



CAPITAL LETTER

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Quotable Quote:

“Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the ark. Professionals built the Titanic.”

~ Anonymous ~

Lessons Learned (the Hard Way) from a Lone Technical Writer

By Bonita White

The guy in the cape was the first thing that caught my eye. In the June 2005 issue of *Intercom*, the article by Laura Dahlinger, “From Lone Writer to Super Employee,” immediately made me think of my current life as the lone writer for a government agency. For me, the title should read “Lone Writer as Super Employee,” as it never ceases to amaze me what the other members of my division think I am capable of doing. Equally amazing is that, somehow, I always manage to get it done.

When I first started this position two years ago, there were three weeks until the simultaneous end of the quarter and end of the fiscal year. I knew documentation would be due. What I didn’t know was that said documentation entailed 10 individual documents ranging in length from 20 to more than 600 pages! And, so as not to leave me with any false hope



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Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication

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Capital Letter is published six times per year by the Washington, DC Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Its purpose is to provide articles and essays in the field of technical communication as well as inform chapter members about special functions and regular activities of the chapter and Society. Material for publication should be submitted to the editor:

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From the President

Eddie VanArsdall

Seven Years to XML



In 1998, I began to hear murmurs about XML: "It's a markup

language that enables you to create your own tags." It sounded intriguing, but I didn't find time to study it in earnest until nearly three years later. Even then, I had no practical application for the knowledge. Nuggets of XML terms and syntax nestled snugly inside my subconscious, but much of what I learned simply vaporized.

Besides, early writings on XML didn't make the topic especially relevant for technical communicators. Like many in our profession, I wondered, "Do I really need to know more about this?" Then I began to read articles on single-sourcing—most of them in our own STC publications—and I noted that XML played a key role.

At the 2004 STC Annual Conference in Baltimore, I attended a presentation on the successes and perils of single-source publishing with Structured FrameMaker. The presenter had learned XML through a 12-week online course taught by Online-Learning (<http://www.online-learning.com>). In December of

the same year, I enrolled in the same course.

Now I'm hooked. Thoroughly convinced. I have since continued my studies to include XSLT and XSL-FO, two other important XML tools. I am by no means an XML expert, but I now see clearly why this technology is important to our profession. I know that it's much, much more than a "markup language that enables you to create your own tags." And if you ask me whether you really need to know more about it, I'll answer yes, without hesitation.

I can't possibly make a convincing case for XML in the short space of this column. I can, however, point out several industry events that support the ever-growing presence of XML in technical communication:

- With FrameMaker version 7.1, Adobe added an integrated, structured environment for creating XML documents. See <http://www.adobe.com/products/framemaker/newfeatures.html>.
- With Office 2003, Microsoft introduced XML formats for its products. The company has also officially announced that

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From the Editor

Bobbie Dofflemyer

A Proactive “Job Well Done”

It’s hard to believe that summer is winding down already. Where did the time go? For me and several of my fellow STC members, the past few months were filled with a bustle of activities to prepare for the 2005/2006 year.

We made excellent progress at the Newsletter Planning Meeting in July. We established a clear set of goals we hope to achieve, including increasing our reader participation, adhering to a more consistent publication schedule, and maximizing our potential as a value-add for our local community. We defined the procedures that, together with these goals, will provide structure and direction for the newsletter throughout the year. We brainstormed a host of new ideas to improve the overall quality of the newsletter’s content and presentation.

What I found most remarkable, however, was the response we received to our volunteer campaign. To date, we have added four new members to the newsletter staff. Each brings a unique background and set of skills that will help make the team and the newsletter more robust. I am so impressed with our new recruits that I feel compelled to point them out to you. Expect great things ahead from this cast of characters:

- Bonita White – Production Manager and lone writer at GSA

- Jim Cammisa – Copy Editor and Information Designer at the U.S. Mint
- Jennifer Singleton – “Rave Reviews” Column Manager and recent DC transplant
- Tom Witherspoon – “The Way We Work” Column Manager and focus of our first member profile (see [Member Voices](#))

We also have several familiar names—both staff and contributors—to help guide the way, including Jennifer Reed (who is pulling double-duty as Production Co-Manager and Members’ Voices Column Manager), David Dick, Sarah Gill, E.C. Eklund, Carolyn Kelley Klinger, Kristen Sweet, Russell Woolard, Pattie Srinath, Leslie Reed, Cynthia Lockley, and Eddie VanArsdall.

Some members contribute full articles or columns; others contribute smaller but equally significant tidbits of information to keep us apprised of the chapter’s finances, competitions, events, membership, and so on. Still others provide advice, solicit advertising, and help us communicate with members by posting the newsletter on the chapter Web site.

As we launch a new year of discussion, learning, and collaboration, I’d like to thank everyone in advance for their contributions to the newsletter. I am grateful to share this experience with such a stellar group of professionals.

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XML will be the default file format for the next version (Version 12) of Word, Excel, and PowerPoint. See

<http://www.microsoft.com/office/preview/default.aspx>.

- Many technical writing teams are now beginning to use GUI-based tools for creating structured XML documents. Like many HTML editors on the market, these tools enable users to switch between a WYSIWYG interface and a code window that shows the actual XML markup. See http://www.xmetal.com/en_us/products/xmetal_author/index.x.
- Building on work developed by IBM, the Organization for the Advancement of

Structured Information Standards (OASIS) at <http://www.oasis-open.org> is developing architectural and language specifications for DITA, the Darwin Information Typing Architecture. DITA is an “XML-based specification for modular and extensible topic-based information.” See <http://www.oasis-open.org/committees/dita/charter.php>.

With knowledge of information design and architecture, technical communicators are a perfect match for structured XML authoring. I invite you to write to *Capital Letter* and share your perceptions of—and experiences with—XML. Are you using it? Would you like to use it? We would love to hear from you.

Chapter Chatter

Membership News

New Senior Members

Betsy C. MacCarthy
Douglas S. Grossman
Kristen T. Schultz
Nancy S. Wiker
Peter J. Kashatus
Richard L. Hoffman
Richard M. Green

New Members Who Joined June 16, 2005 to July 31, 2005

Andrew Friedman
Anjoo Pokharel
Arna Lane
Bunnie Bates
Gregory Schnitzer
J. Glenn Sartori

Jocelyn Anthony-Williams
Martha Le
Philip Corriveau
Stephen Mann

Transferring Members

James O'Brien (from the Atlantic Community)
Larry Faulks (from the San Francisco Community)

Total STC Members: 15,990
Total STC WDC Members: 558
Welcome to STC WDC!

Newsletter Dates

Content Due: 10th of even-numbered months

Newsletter Published: First Tuesday of odd-numbered months

Upcoming Chapter Events

Event:

Opening Social

When:

Thursday, September 15, 2005, from 5:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Where:

National Museum of Natural History, 10th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20560

Cost:

\$5

Info:

Writers meet artists this fall when our chapter teams up with three other organizations for our first event of the year. On September 15, 2005, we will join the following groups for a social and informational meeting:

- The Guild of Natural Science Illustrators
- The Association of Medical Illustrators
- The Illustrators Club of Washington

We will meet at the National Museum of Natural History at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue, NW. Join us for networking, eating (of course!), and learning. Each group will give a short presentation, followed by a Q&A session at the end. As the date draws closer, look for more details about this event in the weekly announcement and on the chapter website.

For more information, contact Kristen Sweet, First Vice President and Events Committee Manager, at events@stcwdc.org.



Event:

Ask the Manager

When:

Monday, November 7, 2005, from 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Where:

National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), Conference Room 2, 4301 Wilson Boulevard, Arlington, VA 22203

Cost:

\$20-30, depending on status

Info:

Have you ever wondered why you didn't get hired for that tech writing position? This panel will give you the opportunity to ask documentation managers what they are looking for when hiring new technical writers and what performance criteria they use to measure performance during an annual review. Come share your thoughts and ideas and gain some perspective from four experienced documentation managers in the field of technical communication.



Save the Date!

- September 17, 2005: Administrative Council Meeting
- October 15, 2005: Substantive Editing
- November 12, 2005: Administrative Council Meeting
- December 6, 2005: December Holiday Party

For more information, visit <http://www.stcfdc.org/calendar.shtml>.

Cast Your Vote!

The staff of *Capital Letter* would like to know more about our readers. To help elicit feedback on specific topics, we've instituted a survey system. The first survey was presented in the July/August issue of *Capital Letter*. In this issue, we'd like to share what we've learned.

Periodically, we may introduce additional surveys to continue to receive your feedback. Please remember that you can always e-mail news@stcfdc.org with your questions and comments, too.

Survey Says...

In the July/August issue of *Capital Letter*, we launched a survey to learn more about what our

readers want from the newsletter. Below are the responses we've received so far.

Question: Which newsletter format do you prefer?	
Option	Number of Responses
HTML	5
PDF	8
Printed	1

Want to chime in? There's still time to voice your opinion. To answer this and a few other optional questions, complete the online survey at <http://www.zoomerang.com/survey.zqi?p=WEB224F7TVUU2G>.

You Asked

Also in the July/August newsletter survey, we asked if readers wanted to pose a question to fellow chapter members and see the results posted in a future issue of the newsletter. Below are the questions we received.

- Just interested in what areas—hardware, software, editing, etc.—other technical writers are currently working and for what companies—themselves, contractors (Northrup Grumman, IBM, BAE, etc.), government employees, etc.
- What is your most effective strategy to obtain timely reviews of your documentation?
- How many STC members had specific educational coursework or degrees aimed at getting the job they now have? How many STC members arrived at their present job

through a progression of different types of jobs/experience with no specific educational training/degree? If the latter, what was the order of your positions/careers that got you to where you are now?

To respond to any of these questions, please send an e-mail to news@stcfdc.org with the subject, "You Asked."

We also asked if there were any particular topics that readers wanted us to explore in the newsletter. One of the suggestions was an article targeted to relative newcomers to the field—what to expect, how to grow your career, where the good jobs are, the right skills to have, etc. Pattie Srinath addresses part of this in her article, "[Welcome to the World of Technical Writing: What to Expect.](#)"

Kudos!

Our chapter Web site, <http://www.stcwdc.org>, won a 2005 APEX® Award for Publication Excellence in the category of Web & Intranet Site Content & Writing. The 2005 APEX awards were based on excellence in graphic design, editorial content, and the success of the entry—in the opinion of the judges—in achieving overall communications effectiveness and excellence. A total of 4,942 entries were evaluated. Of those entries, 100 APEX Grand Awards were presented in 11 major categories to honor the outstanding works in

those categories; and 1,523 APEX Awards of Excellence recognized excellence in 109 individual categories.

The STC AccessAbility SIG site also won an Award of Excellence in the category of One to Two Person-Produced Web & Intranet Sites. We would especially like to congratulate our Web Site Committee Manager and AccessAbility SIG Web Site Manager, Cynthia Lockley, who has worked diligently to make our site accessible. Great job!

Volunteer Spotlight

Have you always wanted to volunteer for STC but never got around to it? This column will highlight a great upcoming volunteer opportunity to help make you aware of the interesting and enriching volunteer opportunities that STC WDC provides.

Volunteer Opportunity:

STC WDC Competition Judge

Position Description:

Judges for the STC WDC competition provide their feedback on 6-9 competition entries. Each judge is assigned to a team of three judges who meet to form a consensus on the award level for each entry they judge. Judges are expected to attend two meetings: a pickup meeting to pick up their entries and receive judging training, and a judging consensus meeting.

Time Commitment:

30-40 hours between November 5 and December 3, including two Saturday morning meetings on November 5 and December 3.

When You Can Apply:

Immediately! Go to http://www.stcwdc.org/judge_app_form.shtml.

What You Get Out of It:

Judging lets you take a look at the work of others in your profession, get ideas for ways to improve your own work, and provide guidance to others. It also offers an outstanding networking opportunity. Fellow judges sometimes seek out those who provided high-quality comments when they are looking to fill a job!

How to Get More Information:

Visit <http://www.stcwdc.org/judcall.shtml> or contact Sarah Gill at competitions@stcwdc.org.

CHAPTER FINANCES	
This summary shows the chapter's financial status as of July 31, 2005. Please send questions to treasurer@stcwdc.com .	
ASSETS	\$18,419.85
Cash & Bank Accounts	\$17,419.85
Inventory (Estimated)	1,000.00
LIABILITIES	\$11.54
Current Liabilities	\$11.54
Long-Term Liabilities	
NET WORTH	\$18,408.31

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that I could actually get all of these documents edited, reviewed, printed (nine copies of each), and delivered, I was told the deadline was in three weeks.

What went through my mind was, "I think I have made a mistake and today is my first and last day!" What I said, however, was, "No problem." Three 70-hour work weeks later, the documents were completed and delivered on time, sans nervous breakdown by the tech writer. I was proud and exhausted, and after a weekend of recovery, I decided that putting together a list of lessons learned might keep me from having to work another 70-hour work week ever again. (In my dreams!)

So, in "Late Night" fashion, here are the top five things I learned from my sleep-deprived experience:

5. **Never say you can or will do something you are not willing to commit to 100%.** I said I could complete the project in the allotted time frame, so there was nothing else to be done.
4. **Know your limitations.** After working my fourth straight 11-hour day, I realized that everything becomes funny when I

am tired—corrupt documents, incorrect spacing, the blue screen of death (yes, my system really did crash and have to be re-imaged during this three-week time frame). I laughed at everything. Needless to say, this was extremely inappropriate behavior. At a certain point, I needed to go home. I needed to pack up whatever I was working on and take it home, a 30-minute drive away. (You would be surprised at how much better you feel, even after a short break.) After arriving home, I could usually work two or three more hours. But I had to learn when to quit or at least take a break.

3. **Create a schedule and hold everyone to it.** After the first couple of days of haphazardly working on whatever was completed, I knew I had to create a schedule. I mapped out everything from my editing time to the document owner's review time, to how long it took to print each document and the order in which the documents should be printed to maximize printer usage and time. No matter how much anyone begged and/or

complained (believe me, there was lots of both), I did not let the schedule slide. I stood outside offices and cubes looking over shoulders, and I sent reminder e-mails until I got what I needed. Without the schedule, I never would have finished the project on time.

2. ***If you need help, ask.*** After about the first 90 or 100 hours on this project, I was either too exhausted to know that I needed help or just too stubborn to ask. Either way, there were times I really could have used some assistance—picking up and dropping off blueines, ordering paper, talking to the printer—but I didn't ask for it. I did everything on my own. And while the project was completed on time, just a little assistance could have made the difference between a 70-hour week and a 55-hour one. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it is the sign of a mature technical writer. And if anyone ever offers, take them up on it immediately!

And the #1 thing I learned is...

1. ***Don't forget to let your manager know that you did a great job.*** As Maurice Martin stated in his *Intercom* editorial, "Lone Writers: Frustration and Flattery," it is not uncommon for managers to be "too distracted to keep track of your contributions." I didn't tell anyone what I had managed to accomplish in those three weeks until more than six months after the fact. My supervisor didn't even realize what had taken place. Sometimes you have to toot your own horn, but don't linger too long; we lone writers never get to rest on our laurels. There is always another impossible project in our queue, and have no doubt that because you managed the impossible once, you will be asked to do it over and over again.

Being a lone writer can be either a boon or curse—often it's both at once. But with great planning and tireless execution, it can be the most rewarding group you ever belong to: a team of one. Then the "Lone Writer as Super Employee" won't be a myth anymore; it will be you.

We Want Letters to the Editor

Do you have something to say about a recently published article? Was there incorrect information we printed that you want to point out? Do you have an idea that you would like to share that may make the newsletter be a more useful and enjoyable resource? Contact us at news@stcwdc.org.

Competition Corner

The Joy of Entering

By Sarah Gill

Have you ever wondered how your technical publications, technical art, or online publications would be viewed by an expert in your field? Do you need feedback on your technical communication products and have no way of getting it? From September through December, STC chapters around the world hold local competitions for technical communication. You can submit entries that fit into any of 6 Online Communication, 18 Technical Publications, and 17 Technical Art categories.

Note: PDF entries are now accepted in the appropriate categories of the Technical Publications competition rather than the Online Communication competition. For details, see <http://www.stcfdc.org/compete.shtml>.

Technical communicators in the local area volunteer their time and expertise to judge in the competitions. As an entrant, you receive multiple sets of comments that point out ways to improve your work in the future. The STC WDC chapter accepts entries from all over the Washington metropolitan region, including Pennsylvania and West Virginia. We also receive entries from other countries, such as Korea and Germany. This makes ours one of the largest competitions in the Society. The number of entries remains high for a number of reasons:

- **Pride of Accomplishment.** After months of planning, programming, writing, editing, and illustrating, you have created a final product that is the result of hundreds of hours of effort. It represents the very best you and your team have to offer.
- **Professional Validation.** This competition provides the rare opportunity for you, as a professional, to measure

yourself against the highest standards in your industry and to receive both validation of, and insight into, your work.

- **Insightful Peer Review.** The judges are all technical communication professionals with experience in publications, art, and online communication. Their experience, coupled with the knowledge of the goals, processes, and standards of excellence in these areas, gives you an impartial, thoughtful, and serious critique of your entries.

Technical communicators enjoy seeing what kind of work others in their field are doing. Therefore, you and other entrants have a chance to see the winning entries at the annual Chapter Awards Banquet in 2006. You may also find the banquet a great way to network within the community.

The Call for Entries is at <http://www.stcfdc.org/compete.shtml>. It details eligibility and submission requirements, competition categories, and entry instructions. If you need more information on preparing your entry, register to attend the webinar, "How to Submit an Award-Winning Entry to the Competitions," on September 24. It only costs \$5, and you can get all your entry questions answered! For more information, visit http://www.stcfdc.org/prgm_webinar_sep05.shtml.

Take the chance, submit an entry, and discover the joy of participating. For additional information on competitions, contact Sarah Gill at competitions@stcfdc.org or visit the links below.

Important Links

Competition Details

<http://www.stcfdc.org/compete.shtml>

Entry Rules

http://www.stcfdc.org/competition_entryrules.shtml**Important Dates**

09/24/2005	Webinar, "How to Submit an Award-Winning Entry to the Competitions"
10/24/2005	Deadline for entries
01/30/2006	Notification of awards/no award
02/03/2006	Awards Banquet (may be 02/04)
03/2006	International Competition

Member Voices: Tom Witherspoon

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.

Tom Witherspoon

**Work**

Q: Where do you work and what is your job title? What are your basic responsibilities?

A: I am currently a Technical Writer at Group 1 Software, a Pitney Bowes Company. I develop and update documentation and online help content for several products.

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

A: This year marks my 10th anniversary as a Technical Writer. I spent seven years in the restaurant industry as a chef, waiter, and bartender. I have also made my living as a professional actor for a few years after graduate school.

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

A: FrameMaker!

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

A: The two greatest allies of a technical writer are patience and planning. You must have patience when your plan falls apart!

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

A: I do enjoy the planning phase of a project. For a brief moment, everything is as it should be! I try to enjoy that moment, because it doesn't last long.

Q: And your least favorite?

A: I had a temp job that required me to employ less than savory tactics to gather information on the company's competitor.

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

A: The first time I ever had to decipher code was a completely terrifying experience. Somehow, I got through it.

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

A: While working as a contractor for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, I participated in a project that developed a system for tracking firearms used in crimes. One of the few times in my career that I really felt I was helping people.

Q: What are some of the changes you've seen in the field in the last 5-10 years?

A: A wholesale move toward electronic distribution of documentation. Online help seems to be getting easier for the user and more complicated for the technical writer!

Q: What would be your ideal job?

A: Someday, I'd like to manage a documentation department. I enjoy mentoring younger writers and "evangelizing" the importance of user documentation.

STC**Q: How long have you been a member of STC?**

A: I've been a member for eight years.

Q: What local chapters have you belonged to?

A: Washington, DC.

Q: What SIGs/Communities do you currently belong to?

A: None.

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

A: Networking opportunities and workshops.

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

A: I'd like to see more "practical" workshops at our annual conference and fewer "academic" ones. It's getting increasingly difficult to justify the expense of going to a conference. So any information that can help people do their everyday jobs makes that request easier.

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

A: Arlington, VA.

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

A: My interests include bicycling, fencing (yes, with swords!), cooking (BBQ, seafood, and vegetarian), theater (seeing and doing), and writing.

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

A: I hold a BA in Drama and English from Kenyon College and a MFA in Acting from The Catholic University of America.

Q: What led you to the technical communication field?

A: While enrolled in the MFA Acting program at CUA, I was employed at the Computer Center on campus. My boss gave me the opportunity to help write the User's Guide for the campus. Thus, a career was born!

Q: Are there any awards/recognitions you've received that you would like to share?

A: I've received a couple of awards from our Chapter Documentation Competition.

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

A: I love the tapas at Jaleo, the sushi at Yoko, and the BBQ at Capitol Q.

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

A: The Holocaust Museum and the Adams Morgan neighborhood.

I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Tom. When you see him at an event, make sure to go say hi. Personally, I'm going to head out to Jaleo soon and see if the tapas are as good as he says.

Thanks for letting us get to know you, Tom!

The Way We Work: Welcome to the World of Technical Writing - What to Expect

By Patricia Srinath

I'll never forget my graduate school orientation when one of our professors spoke to us about technical writing. She wanted to make sure that we understood what we were getting ourselves into before embarking on our studies. She made it very clear that technical writing involves collaboration and teamwork, and is by no means a solitary profession. Her words of wisdom still echo in my mind from time to time, especially when I talk to people who think that technical writers just sit alone in cubicles writing user manuals.

The only predictable aspect of being a technical writer is that it is unpredictable. There is no *day in the life of a technical writer*, because a typical day for one technical writer can be completely different from that of another. In fact, for some technical writers, each day can be a new adventure. One day, you can be a graphic designer developing an architecture diagram in Visio and the next you are a business analyst interviewing subject matter experts as part of a re-engineering initiative. Even the job title is inconsistent—technical writer, documentation specialist, information architect, communications specialist, and the list goes on. In spite of the changing landscape, there are a few predictable

challenges and opportunities that seem to ring true for technical writers across the board.

Rapidly Changing Technology

It is very difficult to stay ahead of the curve when it seems that the minute you have mastered a new software program or tool, a new and improved one is waiting in the wings to take its place. Although this phenomenon can make you feel overwhelmed and dizzy at times, it provides a never-ending opportunity to learn. The more you know, the more marketable you become, but balance is the key. You could never possibly learn every single software program or use every technology available; therefore, it's best to confidently acknowledge the fact that if you can master one, you have the aptitude to learn them all.

Cooperation and Teamwork

As the saying goes, "No man is an island," and that includes technical writers. As a writer, you may know how to craft the perfect sentence and write with style and grace, but the content has to come from somewhere and, most of the time, your co-workers are the ones who provide you with the information you need to get your job done. Getting the information you need,

however, can be more painful than a root canal. Whether it's general disinterest, secretiveness, or just plain laziness, you may find that your human information sources are not willing participants in your documentation efforts. Surprisingly, excellent people skills will benefit you more than your writing skills in these types of situations. Make sure you ask the right people the right questions and, if possible, try to show them what's in it for them if they cooperate. If all else fails, follow the philosophy, "the squeaky wheel gets the oil," and persist until they will do anything to get you out of their office.

Recognition and Appreciation

Writing gets noticed when it is done poorly, but if done well, it often goes undetected on the radar screen. Although there are plenty of technical writers out there who get a pat on the back for a job well done, there are just as many who complain that they are not given the credit they deserve. Technical writing can be a thankless job. If you are doing it for the recognition and

appreciation, you have probably picked the wrong profession. If you are doing it because you love to bridge communication gaps, make information easy to understand, and of course, write, then you may have to trade in your Pulitzer Prize in Technical Writing for the satisfaction of a job well done.

Stress

Technical writing can be stressful for a number of reasons, including tight deadlines, last-minute changes, long hours, heavy workloads, and demanding bosses, to name a few. Some technical writers willingly accept these stressors as part of the territory; others find themselves kicking and screaming until they go insane. The good news about technical writing is that it doesn't require you to lift 50 pounds, and you probably won't get dirt under your fingernails while doing it. It's all about choices, and the choice is yours.

Technical writing can be a very rewarding career if you know what to expect and, at the same time, expect the unexpected.

A Look at Usability University's Plain Language Seminar

By Allen Rotz

All effective communication requires plain language—especially technical communication. Plain language *is not* writing at a sixth-grade reading level. Plain language *is* a style of writing that focuses on the audience, to communicate easily and effectively with that audience. I think of it as usability applied to the written or spoken word.

So, it was very appropriate that Dr. Annetta L. Cheek spoke at the July 19 Usability University's seminar. Dr. Cheek humorously calls herself the "Czarina of Plain Language," and this is backed by great authority but, unfortunately, not with a command of a royal dictate. Her first efforts to apply plain language to federal government communications have had the support of the Clinton and now the Bush administrations.

Now her mission is to help the FAA improve safety by making regulations and procedures clear and more easily understood.

The benefits of plain language can be dramatic. In one of Dr. Cheek's examples, the Jackson, Mississippi, office that handles veteran benefits used plain language principals to rewrite one of the form letters it distributes to those who are claiming benefits. The office used to receive up to 1,128 calls per month, but with the much clearer and easily understood form, the number of calls dropped to 192. Plain language made the difference.

Plain language helps users accomplish their tasks by helping them do the following:

- Find what they need,
- Understand what they find, and
- Use what they find to meet their needs.

Plain language reinforces the most important rule in writing—write for your audience:

- Know their level of expertise.
- Try to have different paths or material to match differing audiences.
- Tell them what they want and need to know—not what you want them to know.

Plain language includes the following techniques:

Use	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informative headings • Pronouns • Active voice • Lists and tables • Short, concise, common words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Hidden verbs” and nominalizations • Abbreviations • Long sentences • Unnecessary words • Information the reader doesn’t want

Pronouns

Using pronouns such as I, you, and we pulls the reader in. Readers feel that they are being personally addressed, rather than being regarded as some faceless unknown. Be sure to define “we” as your organization and “you” as the reader. Pronouns help shorten text—“you” rather than “the applicant;” “we” rather than “the department.”

Active Voice

Active voice is not only stronger, more direct, and easily understood, but also can be shorter. Compare these sentences:

Passive: The application must be completed by the applicant and received by the Grants Office by June 1. (17 words)

Active: We must receive your application by June 1. (8 words)

Lists and Tables

Vertical lists help increase clarity in the following ways:

- Make it easy for the reader to identify all of the items or steps in a process.
- Add white space to separate items and make reading easier.
- Help your reader see the structure of your document.

Tables also help understanding in the following ways:

- Make it easy to take in complex material at a glance.
- Make it easy to locate specific information.
- Save words.
- Make your logic and structure clear.

Concise Wording

Cut unnecessary words and form stronger phrases.

Wordy Phrase	Stronger Phrase
In order to	➔ To
We are currently planning	➔ We are planning
The project of really critical	➔ The project is critical
In the case that	➔ If

Dr. Cheek gave more tips, showed before-and-after examples, answered questions, and gave her advice and opinion. To learn more, explore the wealth of information at

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov>.

You can also find additional information on plain language at the following sites:

- Center for Plain Language – <http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org>
- Plain Language Association International – <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org>

Jot this Down!

The Fifth International Plain Language Conference will be held in Washington, DC, on November 3-5. For conference details, see the links above or the [Calendar](#) section of the newsletter. Note that the early bird discount ends September 15.

Rave Reviews: *Stylin' with CSS, A Designer's Guide*, by Charles Wyke-Smith

Reviewed by Jennifer Singleton



Paperback: 275 pages
Publisher: New Riders, PeachPit Press
ISBN: 0-321-30525-6

Stylin' with CSS may sound like a new reality series or even the newest crime drama, but behind the catchy title lies an in-depth lesson on Cascading Style Sheets, a mechanism for styling XHTML markup. In the introduction, Wyke-Smith points out that his book is not about design, but is geared to designers and highlights the important techniques in standards-based Web design. “*Stylin' with CSS* is all about designing and building Web pages that look stylish and professional... and whose content can be easily updated and distributed for other purposes.” He points out that the content on the majority of the world’s Web pages is “crammed” with markup that is only there to achieve the desired presentation on a small group of obsolete Web browsers and provides no actual information at all.

Stylin' shows you how to publish content by defining its structure with XHTML and then defining its presentation with CSS. Since CSS is a mechanism for styling XHTML, you can’t start

using CSS without a solid understanding of XHTML, which is a reformulation of HTML as XML. Everything in the book is based on Web standards, the rules defined in the recommendations of the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium).

Chapter 1, “Giving Structure to Content,” provides a brief overview of XHTML and why you need CSS. The author highlights the top 10 benefits of standards-based coding or markup with a brief background of XHTML markup rules.

Chapter 2, “How CSS Works,” describes how CSS rules are written and provides three ways to add CSS to your Web pages from a separate CSS style sheet. The author covers how they work, their limitations, and his personal usage recommendations. This chapter also shows how to use contextual selectors to target tags within the document hierarchy and ways to work around Internet Explorer’s “various non-standards-compliant quirks.”

Chapters 3 and 4 cover text and font properties, and positioning elements. Wyke-Smith begins with an introduction to the different font families and three types of values to size fonts, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of each. The pros and cons of proportional sizing are discussed as well as the importance of font sizes

in indicating the hierarchy of the text in a document. There is also a detailed table of the eight text-related CSS properties. In terms of the positioning elements found in Chapter 4, the box model is explained as well as the display and position property with specifics on box border, margin, and padding (the distance of the content from the border of the box). Chapter 4 also introduces the red dialog boxes used throughout the remainder of the book. These boxes explain the resulting actions of the XHTML code examples and introduce the floating and clearing techniques used to organize page layout.

Chapters 5 and 6 use templates that the reader can download from the *Stylin'* Web site as examples for basic page layout and advanced page layout. These chapters explain how to achieve two-column layout and three-column layout with headers and footers. They also expand on the float and clear techniques discussed in Chapter 4 to create the columns.

Chapter 6, "Advanced Page Layout," includes instruction on how to achieve full height columns for CSS-based layouts and expands on different layout techniques, including floated-faux column and fluid layout.

Chapter 7, "Creating Interface Components," shows how to understand and write valid XHTML markup for components such as navigation links, forms, lists, and tables. Creating forms is one of the most fundamental elements of any Web site, and Wyke-Smith shows the reader how to design a form using CSS and a minimal amount of

markup, as well as how to create and simplify CSS-based menus such as the multiple-level drop-down menu.

At the book's conclusion, the reader builds a Web page using a downloaded template that makes use of all components discussed in the previous chapters. Readers start with the initial setup of the folder structure, create the site architecture, modify the markup, and then perform the final cleanup. This final step involves spacing the paragraphs, inserting dividing lines, and adjusting margins.

Throughout the book are easy-to-understand sidebars and dialog boxes for both the experienced and intermediate XHTML coder with helpful tips to avoid mistakes. The book also provides detailed examples of techniques and shortcuts that Wyke-Smith himself has used and which serve as a guide. There are also many illustrations and line-by-line XHTML coding for the reader to follow. The appendix provides a listing of CSS properties and values in terms of background, dimension, classification, border, font, and positioning.

The reader is encouraged to use the *Stylin'* Web site as an interactive tutorial to accompany the book by downloading templates and copying examples and code to create elements such as dropdown menus and navigation links.

Wyke-Smith's sometimes witty yet insightful commentary truly gives a sense of his passion for assisting technical communicators in pursuing their creative vision.

Advertise in this Newsletter

If you would like to advertise your business in our newsletter, please send a message to Bobbie Dofflemyer at 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. Discounts are available if the same ad runs in two or more issues within 6 months.

Calendar of Non-Chapter-Sponsored Events

Educational Opportunities and Other Events of Interest

STC Sponsored Events

Dreamweaver MX 2004 Two-Part Telephone Seminar

September 14, 2005, and September 21, 2005

Join speaker Michael Doyle to learn both the “how to” and “why” of a number of Dreamweaver functions, occasionally taking a peek at the underlying HTML.

Seminars are \$99 each for STC members and \$149 each for non-members. To enroll, visit <https://stc.webex.com/stc/mywebex/default.php?Rnd1315=0.6869852012654498>.

Project Planning and Quality Checks Two-Part Telephone Seminar

October 19, 2005, and October 26, 2005

Why is technical documentation an “afterthought” in the minds of some of your co-workers? Why do some of them secretly perceive producing documentation as a “necessary nuisance” in the product development cycle? John Wilson will teach you how solid, well-considered project and documentation plans can help you alter counterproductive viewpoints and get co-workers on the same page—literally—by showing them how technical documentation is one of many product components.

Seminars are \$99 each for STC members and \$149 each for non-members. To enroll, visit <https://stc.webex.com/stc/mywebex/default.php?Rnd1315=0.6869852012654498>.

STC Training Program

October 20-21, 2005

Imagine a two-day course covering the things you need to advance your career in technical communication—an in-depth, focused course taught by some of the most respected names in the field.

Now imagine that you have a choice of five such courses, each covering a different subject within technical communication. That’s the STC Training Program—a new learning venue designed for today’s professionals and scheduled for October 20-21.

The five two-day courses, described in detail at <http://www.stc.org/training>, cover the following subjects:

- The Architecture of Content. Instructor: Jonathan Price, STC Fellow
- Creating and Using Personas to Improve Usability. Instructor: Whitney Quesenbery, STC Associate Fellow
- Focusing on Content: Making Web Sites Work for Users. Instructors: Janice (Ginny) Redish, STC Fellow, and Caroline Jarrett
- Leadership in Information Management: Developing the Business Framework and Implementation Roadmap for Single Sourcing, Content Management, and Knowledge Management. Instructor: Benhong Rosaline (Roz) Tsai, STC Associate Fellow
- XML: From Hand-Coding to WYSIWYG Authoring. Instructor: Neil Perlin, STC Associate Fellow

September/October 2005, Vol. 47, No. 2

The STC Training Program will take place at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City, Arlington, VA (near Washington, DC). Register by September 21, 2005, and the cost for STC members is \$1,095 (with hotel, \$1,295*) and \$1,255 for non-members (with hotel, \$1,455*). After September 21, costs increase \$150.

Don't miss out on this unique opportunity. For information or to register, please visit

<http://www.stc.org/training>.

* Hotel accommodations include up to three nights lodging in Arlington, VA.

Registration includes two breakfasts and two lunches. Discounts are available for multiple registrants from the same company.

FlashHelp, WebHelp, Web Help... Help! Telephone Seminar

Wednesday, November 9, 2005

Confused about the differences between sound-alike technologies like WebHelp and Web Help or HTML Help and HTML help? Not sure what newer technologies like XHTML and SVG are, and how they may affect your authoring tool selection and development? These uncertainties can make it difficult to select technologies and tools for creating online help or documentation and increase the risk of misunderstandings. Speaker Neil Perlin will demystify these options and others to help you select the most appropriate formats and tools and be aware of the technical and business aspects of new technologies.

Seminar costs \$99 for STC members and \$149 for non-members. To enroll, visit

<https://stc.webex.com/stc/mywebex/default.php?Rnd1315=0.6869852012654498>.

Other Events of Interest

WritersUA East Coast Conference

September 12-13, 2005, Philadelphia, PA

The WritersUA East Coast Conference brings you two days of information-packed instruction from four acknowledged industry experts. A laser focus on user assistance has always been the defining characteristic of the events produced by WritersUA (formerly WinWriters).

For more information, visit

<http://www.writersua.com/ec05/index.html>. For information about additional conference dates around the world, visit <http://www.writersua.com>.

INTERACT 2005: Communicating Naturally through Computers

September 12-16, 2005, Rome, Italy

The INTERACT 2005 conference will highlight to both the academic and industrial world the importance of the Human-Computer Interaction area and its most recent breakthroughs on current applications.

For more information, visit

<http://www.interact2005.org>.

Branding: Beyond the Buzzword

September 14, 2005, National Education Association, Washington, DC

The Public Relations Society of America presents this professional development seminar to address topics such as building your product or service into a bona fide brand and how PR and marketing work together to build a brand.

For more information, visit http://www.prsa-ncc.org/index.php?option=com_events&task=view_detail&agid=52&year=2005&month=09&day=14&Itemid=63.

MobileHCI 05: 7th International Conference on Human Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services**September 19-22, 2005, Salzburg, Austria**

MobileHCI provides a forum for academics and practitioners to discuss the challenges, potential solutions and innovations towards effective interaction with mobile systems and services. It covers the analysis, design, evaluation and application of human-computer interaction techniques and approaches for all mobile computing devices and services.

For more information, visit <http://mobilehci.icts.sbg.ac.at>.

European IA Summit – Building Communities**October 15-16, 2005, Brussels, Belgium**

The first European Information Architecture (IA) Summit's focus is on building the IA community in Europe. The objective of the event is to bring together a number of disciplines and practitioner communities by providing a stimulating environment for debate and an opportunity for establishing cooperation. For more information, visit

<http://www.asis.org/Conferences/IA/euia.html>.

UIST 2005: 18th Annual ACM Symposium on User Interface Software and Technology**October 23-26, 2005, Seattle, Washington**

UIST is the premier forum for innovations in the software and technology of human-computer interfaces.

For more information, visit <http://www.acm.org/uist/>.

ICKM2005: International Conference on Knowledge Management**October 27-28, 2005, Charlotte, NC**

The second International Conference on Knowledge Management (ICKM2005) will bring

together academics, researchers, developers, practitioners, and users in the areas of knowledge management and information processing. It will serve as a platform for networking, exchange of research ideas, practical applications, and best practices.

For more information, visit <http://www.ickm2005.org/>.

Plain Language 5th International Conference**November 3-6, 2005, L'Enfant Plaza Hotel, Washington, DC**

The Plain Language Association International welcomes everyone interested in clear writing and communication to their Fifth International Conference. The theme of this year's conference is Adding Up the Benefits.

For more information, visit <http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/conferences/2005/index.html>.

November 3 is World Usability Day. Plain language is a critical aspect of usability, so please join us for this special event.

DUX 2005: Conference on Designing for User eXperience**November 3-5, 2005, San Francisco, CA**

ACM SIGCHI, ACM SIGGRAPH, and AIGA are excited to collaborate again in developing the DUX2005 conference. It will gather together researchers and practitioners of all the design disciplines and related fields to share their stories and experiences on how the needs and goals of both users and businesses are met through design.

For more information, visit <http://www.dux2005.org>.