@execpc.com

phone: 414-328-2267

▶ Newsletter / Publicity, Lisa Schroedere-mail: lisa.schroeder@deluxedata.com

phone: 414-341-5358

**The next
newsletter
deadline is
January 22, 1999**

Communications

Hot Job Tracks

Technical Writer

Last month Sharon Murphy, a technical writer at General Mills in Golden Valley, MN, decided that the verb “simmer” is meaningless to a “cooking illiterate” population. She changed the back of the Betty Crocker scalloped potato mix box to read, “Cook until the mixture bubbles very gently.” Some technical writers tell couch potatoes how to program a VCR; others write space-probe manuals for rocket scientists. Technical writers use specialized knowledge to translate complicated concepts into layman’s language. The Society for Technical Communication has seen its membership rise 53 percent since 1990, from 13,159 to 20,190, as the demand for technology filters down from the lab to the home.

Hot-Track Salaries (average)

- Entry level: \$35,500
- Midlevel: \$41,300
- Top: \$54,510

Training

A bachelor’s degree—typically with an English or technical communications major—and strong writing skills are required. A specialized background like engineering or business helps, but on-the-job training is often available.

Runner-Up Hot Track

Healthcare public relations. HMOs and hospital chains often face negative press; many have in-house PR staff and retain an outside firm as well.

What Communications Jobs Pay

- Newspaper reporter **\$26,301**
- TV news reporter **\$33,223**
- PR account executive **\$36,050**
- Corporate PR specialist **\$57,467**
- Health care PR specialist **\$63,800**
- TV news anchor **\$71,937**

Taken from *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 26, 1998.

6 ~~~~~
Sources: *Society for Technical Communication*, Inland Press Association, National Association of Broadcasters,

Sponsor News

International Day and Fall Board Reports

Susan M. Jensen, Region 6 Director-Sponsor

On September 19, I had the privilege of attending STC International Day in Paris, France. I joined over 100 STC members from 13 countries, delegates from other communication organizations, and the rest of the STC board at this memorable event.

We heard reports from STC’s new International Issues Committee and on chapter activities in Paris, Belgium, Sweden, Israel, and the United Kingdom. Did you know that the Paris chapter has been holding competitions in multiple languages since 1994? That the Israel chapter was started in the 1960’s? That the Swedish chapter subsidizes their activities by offering their programs to the public?

We also met with delegates of other technical communication organizations from France, Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom. INTECOM (the International Council for Technical Communication, an association of communication societies to which STC belongs) presented a summary of their activities and discussed plans for FORUM 2000, a multi-day conference to be held in London in 2000.

International Day participants had an opportunity to communicate their concerns and needs to the STC board throughout the day, and we learned much. Many of the concerns are not too different than those we experience in North America—membership that is geographically spread out, funding that doesn’t quite meet the need, and volunteer burnout. Many concerns are unique to the non-North American membership—specific cultural issues, legal and political impacts on the workplace, and lack of formal training programs.

What most impressed me is that we clearly have much to share with and learn from each other—on both sides—and that we communicated a commitment to that effort at International Day. As a society, this was one step in the process of strengthening our ability to work globally.

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Workshop Recap

Managing Your Documentation Projects

Susan Duncan

On Friday, November 13, 40 STC and WORDS members gathered at the Milwaukee School of Engineering to participate in a day-long workshop led by author and information development specialist JoAnn Hackos. The workshop, jointly sponsored by STC and WORDS, provided practical information on managing documentation projects, from making a business case for project management to creating an information plan and scheduling project milestones.

In making the business case for project management, JoAnn compared project managers to film producers and directors. While directors control the creative aspects of the project, producers try to ensure that the movie comes in on schedule and within the budget. Documentation projects, however, demand that managers function as producer *and* director—with all the creative and practical problems of both jobs. The project manager not only works to ensure a return on investment, but also designs the information product, tracks the project's progress, and attends to quality issues.

One of the problems in ensuring that a specific project offers a return on investment is measuring the value added by the product. Even though we know that our products provide a necessary and valuable service—we save the company money in decreased cost of liability, increased productivity, fewer help desk calls, etc.—without good “before” and “after” data to support our conclusions, upper management is apt to overlook our contributions. JoAnn strongly advocated keeping detailed records and perhaps inviting an outside consultant to

*International Day and Fall Board Reports, continued from page 4***Fall Board Meeting**

The STC board met on September 17, 1998, to conduct a great deal of business. Director-sponsors met afterward to discuss logistics and milestones for Distinguished Chapter Service Awards, Associate Fellow nominations, and Chapter Achievement Awards.

Actions taken at the September board meeting include the following:

- ▶ The 1999 balanced budget was passed—after much effort both before the meeting and during; Treasurer Martha Collins deserves an award just for keeping everything on track.
- ▶ The site for the 2004 annual conference changed from New York to Philadelphia. New York sources were estimating \$400 per night hotel costs, which would have made that venue beyond many members' means.
- ▶ Richard Wrye (First Coast chapter) was appointed to the position of Conference Support Manager for the Orlando conference in 2000.
- ▶ The STC Strategic Plan for 1998-2003 was approved. For more information about this, please contact Annette Reilly, strategic planning committee manager, through the STC office.
- ▶ Revisions to the *STC Ethical Principles for Technical Communicators* (previously named the *STC Ethical Guidelines for Technical Communicators*) were approved.
- ▶ This statement in the policy on election campaigning: “Campaigning by candidates for Society level office is not forbidden by the Society Bylaws, but should be discouraged; if done, the candidates should be ethical in their methods. (9/88)” will be replaced with: “Candidates for Society-level office who conduct campaigns for office should be ethical in their methods.” In other words, campaigning for STC offices is no longer discouraged, provided it is done in an ethical manner.
- ▶ The Front Range (Utah) and Columbia River (Oregon) student chapters were dissolved. Regular chapters in the area (Intermountain and Willamette Valley) will serve the needs of the members.
- ▶ The San Diego State University student chapter was dissolved. The San Diego chapter will serve the needs of the members. ≈≈≈

The President's Corner, continued from page 3

To Apply

Obtain application forms and additional information from your university (college) department or contact:

Society for Technical Communication
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1854
(703) 522-4114

or

Ms. Lenore S. Ridgway
19 Johnston Avenue
Kingston, NY 12401
(914) 339-4927 ≈≈≈



A Great Design Tool for Writers

Techline

Janine Pilarski

You're a great writer, right? But when it comes to designing a new visual format, could you use some help? Help is available in the form of a little book called *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams.

This book is so popular in my office, it's almost never on my bookshelf. Everyone in my department uses it to get ideas for new visual designs.

Often, we look at pages and we know what we like and what we don't like, but we're not sure why. This book provides the explanation. In the design section of her book, Williams uses a before-and-after setup to display the same information two ways: first, a sort of unimaginative way, and a second, more creative (better) way, either on the same page or on facing pages, so you can easily see the improvement. The accompanying text provides a short, but effective explanation of the changes.

Later in the book, Williams discusses font and typeface, and explains how they can affect your document. There are even some quizzes at the ends of sections that you can take to see if you're grasping the ideas she writes about.

The book itself is visually very appealing. Williams made good use of the tips she writes about by using them to design this book. This is a tool every technical writer can use. ~~~

Twin Cities Conference

Future Tense 1999

Saul Carliner

Save February 27. That's the day your questions about the future will be answered. (At least, your questions about the future of technical communication.)

At FutureTense 1999, the first conference of the Twin Cities Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), is scheduled 8:30 - 4:30 at Minneapolis Community College. Starting with keynote speaker Nancy Hoft's (author of *International Technical Communication: How to Export Information about High Technology*) views on the new world order of our field, the workshops, panels, and games in our five stems—Writing, Business and Management, Technology, Usability and Graphics, and the Academic Conclave—will address questions such as:

- ▶ What technologies will we be writing about?
- ▶ How can we design interfaces that users find effortless?
- ▶ How can we communicate visually in this increasingly visual age?
- ▶ How will XML affect our lives?
- ▶ Which management theories will hold water?
- ▶ In an overstimulated era, how can we creatively and eloquently communicate technical concepts?
- ▶ How can we get published in a magazine or journal?
- ▶ Which recent research can help us communicate more effectively?

Speakers already confirmed include Ben Weisner, Susan Jensen, Mary Lay, Craig Hansen, Jim Romano, Kris Henke, and Dan Dodge.

A networking luncheon provides a fun way of meeting people with similar professional interests.

Following the conference is the STC Region 6 Awards Banquet, which honors recipients of awards in the regional online communication, technical art, and technical publications competitions.

Check the STC/Twin Cities website (www.stc.org/region6/tc) for updates on speakers and session details. You should receive registration information in early January. ~~~

Tips and Tricks

Here's What Good Teams Do

The best teams cooperate instead of competing. To enhance cooperation, consider the following advice:

- ▶ **Eliminate rules** and curb behaviors that can limit cooperation. Teams must be able to argue and discuss freely—but in a friendly, nonthreatening manner.
- ▶ **Eradicate ranking** and individual ratings. Give members roles, not titles. And rate the entire team on its performance—not particular participants.
- ▶ **Recognize individuals** for outstanding contributions—but stress the value of the contribution to the team.
- ▶ **Communicate to** team members what their roles are, where they fit into the program, and how valuable they are to the process.

Taken from *Communication Briefings*

Source: Robert Crow, writing in *Journal for Quality and Participation*, 801-B W. 8th St., Cincinnati, OH 45203. ~~~

Reference Materials for Technical Communicators, continued from page 1

Design

In the area of visual communication and information design, many of the same names also kept coming up. These authors have written several books each, all of which were mentioned by at least one person surveyed: Edward Tufte, William K. Horton, Laura LeMay, Jan White, and JoAnn Hackos.

World Wide Web

Many technical communicators use the Web for resources, such as style guides, editing tips, dictionaries and thesauri, citation guides, and web design.

Handout

The handout from our conference presentations is available on the Wisconsin Chapter web site (<http://stc.org/region6/mwc/www/>) as a .pdf file.

More Information

To continue to provide up-to-date references for technical communicators from their peers, I need your help. Please send me citations for your favorite reference guides/educational materials that you use at work. If I receive enough additional information, the updated list will be published in a future issue of this newsletter and/or on the web site. ~~~

Workshop Recap

Usability Testing

Marylou Lindquist

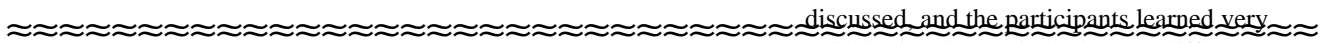
The engineers were proud, the company excited. The new machine, designed to perform with cutting edge technology, offered great promise. Even though built and ready for full production, a quick usability test could put the crowning stamp of approval on the product.

The first real user stepped up to the machine, and within seconds made a horrifying announcement. It was designed backwards! Release the product and the company would be the laughing stock of the industry.

The need for usability testing was emphasized in the Practical Usability Testing workshop conducted by Dr. JoAnn Hackos and attended by 19 STC and WORDS members on Saturday, November 14. Workshop participants learned that usability testing is the process by which we determine if our users can successfully learn and use our products. When incorporated as a part of the product-information-development life cycle, usability testing can be performed without increasing production time.

Dr. Hackos demonstrated how to perform usability tests by conducting a test with the group. Two volunteers tested directions on how to create an origami swan, while the rest of the group observed and made notes. The results were discussed, and the participants learned very quickly that the world looks very different through the eyes of the real user.

Workshop participants learned how to work



Upcoming Meetings

Designing and Implementing Online Information

January 12, 1999

Join us for an overview of design and delivery implications, followed by breakout sessions covering: CBT, Web, Online Help, and Large (1000+ files) online help. Your presenters include: Rob Lemerond, Laura Duchelle, Gary Krukar, and Dave Franson.

Whittman-Hart
330 E. Kilbourn Avenue
Suite 220
Milwaukee, WI 53202

Understanding the Foreign Language of CE Requirements

February 9, 1999

Learn about what we as technical communicators need to do to make our products saleable in Europe. Kristin Pabst is the presenter.

Marquette Medical Systems
8200 West Tower Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53223



Managing Your Documentation Projects, continued from page 5

One way to add value to any company is to enhance its management processes and move beyond chaos to an orderly organizational style. The Information Process Maturity Model (IPMM), modeled on the Software Engineering Institute’s Capabilities Maturity Model (CMM), describes six levels of process maturity and their related belief statements.

- ▶ Level 0: Oblivious—“Anyone can write; No one reads the manuals anyway”
- ▶ Level 1: Ad Hoc—“Writers manage their own work; Style standards are not enforced; Technical experts are in control”
- ▶ Level 2: Rudimentary—“Writers are beginning to follow style standards; Process standards are begun; Management is in place; When the going gets rough, standards are abandoned”
- ▶ Level 3: Organized and Repeatable—“Projects are managed; Standards and processes are followed; Time is available for improvement”
- ▶ Level 4: Managed and Sustainable—“Processes are always followed; Innovation is closely linked to customer needs: Time is available for quality”
- ▶ Level 5: Optimizing—“A continually improving organization; Quality measurements are in place; Innovations are part of the process; Everyone is on the team”

According to JoAnn, it’s very difficult for a documentation department to rise higher than one level above its organization. For instance, a Level 1 organization with chaotic management and no processes in place will usually keep a documentation department from moving higher than a Level 2. But improvement is possible no matter where your company and/or

Depending on the project, these plans can be combined into one document. The Information Plan consists of an overall justification for the project, a product description, goals for the information product, an audience profile, a user/task matrix, design implications, a list of deliverables, concerns, team roles and responsibilities, and a project schedule. The Content Specification plan includes goals and objectives for a specific deliverable, usability goals, testing plans, information objectives, and a detailed overview of the deliverable’s contents. Templates for both of these documents can be found on the Comtech web site at www.comtech-serv.com.

While Information Plans and Content Specs are extremely useful, it’s often very difficult to define a project’s scope with enough depth to create a realistic schedule of milestones and deadlines. One way to estimate project time and costs—and thereby scope—is with the Dependencies Calculator, which weights different factors of the project. The Dependencies Calculator takes into account items such as Subject Matter Expert (SME) availability, team experience, and prototype availability, and offers a systematic way to use these dependencies to estimate writing, editing, and production time. You simply plug in the numbers and come up with estimated project hours. It’s important to remember that the Information Plan and Content Specs are dynamic documents; as the project progresses, the schedule (and perhaps project scope) will inevitably change. For more information about the Dependencies Calculator, refer to the Comtech web site.

By the end of the seminar, most participants had a rough Information Plan for a current project to take home with them, as well as the desire and knowledge to heighten their department’s process and management maturity level.

For more information on project management, take a look at JoAnn’s book,

Tips and Tricks

Spotting Team Trouble Signs

You’ll know a team is off-track when you see these signs:

Mission Mystery

Team members seem unclear about what the team is supposed to do. *Solution:* Find out where team members think they’re headed by asking them to write a formal mission statement of 25 words or fewer. Then work with them to craft their viewpoints into one inspiring common goal.

Humor Deficit

A team that has no fun is a bored team. *Solution:* Encourage a little goofiness. Give out humorous awards and allow some practical jokes. Set aside a bulletin board for work-related cartoons. Don’t go too far—just far enough to lighten things up.

Abrasive Bickering

You can expect some griping on any team. *Solution:* When it begins to erode team effectiveness, it’s time for some training, perhaps in listening skills and conflict resolution. Or bring in an outsider to facilitate a meeting or two to get the grumbling out in the open so you can deal with it.

Action Paralysis

Candidly answer this question: “What real value has the team provided for the organization and its customers, employees and shareholders in the past two weeks?” If the answer is none or little, the team needs a strong reminder about performance goals. If that doesn’t work, it’s time to sign new players to the team.

Taken from *Communication Briefings*
Source: Winning Team, Time Inc., Time & Life Bldg., Rockefeller Center, New York, NY 10020 ≈≈≈

