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May/June 2006

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# Capital Letter

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### Quotable Quote

There are many ways of going forward, but only one way of standing still.

~ Franklin D. Roosevelt ~

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## Babel Not: Machine Translation for the Technical Communicator

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By Sandra Bologna

*This is the last installment of a three-part series. Previous installments introduced Machine Translation (MT), examined when it is useful, and considered the associated costs. To read the previous two parts, see the January/February and March/April issues.*

### Basic Controlled Authoring Methods: Getting Ready for Machine Translation

Have you decided to buy an MT system, but can't produce good translations from your new purchase? MT requires a controlled authoring style. Here are a few points on using MT efficiently:

1. The most important rule for MT writing is to limit sentence length. Sentences longer than 25 words often become ambiguous and too complex for MT to correctly translate. Keeping sentences to a minimum word length will improve the quality of the output.
2. Avoid metaphors, jokes, slang, puns, idiomatic expressions, and regional or national expressions. Since these are often translated literally, they tend to lose their meaning, creating an unintelligible translation. The literal translation of "break a leg," for example, will not make sense to the target reader.

(Continued on page 8)





## From the Outgoing President: It's Still About the Journey

By Eddie VanArsdall



In my first *Capital Letter* column ("It's All About the Journey," July/August 2005), I recounted my evolution from musician and factory worker to technical communicator. I emphasized how vital STC membership has been to my career and to my journey.

Nearly a year after writing that column, I have completed the milestone of having served a one-year term as STC WDC chapter president. At this juncture, I view STC as even more vital—not only to my own journey, but to the future of our profession.

### Mining Information in the Nevada Desert

As a fitting culmination of my year in office, I attended the 53rd Annual STC Conference in Las Vegas. The conference was just what I needed to move further down the path. It gave me a wealth of ideas for our chapter and a renewed awareness of the many places that STC can take us.

On Leadership Day, I attended an energizing, inspiring presentation by STC Interim Executive Director Rob Moran. Rob's presentation, titled "Creating the STC Community of the Future," emphasized characteristics of successful organizations and leaders. According to Rob, a successful organization needs to have, among other components, a "focused strategy." This was one key point that stuck with me.

After returning home, I searched online using the keywords "focused strategy," which led me to the works of authors Robert S. Kaplan and David P. Norton. In their book, *The Strategy-Focused Organization*, the authors state that while many organizations succeed in developing a strategy, few succeed in actually implementing it.<sup>1</sup>

### Advertise in this Newsletter

*If you would like to advertise your business in our newsletter, please send a message to Eddie VanArsdall at [news@stcwdc.org](mailto:news@stcwdc.org). Please include your phone number in the message. Advertising rates are as follows: Full Page—\$140, Half Page—\$75, Quarter Page—\$40, Business Card—\$25. A discount of \$15 per issue is available if the same ad runs in two or more issues within six months.*

As chapter president, I have often been so caught up in the day-to-day activities of running our business that I have not always had time to focus on the execution of strategic initiatives. As soon-to-be immediate past president, I assume the responsibility of our chapter's strategic planning. Starting this summer, I will turn to the work of Kaplan and Norton for help in executing our stated initiatives. I thank Rob Moran for planting a seed that my mind is now cultivating.

Here are other conference highlights that gave me insight, energy, and inspiration:

- I attended sessions on a diverse range of topics: recruiting volunteers, strategic planning, public relations, Sarbanes-Oxley, DITA, and AuthorIT, among others.
- I participated in outstanding roundtable progressions conducted by two of STC's most vibrant SIGs (Special Interest Groups): the Instructional Design and Learning SIG (IDL SIG) and the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG (CIC SIG).
- I attended a newsletter editors' forum, where I was proud to see an issue of *Capital Letter* displayed in a presentation of publications that won an Award of Excellence in the 2005-2006 STC Newsletter Competition. I extend thanks and congratulations to our hard-working group of writers, editors, and production staff who earned this award under the direction of Bobbie Dofflemyer. (Bobbie, we're going to miss you!)
- I chatted with many vendors. I noticed that an increasing number of them were selling content management solutions this year. I threw myself into the middle of the online help tool vendor wars by letting each vendor give me a sales pitch, as if I had no interest in any competitor. (This was especially fun.)

<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Robert S., and David P. Norton. *The Strategy-Based Organization: How Balanced Scorecard Companies Thrive in the New Business Environment*. Boston: Harvard, 2000.

***My favorite moment at the conference—and a major highlight of my year as president—was accepting a Chapter of Excellence award on behalf of our entire chapter.***

- I attended a breakfast meeting of Region 2 leaders, organized by our former Director-Sponsor, Vici Koster-Lenhardt. I met leaders from North Carolina, the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and Germany. This meeting helped to foster a stronger relationship between STC WDC and other STC communities.
- I attended an STC business meeting, conducted by Incoming President Paula Berger in a town hall setting. I was able to see how our Board operates and have the opportunity to ask questions. This meeting has inspired our chapter leaders to plan a similar type of meeting for our local chapter membership during the next year.
- Since this was my first trip to Las Vegas, I combed the Strip, rode the monorail, and ventured out to Hoover Dam and Red Rock Canyon with my partner Greg.

But my favorite moment at the conference—and a major highlight of my year as president—was accepting a Chapter of Excellence award on behalf of our entire chapter. STC WDC received the following citation:

*Chapter of Excellence presented to the Washington, DC Chapter for providing excellence in programs, achieving significant membership growth, and establishing effective communication between your community's leaders and members.*

I am so proud of this accomplishment! I thank our chapter leaders and volunteers who worked tirelessly during my year as president to enable us to earn this award.

Attending the 2006 Annual Conference was a grounding experience. It enabled me to evaluate where I am professionally and where I want to go. It strengthened

my confidence that STC is growing and changing with the times. It showed that STC's transformation initiatives, although sometimes confusing and sometimes painful, have borne fruit. Although I realize that there is still much work to do at all levels of the Society, I returned home feeling that we are on the right track—that STC is still the premier organization for technical communicators.

### **Taking the Next Steps Down the Path**

And so, my year as STC WDC president comes to a close. As immediate past president, I will remain a voting member of the Administrative Council for another year. In addition to beginning my new chapter responsibilities, I look forward to working closely with our new officers.

Serving as the main contact of our chapter during the past year has rewarded me with the experience of receiving many communications from chapter members. I have considered all of your viewpoints, regardless of my own position. I have directed many of you to Society-level resources. Best of all, I have had the honor of helping many of you find your own direction and establish a path for your own journey. I especially love serving in this capacity.

We have had a good year with many successes, and with some of the failures that come with taking risks. But the successes have far outweighed the failures, and I have learned a lot from both.

Ultimately, you made this past year successful by supporting your chapter. **Thank you!** Please continue to attend programs and meetings. Please participate in the competitions as a judge, an entrant, or both. Please give us your opinions and feedback online, in e-mails, in chat lists, and in surveys. Your participation is vital to our ongoing success.

As you follow your own path, remember that you belong to a profession that is essential to this world. Those procedures you wrote made someone's life easier. That critical warning message you crafted may have saved someone's life.

STC exists to promote precise communication that can truly improve the human condition. You are contributing to the mission. I hope you will make STC an integral part of your journey, as I have.

## Chapter Chatter

### Membership News

In early April, the STC office removed from its roster all members who had not yet paid their dues. The drop in membership is reflected in both the community membership counts and the membership counts for the entire Society. However, between now and June 30 (the end of the fiscal year), membership will continue to increase as late renewers pay their dues and new members join the Society.

If you need some encouragement to renew your membership, please contact Carolyn Kelley Klinger at [membership@stcfdc.org](mailto:membership@stcfdc.org).

### New Members Who Joined between January 31, 2006 and April 30, 2006

Randy Abdool  
Dara Allen  
Jodi Bergeman  
Michael Black  
Anna Bradley  
Julia Brand  
Jean Bryan  
Karen Burkardsmaier  
Gary Callison  
Christine Chulick  
Claudia Conlon  
Noelle Donati  
Angela Edwards  
Tracy Epps  
Erin Friday  
William Hagen  
Arlette Hart  
Laurie Kittle  
Dianne Lafleur  
Elsa Ma  
Robert Mairs  
Stephen Martin  
Jeanette McTegart  
Barbara Meier  
Heather McKeon Miller

### Monthly Happy Hours

By Mike Cleary

The Washington, DC chapter is now sponsoring monthly happy hours. These informal get-togethers give members a chance to meet their peers and chapter leaders, find out what's going on in the chapter, and just relax after the day's work.

The first two gatherings took place in April and May. The April gathering was held at Gordon Biersch, 900 F St., NW, in the District, within a block of the Gallery Place Metro stop. The May gathering was held at McCormick & Schmick's, across the street from the first location. Both events ran from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

Originally, our Administrative Council planned these happy hour gatherings for new chapter members. So far, attendance has been light, but reviews have been positive. As a result, our chapter will open future events to all STC WDC members.

We will continue to hold monthly happy hours at Metro-accessible locations, from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. Although we have not yet set a schedule, we will mostly likely hold future events on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. If there is enough interest, we will also hold these gatherings in Virginia and Maryland locations. For more information, contact Mike Cleary at [mcleary216@yahoo.com](mailto:mcleary216@yahoo.com).

### Events of Interest

STC will be hosting the following telephone seminars:

- June 14: Introduction to DITA
- July 12: Adding Panache to Your Procedures
- July 26: Working in Global Teams
- August 9: Creating Training That Sticks
- August 23: It Might Be GUI, but It Doesn't Have to Be Messy!

Each seminar costs \$99 for STC members and \$149 for nonmembers. For more information or to enroll, visit <https://stc.webex.com/stc/mywebex/default.php?Rnd1315=0.6869852012654498>.

### Newsletter Dates

**Content Due:** 10th of even-numbered months

**Newsletter Published:** First Tuesday of odd-numbered months



(Babel Not, from page 1)

**Instead of:** “You say that your sales will increase by 10 times by the end of this year? Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.”

**Use:** “You say that your sales will increase by 10 times by the end of the year? Do not be too confident. Wait until you get the final results.”

**Instead of:** “Don’t get me wrong; I love sports, but I hate basketball.”

**Use:** “Do not misunderstand me; I love sports, but I hate basketball.”

3. Avoid abbreviations, acronyms, contractions, and common Latin terms (etc., i.e., e.g.) as these do not always have equivalents in different languages. Spell out the entire word instead. Machine translations do not always recognize abbreviations and will leave them untranslated.

**Instead of:** Sr., Jr., FDA, TV, etc.

**Use:** Senior, Junior, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), television, et cetera.

4. Keep pronouns to a minimum. The meaning of pronouns can be lost after translation because different languages use different word orders, and gender-specific languages may use different genders for certain objects. For example, in French, “il” could mean “he” or “it,” so your subject may be unclear to a French reader. Replace pronouns with nouns wherever possible.

**Instead of:** “He is interesting,” or “It is interesting,” both of which become “Il est intéressant” when translated into French.

**Use:** “Marc is interesting,” or “The book is interesting.” These phrases avoid ambiguity when translated, becoming “Marc est intéressant,” or “le livre est intéressant.”

5. Use simple, direct sentences with basic grammatical constructions. Ensure that the sentence structure is grammatically correct. Do not omit words.

**Instead of:** “Make sure you use grammatically correct sentence structure.”

**Use:** “Make sure that you use grammatically correct sentence structure.”

6. Avoid ambiguity. To produce a clear translation, reduce the number of words and sentences with multiple meanings.

**Words:** The word “right” can mean “correct,” or it can mean “right” in terms of direction (right or left).

**Sentences:** The sentence “They fed her dog biscuits” can be understood as “she was fed dog biscuits by them” or “her dog was fed biscuits by them.”

**Instead of:** “They fed her dog biscuits” to mean “her dog was fed biscuits by them,”

**Use:** “They fed biscuits to her dog.”

**Instead of:** “They fed her dog biscuits” to mean “she was fed dog biscuits by them,”

**Use:** “They fed her some dog biscuits.”

7. Avoid compound verbs, as they are often mistranslated. Use a thesaurus to simplify uncommon usages.
8. Use the International Standard Date Format for writing dates. Date order varies from country to country, but the standard numerical year-month-day (YYYY-MM-DD) format will eliminate problems arising from translating dates.
9. Use the infinitive form of the verb rather than present participles, because present participles do not always have equivalents in other languages.

**Instead of:** “Click here for selecting the icons and viewing the images.”

**Use:** “Click here to select the icons and to view the images.”

10. Include a list for the translator of all words that should remain in the source language. These can be anything from proper names and titles to product or company names.
11. After completing the source document, run a draft through the machine translation and back into the source language to see where problems may be occurring.

Following the above points will prevent many common translation problems from occurring.

Machine Translation, though useful in certain cases, is still not—and may never be—the one-size-fits-all solution for translation needs. Any translation used for commercial or professional purposes must be at the very least checked and double-checked by human translators, if not translated by human translators altogether. For those other cases where the benefits of using MT far outweigh the drawbacks, MT may be the key that unlocks the mystery of languages.

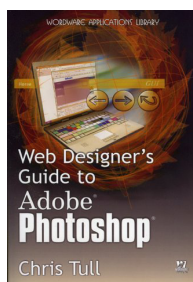
#### *About the Author*

*Sandra Bologna is a translation project manager with WTB Language Group, a Canadian-based translation company that provides technical translation services (<http://www.wintranslation.com>) in over 140 languages. Sandra can be reached at 519-256-8897 ext. 101, or at [sandra@wintranslation.com](mailto:sandra@wintranslation.com).*

## **Rave Reviews**

### ***Web Designer's Guide to Adobe® Photoshop®, by Chris Tull***

Reviewed by Jennifer Singleton



Paperback: 251 pages  
 Publisher: WordWare Publishing, Inc.  
 ISBN-10: 1-59822-001-2

With the complexity, detailed arrangement, and brilliant color graphics of many popular Web sites, it is easy for Web design novices and intermediates

to feel intimidated when faced with the challenge of creating a site of their own. Fortunately, in *Web Designer's Guide to Adobe Photoshop*, author Chris Tull explains how to create Web pages that rival many of today's most impressive Web sites using Adobe Photoshop, the image editing software that has changed the way information and concepts are exchanged on the World Wide Web.

By using Photoshop, designers can create complex shapes, crop and combine existing images, and organize these images using layering techniques. Tull introduces Photoshop in a way that simplifies what many perceive as a daunting undertaking when creating the images and graphics needed for a successful Web site. He not only defines design terminology, but also provides hands-on tutorials featuring fictitious clients. The tutorials teach the reader to create industry images with the aid of various Photoshop tools.

"The World of Web Design" covers information that Web designers should know, such as appropriate digital image dimensions and how a computer monitor displays primary colors. Tull explains the two basic formats of digital images, bitmap and vector images, along with the limitations of their use. For instance, vector images are best suited for logos and graphics because they cannot depict the details of a photograph in the same way as bitmap formats.

Perhaps the most crucial section of the book is "Working with Dreamweaver®." Popular with professional Web

designers, Dreamweaver is often used to upload images onto Web pages. This chapter highlights Dreamweaver's tools for creating backgrounds and rollover images, and for adding text to a Web site. (There is no way to add text in Photoshop unless the text is a part of an image.) Tull offers an in-depth look at the Dreamweaver environment, highlighting features that users may not be familiar with.

Tull devotes two chapters to the features of professional Web pages and the type of clients that would be attracted to them. For designers creating professional pages, the author covers common business formats such as the use of left navigation panes, top title panes, and textured graphics with text. Clients who want more modern Web pages enjoy the use of sans-serif fonts, white space, and bold color.

"Going Live with Your Web Site" reminds designers to be aware of their allotted file space and the number of visitors expected to the site. Tull offers insight on the types of Web hosts that designers should seek, depending on the Web site's purpose. For example, with a personal or hobby Web site, designers should seek out the free services of their Internet Service Provider (ISP). For e-commerce Web sites, he advises that Web hosts should be able to offer support such as assisting with the taking of credit card orders.

Tull effectively educates readers on how to navigate the intricate yet amazing world of Photoshop using personal recommendations, simplified terminology, and step-by-step tutorials. He encourages readers to further their understanding of Web design through a brief glossary, book recommendations, and a listing of designers' top 10 mistakes, such as browser incompatibility, inadequate photo enlargement, and inappropriate fonts that can create legibility concerns. Whatever reason you choose to design a Web site, whether you want to impress an important business client or to showcase your favorite hobbies, when it comes to the end result, Tull says it best: "...the real challenge is to get visitors to keep coming back."

## Adobe® Photoshop® Elements

Reviewed by Guy Ball, STC Senior Member

There is no question: Adobe Photoshop is *the* industry-standard photo editor for graphics professionals. But at \$600, it's expensive for technical writers who on occasion use the software to edit or fine-tune a photo, or who use a limited subset of the features. I've always enjoyed Photoshop's clear menu and toolbar functions, so when I've tried other photo programs, I've always found myself coming back (often to an earlier version that I had purchased long ago). I don't pretend to know all the advanced Photoshop features—I don't need them. So spending that kind of money for my limited usage was never cost-effective.

Fortunately, Adobe has taken the most useful features for low- to medium-level users and packaged them as Photoshop Elements. In the past, this program was delivered free with other Adobe products, like Premiere, and offered only a few Photoshop features. The latest versions of this software offer virtually every feature technical writers would need and more. And priced at under \$100, you can't beat the value.

Photoshop Elements 3 and the recently released version 4 offer all the standard editing tools you would expect in any photo program. You can crop and save to other formats. You can easily change the quality level if file size is an issue. And you have a range of options with tonal changes—simple adjustments like Lighting/Levels, and the more complex, requiring a practiced eye, like Shadows/Highlights or Adjust Hue/Saturation. Need to get rid of unwanted people in the photo? That's easy. Just use your Clone/Rubber Stamp tool to cover them with copies of the wall next to them. Presto... *what* people? (I also like to use this tool to slim down people or remove blemishes.)

With the Resize function, you can easily change an image to a specified pixel size for posting on the Web. Want to burn-in a specific light area of a photo or dodge a dark area? The tools are right up front on the toolbar. Have a slightly out-of-focus shot that you need to use? Try the sharpening tools. Want to set up several layers of text, multiple photos, and a different background? Elements offers this as well. Got red-eye in that photo of your boss that you need for a newsletter? Click a button and she no longer looks like an alien.

With recent versions of Elements, Adobe folded in the Photoshop Album software that they had been selling separately. This is a great product that enables you to easily organize your photos. You can automatically

catalog every image on your hard drive, which helps you find missing photos that you know are on your hard drive somewhere. By adding *tags* (keywords) to your photos, you can search and find those images at the click of a button—regardless of where they are on your computer. I use this feature to track the hundreds of photos I've taken of a complex machine at different times, so I can pull out a smaller, focused selection when I need it.

Another feature I like is the automatic downloading of my digital photos into the Elements photo organizer. I just hook the camera through the USB cable and the computer downloads all of the images into a new directory named with today's date. All the images are automatically included in the organizer, ready for me to tag. A message then asks if I want to delete them off my memory card. This saves me time and effort, and I love it. (I know my camera has a program to do this, but I love having the feature built into my photo editor.)

Other features of the program that you may find useful include the ability to burn a dynamic slide show to CD or DVD, create a photo album that you can print, apply text effects and add frames around your pictures, and build panoramic photos with the Photomerge function.

I was very happy with Photoshop Elements 3, and I am basing my review on that version. Adobe has just released version 4. My employer purchased it and I'm trying to determine if it's worth the upgrade at home. It has a few new features, but nothing I can't live without. Meanwhile, several reviews on Amazon.com are critical of version 4 and recommend staying with 3. If you have 3, you might want to stay with it for now.

So if you're looking for power, great photo-editing features in a very inexpensive package, and a product that's a member of the Adobe Photoshop family, give Photoshop Elements a try. You won't be sorry.

### *About the Author*

*Guy Ball has written on a variety of technology and multimedia topics for Intercom and various STC chapter newsletters. He works for EADS-North America Defense as a senior technical writer. His next book, Images of America: Santa Ana, will be published this summer. He can be reached at [guyball@pacbell.net](mailto:guyball@pacbell.net).*

*This article was originally published in TechniScribe, the Orange County (CA) STC chapter's newsletter.*

## Understanding Web Readers (and Non-Readers): Creating Usable and Effective Web Content

Reviewed by Scott McDonald, Member of the Washington, DC Usability Professionals Association

On February 16, 2006, the Washington, DC chapter of the Usability Professionals Association co-sponsored a program with the STC WDC Usability SIG. The program, *Understanding Web Readers (and Non-Readers): Creating Usable and Effective Web Content*, featured STC Fellow Janice (Ginny) Redish, Ph.D., as guest speaker.

In her presentation, Redish discussed how research from linguistics, cognitive psychology, reading studies, writing studies, and other disciplines contributes to usable Web sites. She pointed out that most users are “goal-oriented and topic-oriented.” They are simply too busy to read a lot of text. They want content that is easy to get to—content that answers their question and solves their problem.

According to Redish, the Web is a “conversation started by a very busy user.” The user asks a question, and the Web site provides the answer. Both the site and the user have a role in the conversation. The main difference between this type of conversation and a conversation between two people is that a breakdown between a Web site and a user is more difficult to repair. To help repair this breakdown, designers should structure information to make it usable.

Redish explained that the typical behavior of Web users is to “skim, scan, select—and sometimes search.”

They do this using four types of Web pages:

- Home page
- Pathway pages
- Destination pages
- Forms

Users typically scan a home page before quickly moving on. Redish presented several before-and-after examples of home pages, including the Department of Health and Human Services home page at <http://www.hhs.gov>. She pointed out that when users searched the original version of the page for information on diseases and vaccination, the success rate was only 41%. After the page was restructured to aid scanning, the rate increased to 92%.

Redish emphasized that, on pathway pages, users “scan, select, and move on.” They usually select the first item that seems relevant to their needs. They don’t want to have to read or think much when using these pages.

When they reach a destination page, users continue to scan the content. If they don’t find what they need immediately, they leave. To stress this point, Redish used <http://Firstgov.gov>, a Web portal, as an example. Using the original version of the home page, she showed how the **Birth & Marriage Certificates** link took users to a pathway page with a colorful heading, “Where to Write for Vital Records,” followed by the letters of the alphabet. In this version, users had to guess what to do next. The revised page added an instruction with help links appearing between the heading and the alphabetical links. The pure alphabet was replaced with an alphabetical list showing the actual names of states and jurisdictions.

To best serve online readers and non-readers, Redish stressed that information is best organized in topics. Books make sense in the print world, but an online database of topics is a better conceptual model for the Web. In this regard, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are a better help model for the Web than traditional online help. As an example, Redish demonstrated QuickBooks® Help, which uses an index card model where each page shows a question followed by the answer to the question. The questions are structured into logical sections and are easy to scan. This model is representative of how users search for online information.

Redish also discussed the use of press releases as an example of how information structure can make or break usability. She pointed out that, when used in print, press releases have a lifetime of only one or two days. When used online, however, their lifetime is potentially forever. Redish presented before-and-after versions of a press release written by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). The original version was text-heavy, with long, run-on sentences. Redish said that “Usability text participants ... read only to the first comma and then left the page.” In contrast, after reading the revised version, which used headers to label information and break it into chunks, 15 out of 16 people preferred the new version. The revised example demonstrated how clear labeling helps users to grasp the meaning of information.

Taking advantage of the Web as a hypertext medium, Redish showed how in-text links can be used effectively for

pages with multiple topics. A list of in-text links serves as a menu or table of contents to direct a user to a specific topic.

Redish summarized her presentation with the following advice:

- Think like your users.
- Put first things first, second things second:
  - in the way you organize pages
  - in the way you write sentences.

- Follow users' logic, even on the sentence level. Start with what the user already knows, or something that lets the user say "this applies to me."
- Think in the users' scenarios by creating a conversation.

Redish also announced that her next book, *Letting Go of the Words—Writing Web Content that Works*, will be published by Morgan Kaufmann in 2006.

## Member Voices: Tim Rahn

*Each issue will feature one or two STC WDC members, asking about work, STC, and life in general. If you would like to participate, please send an e-mail to the Member Voices manager, Jennifer Reed, at [jlreed4@gmail.com](mailto:jlreed4@gmail.com).*

### Work

**Q: Where do you work and what are your basic responsibilities?**

**A:** Cinetic Landis Grinding Corp. in Waynesboro, PA. I am Manager of Training and Technical Information Services. Landis manufactures precision abrasive equipment or what the industry calls "grinders." Our customers use our machines to grind parts to precision tolerances, typically micron level. Our biggest customers are automotive companies and diesel equipment manufacturers.

As you can tell from the title, I wear two hats. First, I'm responsible for customer training. I don't actually deliver training, but facilitate it. This includes preparing proposals, responding to customer inquiries about training, and preparing materials used in training. Second, I manage the department responsible for documentation. We create the operator's and maintenance manuals and parts catalogs for our machines and user's manuals for our control systems. This second function consumes 80% of my time. I write some, but mostly do a helluva lot of editing and working with our writers to complete projects.

**Q: How long have you worked in your current field? Have you worked in other fields?**

**A:** Twenty-six years. Along the way, my position at Landis included employee training responsibilities. For eight years I supervised the apprentice program, which involved recruiting, selecting, and managing apprentices. It was one of the more rewarding experiences I've had outside of my documentation responsibilities.

**Q: What is the one indispensable thing (e.g., piece of knowledge, tool, co-worker) that you couldn't live without when doing your job?**

**A:** I'm not sure that this counts as knowledge, but I would say that my experience or my "ear" is probably the one thing that I would find indispensable. I'm not a grammarmeister and I don't know exactly how an eddy current works, but I have a good ear and can judge when something isn't written well enough to convey what the user needs to know. We write complicated procedures that tell users how to set up our equipment. If something doesn't make logical sense, my antennae detect it. That's when I turn to the writer's normal tool set of subject matter experts and reference material.

**Q: What is your biggest lesson learned while working on a project?**

**A:** Keep the end in mind.

**Q: What is your favorite task or project you've worked on?**

**A:** I like the challenge that comes from organizing and structuring content. It requires problem solving at a number of levels: understanding what is new about the product, determining user needs, and determining how the content fits existing structures.

**Q: And your least favorite?**

**A:** Reducing staff. As a manager, nothing is harder than telling people that they don't have a job because business is bad. They've done nothing wrong and everybody feels lousy.

**Q: What is the biggest challenge you've faced?**

**A:** Becoming the lone writer during a particularly lean time at Landis. Talk about pushing a stone uphill.

**Q: What is the most rewarding work experience you've had?**

**A:** This may seem like a little thing, but one of the more rewarding experiences I've had was getting a customer to buy into using our manuals as training material. We were bound by the customer's spec or requirements to quote training material. They didn't like the cost and they brought the corporate buyers into the discussion. Buyers typically hold a lot of sway in our industry so it became a big deal, especially since the training representative was adamant about our providing the material.

The next thing I knew I was asked to travel to their headquarters and explain our position. At the meeting, I listened to all of their objections to our proposals. When it was time to make our case, I pointed out that their spec was driving the cost. I also told them that if they simply accepted the manuals we provided with the machine, there would be no cost for training materials. I showed them how our manuals included the content required by the spec—it just wasn't a "training manual." Both the customer's training representative and the buyer agreed to the use of the manuals. It established a precedent that we follow to this day. It has also saved us a lot of time and our customer a lot of money.

**Q: What would be your ideal job?**

**A:** A management position leading a group of creative people responsible for delivering information that can be used by a variety of users.

**STC****Q: How long have you been an STC member?**

**A:** I don't remember exactly when I joined, but I think I've been a member for 16 or 17 years.

**Q: What local chapters have you belonged to?**

**A:** WDC and the now-defunct Mason-Dixon Chapter. I edited the Mason-Dixon chapter newsletter for the three or four issues we published.

**Q: What SIGs/communities do you currently belong to?**

**A:** Information Design, which is something I would like to pursue in the workplace and in the classroom.

**Q: What do you see as the biggest benefit of being an STC member, both nationally and locally?**

**A:** Knowing that you are part of a larger community. I'm always being told that management knows we are the redheaded stepchild. That's telling me that they acknowledge that documentation is important, but other things are more important. Listening to other technical communicators at STC functions helps me see that we are not alone. STC also gives me the opportunity to see and hear what others are doing to create all kinds of documentation.

**Q: If you could change one thing about STC, both nationally and locally, what would it be?**

**A:** I would like the organization to attempt more outreach to people who write technical documents for products other than computer software. I work in manufacturing, which I think is neglected. The typical machine tool is just as complicated as the most complex computer program: it uses sophisticated motor control, exotic materials, and has a user interface. If most people saw how a modern shop floor worked, they would be astounded at the level of technology. They would also see opportunities for improving the user's lot.

**General****Q: Where do you live (city and state)?**

**A:** I live in a small bungalow in Takoma Park, MD with my wife, Nancy. We have two cats, Oliver and Reilly.

**Q: What do you like to do outside of work?**

**A:** I've always been involved with volunteer organizations and have served on a number of boards. I like to cross-country ski, bike, hike, and swim. I'm swimming the Bay One-Mile in June. I also like to work with wood, cook, read, garden, and birdwatch. I have an

interest in architecture and landscape architecture. One of my heroes is Frederick Law Olmstead.

**Q: What led you to the technical communication field?**

**A:** Accidents happen. I finished all my college course work without much of a plan other than to go to grad school. I had not applied anywhere and didn't have any area of study in mind. In the meantime, I needed a job. I applied as a machine inspector at Landis. The guy who interviewed me said I was overqualified because of my college education. He was being nice. I didn't know a micrometer from a C-clamp. A couple of weeks after that, the technical writer announced her resignation and a senior manager at Landis suggested that I apply for that position.

**Q: What is your educational background (classes, universities, degrees, etc.)?**

**A:** I majored in English Lit at Maryville College, a small liberal arts college in Maryville, TN. I'm a great believer in a liberal arts education; you learn to analyze and think and you have to take classes outside a specialty. I completed the GWU Publication Specialist certificate program, which has been an enormous influence on my ability as an editor.

**Q: Where is your favorite place to eat in the area?**

**A:** It would be a tossup between Pizzeria Paradiso and 2 Amys. Pizza is the original meal from the hearth.

**Q: Where is some place you tell everyone they have to go when they visit the area?**

**A:** The Great Hall of the National Building Museum. A remarkable space, but often overlooked because DC is full of remarkable and great spaces.

## How I Got My Foot in the Door—and How You Can, Too

By Russell Woolard

I have to say one thing about my old job: There was never a dull moment.

As news editor for a small-town newspaper, I had no shortage of assignments that kept me busy and entertained. There were countless local government meetings and political races—many so contentious that they would have made great WWE pay-per-views.

There was a daylong trip by ferry to interview a bluegrass band that was about to appear on "A Prairie Home Companion," one of my favorite radio shows. Once, we even had George H.W. Bush come to our town to buy a cigarette boat from one of our leading manufacturers (this was long after he had left office)—although political questions were strictly verboten, leaving us Fourth Estaters to content ourselves with zingers like, "How do you like the boat, Mr. President?" (Bet *that* one made Mr. Bush sweat.)

Still, I wanted to make a career change—for reasons that are varied and complex—and technical communication appeared to be my best shot at making a better life. But how was I going to do it? On the surface, it seemed that writing about local government and economic development had little relationship to producing company-wide e-mails or writing copy for technical brochures.

And yet about a year after I started my career change in earnest, I landed a job at a small firm that helped customers document policies and job descriptions that they could use in training employees. Unfortunately, the job didn't last long; the company was unable to

ride out the recession and the dot-com bust. But it was the proverbial foot in the door that I needed.

***MadCap Software is offering one-time, exclusive discounts on product, maintenance, and training to members of the STC WDC chapter through June 30.***

***For June only, MadCap Software will give STC WDC members an additional 10% discount off of the already-discounted price of \$599 for Flare. They will also extend an additional 10% off maintenance orders.***

***It doesn't stop there! When you take advantage of this offer, you can also get \$100 off on MadCap's Web-based training scheduled for July 10 through July 13.***

***Act now to take advantage of this special offer and save.***

***To order Flare, or to inquire about these exclusive STC WDC discounts, call Jennifer Morse, Territory Manager for DC at (858) 320-0387 ext. 212 or email [jmorse@madcapsoftware.com](mailto:jmorse@madcapsoftware.com).***

In making this transition, I pursued a number of strategies, largely learning as I went along, and these lessons might be of interest to others who are working in other fields but would like to break into technical communication. To be sure, luck, and being in the right place at the right time, are part of a successful career switch. But based on my experience, there are a number of steps you can take to help yourself:

- **Pursue continuing education.** This topic has been covered before, but pursuing further education can add to your skill set and open a number of doors. I took a year to earn a certificate in technical and scientific communications. While there wasn't much time devoted to learning the software programs used in producing technical communications, there was a great deal of information on how to develop different types of communications for various audiences. I learned how to explain complicated technical concepts in simple terms and how to deliver good and bad news to readers. The program helped me understand the differences between writing for a targeted audience and writing for a broad community readership. For those of you considering the field of technical communication, there are numerous educational opportunities that will fit into your work schedule. You can easily find classes on the STC WDC Web site and the Internet.
- **Pursue opportunities to write in your current job.** Although I didn't realize it at the time, all those government meetings I was covering helped me prepare for the kind of work I'm doing now. As a reporter, I was learning how to write on tight deadlines, how to discipline myself as a writer, how to boil down discussions that stretched for hours (no exaggeration) into their most important elements, and how to translate jargon into language people use in everyday conversation (after all, when was the last time you heard your neighbor complain about his or her *ad valorem* taxes?). What I just described represents the essential elements of technical communication. It's simply a matter of transferring those basic skills.

Also, other fields may present opportunities to develop written communications skills, and you should be on the lookout for them. Many employers are looking for more things for their administrative assistants to do, including, to cite just one example, recording meeting minutes. It's organizing and explaining ideas in a coherent, reader-friendly manner. It counts.

- **Be willing to learn new things.** When I had my second phone interview for the technical writing position I applied for over five years ago, I mentioned that I was taking on more responsibilities in actually producing the newspaper, like laying out the pages using QuarkXPress® and Adobe® Photoshop®. By no means did I consider myself an expert in getting out a newspaper, at least not compared to others I had worked with and modeled myself after. But to the person interviewing me, what mattered was that I was willing to grow. I wasn't waiting until I had switched careers to show my commitment to growth and development. The woman who was interviewing me sounded impressed, and about a week later, I received an invitation to come up to Northern Virginia for a face-to-face interview.

But I didn't have the job yet. I still had to convince the managers that I could transfer my skills and help them achieve their goals. Which leads me to the last—and possibly most important point—of this particular missive:

- **Do your homework.** Before I came up for my third interview, I spent several hours visiting the company's Web site, learning as much as I could about the company, its mission, and its customers. By the time I arrived for the interview, I had given thought to how I could transfer my skills to their work, and I was ready with specifics. It didn't matter that I didn't know everything about their company. What impressed them was that I knew *something*.

I also want to work in a plug for the STC salary survey, because it made a major difference in helping me transition to the field successfully. Having made it that far in the vetting process, I knew money would come up when we met fact-to-face, and I sensed that "whatever salary you think is fair" wouldn't fly. So I visited the STC WDC Web site and found a salary range for people who were just starting out in technical communication. I quoted this range when I was interviewed, and it showed the company that I had done my homework. I got a job offer less than a week after the last interview.

These steps—with a few variations here and there, depending on the individual's situation—should make it easier to change to a career in technical communication.

## Content Management Technologies: Picking Through the Alphabet Soup

By Rahel Anne Bailie, STC Associate Fellow, Senior Member, STC Canada West Coast

Managing content takes many forms. In fact, you could serve up a veritable alphabet soup of acronyms that vary on the content management theme: the basic CM (content management), WCM (Web content management), ECM (enterprise content management), DM (document management), DAM (digital asset management), KM (knowledge management), LM (learning management), PIM (product information management), RM (records management or rights management), and CRM (customer relationship management). These terms refer to different types of content, with specific business requirements and processes that drive the feature set of the particular technologies.

Not surprisingly, none of the technologies mentioned so far support the production of content for purposes of producing technical documentation. That is a specific type of content management system that has specialized functions for technical communicators doing multi-channel publishing, yet it hasn't spun off its own specific acronym. Sometimes called *structured content management with XML*—personally, I think XSCM would make a fine acronym for XML content management—it refers to what I hear many writers still do with “FrameMaker and an Excel spreadsheet”: facilitate re-use of content across multiple output channels such as print, PDF, online help, and customer support knowledge base.

So when confronted with this jungle of acronyms, how can you tell what's what? Borrowing heavily from the glossary compiled by CM Professionals at <http://www.cmsglossary.com>, here is a quick tour.

All Content Management systems support the creation, approval, storage, retrieval, versioning, re-use, and delivery of content objects. What differs is the type of content that is being managed and the features that manipulate the content in specific ways for different purposes.

Web Content Management, usually referred to by the generic term “content management,” is a system for handling content on Web sites. WCM can range from an extraordinarily simple application, such as a blog, to feature-rich applications that run portals delivering personalized content, such as a “My Yahoo” page. Some WCM applications are known for their specializations, such as the handling of localized content.

XML Structured Content Management has functions that allow authors to produce technical documentation and publish that content to multiple channels. These systems

usually have more functions, such as the ability to generate PDFs and online help as well as Web pages, and have features that generate authorities (table of contents, index, glossary) and let authors view their content in a familiar split-pane “table of contents” format common in help authoring tools. Of the 2,000-plus commercial CM systems, only a dozen or so are intended for the power-publishing done by technical communicators.

Enterprise Content Management does both WCM and XSCM and more. Each ECM system has its own unique combination of modules that handle content that ranges from unstructured content, such as e-mail, to records, documents, and product information for e-commerce sites—in fact, any or all of the types of content mentioned here. These are usually massive, expensive systems that often get semi-implemented. (The words “SAP implementation” and “ECM implementation” often cause the same type of hysterical laughter from staff who have survived such projects.)

Document Management is a way of controlling native-format documents (such as Word or Excel) through their creation, storage, retrieval, and versioning. A document management system does not support the re-use of content chunks within the documents. From a technical communication point of view, a writer manipulates content objects in an XSCM system and generates a document, which then gets managed through a document management system. Some XSCM systems include basic DM functions with their systems, but these are often not robust enough to meet the specialized needs of an organization.

Digital Asset Management is a system for handling rich media, which may include still graphics such as photos, video clips, sound files, and other types of multimedia. It is used by libraries, museums, and media outlets such as television stations to deliver content, and it handles such challenges as categorizing hundreds of photos of a painting called “Untitled 1” and encoding video with metadata.

Knowledge Management essentially uses content management technology for the purpose of gathering information to help with business processes, best practices, expert systems, and other information that can lead to better business intelligence. This affects the way the content is searched and retrieved.

Learning Management manages content for online courses, along with the management of supplemental

information such as student information and test scores. Many LM systems use SCORM (Sharable Content Objective Reference Model) standards that specify ways to catalogue, launch, and track course objects.

Product Information Management, sometimes called Product Data Management, handles content for online catalogs and e-commerce systems. The content includes product names, images, and descriptions, part numbers, quantities and corresponding prices, and perhaps language variants. Some PIM applications are connected to “configurators” that calculate the various ways that a product can be sold. For example, a piece of equipment might come with attachment A in blue or red, or two of attachment B, one each of red and blue or both red or both blue, and a slightly different price depending on the options chosen.

Records Management handles data that becomes aggregated into a record and can be sorted in various ways. For example, all of the information that makes up personnel records would be handled in a records management system. Controlling access to these records is handled by rights management.

Customer Relationship Management is a variant on records management, handling information about customers to help companies better understand customer needs. CRM resembles knowledge management in that it uses CM technology with a view to supporting certain business goals.

When sorting through the various types of content management systems, an important consideration is to determine the business needs and then match the system to those needs, and becoming familiar with the various types of CM can open up a world of possibilities. Some organizations use multiple content management systems, connecting the databases, in order to serve diverse business needs, while others go the ECM route to have a single system to fill the needs of multiple groups. There is no perfect system—and no perfect project—so the more familiar you become with the alphabet soup, the more prepared you’ll be to converse using the CM vocabulary.

#### *About the Author*

*Rahel Anne Bailie operates Intentional Design Inc. (<http://www.intentionaldesign.ca>), a Vancouver, BC consultancy focused on content management, content development, and user experience services. Bailie has many years as both line staff and management in technical communication and usability environments, and her perspectives, both about content use and staff management, are informed by her experience and studies. A self-identified geek, she is drawn to technology like a moth to flame, and works hard to stay current with the technical side of content management. Bailie is also a partner in Strategy A, a management consulting firm. You can reach her by e-mail at [rabailie@intentionaldesign.ca](mailto:rabailie@intentionaldesign.ca).*

## **A Quick Look Inside Standards for Technical Communication**

By Annette Reilly

If you’ve ever tried to plug in your cell phone charger in London or connect to the Internet in Colombia, you’ve seen the need for standards. Standards make physical and electronic interconnections possible; standards allow the HTML, XML, and CSS content produced by technical communicators to be displayed by a variety of devices and formats. Groups such as W3C, of which STC is a member, work to keep up with new technology while developing interoperability standards for the Web.

On the other hand, incompatible products, such as dueling operating systems or variant music files, are often due to the pressures generated by competitive vendors intent on protecting their intellectual property and making their proprietary products the de facto industry standard. Another reason for incompatible standards is national variations in practice when countries want to limit access to foreign sources.

While the need for standards for interoperable hardware and telecommunications is evident, the value of standards for technical communication is subtler. Standards for software documentation are less well known, and people often substitute their favorite textbook, style guide, or user manual for their employer’s documentation tool for an internationally recognized standard. If you’ve ever tried to set up and enforce a style guide, much less a content management system, you know that setting objective standards and building consensus to develop and apply a standard can be a major effort.

STC takes an active role in producing and promoting good standards for technical communication. Because STC works as an international, non-profit, professional membership association, our involvement in standards activities has some boundaries. STC does not endorse (or disparage) proprietary, vendor-specific protocols or standards developed by closed industry groups.

