



# Lakeshore Connection

Wisconsin Chapter, Society for Technical Communication Volume 4, Issue 3 May 2003

## Joint meeting with ASTD and PMI in May

by *Kathie Gorski*

If you're looking for a different sort of STC chapter meeting, look no further. Our May event will be a joint meeting with the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) and the Project Management Institute (PMI). The topic is "Managing Multiple Responsibilities," and the presenter is Madison consultant Michael Tobis, Ph.D.

Demands for our attention often come not only from our current "front burner" project, but also from nearly completed past projects, planning for upcoming projects, secondary projects, and other responsibilities. This flood of responsibilities can be overwhelming. The more ambitious a person is, the more that person risks being late or incomplete, or unreliable. This talk will address the consequences of our burgeoning opportunities and responsibilities.

The speaker is Michael Tobis, Ph.D., co-author of "Managing Multiple Projects," a recent release in the Briefcase Books series from McGraw-Hill. Michael, a systems engineer, and his wife, Irene, a psychologist, are co-founders of Ducks-in-a-Row Efficiency Consultants, a Madison-based consultancy focusing on individual and small group productivity and workflow.

The meeting will be held Tuesday, May 13, 2003, at Harley-Davidson Motor Co., 3700 W. Juneau Ave., Milwaukee 53208. (From Wisconsin Avenue, traveling west, turn right on 37th Street. Harley is on 37th and Juneau. Park in parking lot. The meeting will be held in the Auditorium.)



*Michael Tobis*

The meeting agenda is:

5:00 p.m. -- 6:00 p.m.  
Registration and networking

6:00 p.m. -- 7:00 p.m.  
Dinner

7:00 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.  
Program

The cost (which includes dinner) is \$20 for members and \$25 for future members. Reservations that are made but not kept will be billed.

If you plan to attend the meeting, we recommend that you register right away. Although the Harley-Davidson facility is large, membership in ASTD and PMI is also large. Because there is limited seating, each organization will be allotted a specific number of seats.

Registration closes May 6. You can register by email to [kgorski@execpc.com](mailto:kgorski@execpc.com) or via the STC telephone reservation line at 414-299-0048. Please supply your name, member status, and telephone number. If you are a member of one of the other hosting organizations as well, please indicate that, so we can allocate seats based on demand. ♦

## Clarity is King

David M. Freedman, of Freedman Consulting in Chicago, was the speaker at our March 11 meeting. The title of his presentation was "Clarity is King – Electronic Communications in Perspective."

His talk educated us about writing techniques for electronic communications—specifically, online communications (the Web).

Why is writing for an online environment different?

1. Online users have short attention spans. These users will quickly go to other sites if they don't find what they need at your site. Strategies for dealing with this include:
  - make your writing brief and concise. Boil it down, then boil it down some more.
  - make your writing "scannable." Use headings and sub-heads so that users can scan or skim the text, and quickly find what they are looking for.
  - use pictures (graphics) primarily to enhance the flow of information. Otherwise, graphics can clutter and distract. (And can also take a long time to download.)
2. The Web is interactive. You can personalize your Website - for example, you can ask users to

subscribe to an electronic newsletter. Interactivity allows collaboration - you can ask for feedback. And be sure to put your contact information (e-mail address) on every page. Make it easy for your users to give feedback or to contact you.

3. The Web is the "wild frontier." It's informal. You can try new things. "Although the Web has become more mainstream, you certainly should loosen up and have fun," Freedman said. ♦

## Fine Tune Your Writing and Editing Skills

William Van Pelt, Associate Professor of English at UW–Milwaukee, presented "Fine Tune Your Writing and Editing Skills" at our April 8 meeting.

Editing is an essential part of the process of writing and publishing. "The editor is the interface between the author and the public," Van Pelt said.

An important goal for both the editor and author is for the author's prose to achieve "transparency." Transparency means that the reader grasps the meaning of the words immediately, and then moves on. The words that he or she has read

disappear from the page, in a sense, because they have been replaced with understanding in the reader's mind.

You achieve transparency through good design and by writing clear, strong, simple prose. The reader should never have to read a sentence more than once to get its meaning. "Clarity is what transparency is all about," Van Pelt said.

To help achieve clarity when you write, use the active voice, the present tense, and simple words.

Remember to give cues to your readers. Your whole document is full of cues. Examples of cues: a well-designed table of contents, or headers and footers. The writer designs the document so that it has cues; the editor makes sure that the cues are there and working.

One good editing strategy is to circle what doesn't work in the piece that you're editing, and put a question mark or indicator in the margin. Don't re-write the paragraph or sentence – let the writer do that.

Give positive feedback, too. Let the writer know when something in the piece works well.

And whether you're the one whose writing is being edited, or you're doing the editing – don't take it personally. Adopt an "ego-less" attitude towards editing. ♦

## Editor's column

by James Green

I don't know if you do, but I get lots of catalogs in the mail at home.

Recently, I was paging through a catalog that I had just received. Among other items, this particular catalog was selling the end labels from old fruit-packing crates. (The labels were still attached to the end of the original crate.)

Apparently, years ago (early 20<sup>th</sup> century?), fruit growers went to great lengths to create colorful, informative labels to be pasted onto the ends of the wooden crates that were used for shipping fruit.

These labels included nice graphics showing the type of fruit being shipped; the name of the orchard; the grower's name and location; etc.

According to the catalog, these old labels are now highly collectible.

All of which got me to thinking: you never know what's going to end up being considered as "art" or as a "collectible."

I'm sure that the writers and people who designed those labels never had the vaguest idea that someday, people would be spending good money to buy the labels, or reproductions of them.

So – what I'm saying is, Take heart. Maybe some of those manuals you've written over the years will one day be highly-valued collectibles. People might pay big bucks to buy a repro of your "Model 101 operation and service manual." Or even the online Help version of it – that is, if people in the future know what online Help is.

**On an unrelated note:** Your newsletter editor recently conducted an in-depth survey to find out what our membership thinks of the chapter newsletter.

Both of the people who were asked (100% of respondents) had a favorable impression of the newsletter:

- one person (50% of respondents) said that the newsletter was "really not too bad"
- one person (the other 50% of respondents) said that the newsletter was "OK, I guess"

When asked how the newsletter could be improved, responses were:

- "more articles" (50%)\*
- "fewer articles" (50%)\*
- "more games and puzzles" (50%)\*
- "include some articles about dogs" (50%)\*

(\*Total is more than 100% due to multiple answers) ♦

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## Networking within STC

*by Mark T. Sakuta, Senior Member, Northeast Ohio Chapter (reprinted from Tieline, January 2003)*

In the past two years, major events in my life caused me to think about moving from Cincinnati to my native area of northwestern Pennsylvania. My mother passed away and, five weeks later, a major fire destroyed my apartment building. Thirteen months after the fire, I found myself unemployed.

My father was alone in northwestern Pennsylvania, so I decided this was the time to return. I had enjoyed working as a technical writer and being a member of the Southwestern Ohio Chapter STC (SWO) since October 1993. I wanted to continue working as a technical communicator and remain a senior member of the Society.

Moving back to Pennsylvania was not an easy decision. While living in Cincinnati, I regularly attended a lunch area network (LAN) that Mike Haap had started for SWO. I enjoyed having lunch with that small group of people. Many ideas that started with this lunch group carried over into program planning for SWO meetings, as I served on the chapter's program team for three years.

After moving in with my father, I started to look for work in the Erie area. Aware that there was no local STC chapter in Erie, I contacted the Society office and requested information about how to start a chapter. I received a list of the other STC members living in northwestern Pennsylvania and was disheartened to learn that there were only six.

Nevertheless, I contacted these six people and invited them to lunch to get acquainted and consider the possibility of forming an STC chapter for northwestern Pennsylvania. Only two people were able to attend our first lunch. One of them was Jeanne Fullerton, a senior member from the Pittsburgh chapter who was an employee of Erie Insurance. Happily, Jeanne knew the supervisor in a different documentation section of the company and helped me get an interview for a position that became available there several months later. I got the position, too.

In the meantime, I attended STC meetings about two hours away in Pittsburgh and northeast Ohio. Jill McCauslin and Angie Dianetti were the lunch meeting coordinators for the Northeast Ohio chapter and helped me feel welcome for lunches in the Cleveland area during my time of unemployment.

After I was hired at Erie Insurance, I learned that a coworker had prepared an internal proposal for management to purchase STC memberships for the documentation development specialists in my section. I helped him refine this proposal, and management approved it several weeks later.

Three other technical communicators of my company also recently joined STC. Now we have eleven STC members at Erie Insurance. Four of us affiliate with the Northeast Ohio chapter, four of us affiliate with the Pittsburgh chapter, and three of us affiliate with the Niagara Frontier chapter.

Will there be a new STC chapter for northwestern Pennsylvania? We plan to contact other area employers using techniques mentioned in the September 2002 *Tieline* and use the sample letter and brochure targeted for employers (*STC Can Help*) mentioned in the October 2002 *Tieline*. The most recent mailing labels for northwestern Pennsylvania include only a few members who are not employed by Erie Insurance. We hope to recruit members who are employed elsewhere in northwestern Pennsylvania. If enough of us are interested, there will be a new STC chapter for northwestern Pennsylvania. ♦