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Feature Article

Get Ready for the E-Learning Revolution! E-learning is hot and getting hotter. See how you can get in on the revolution.



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Newsletter Staff

Publication Information

Advertising Rates (PDF)

Chapter Administrative Council

STC Mission Statement

Visit the Society Web site at www.stc.org

Editor's Desk
Editor Sees
Two Eventful Years

Presidential Podium
*A Fond Farewell
*New Council Members

Visiting Author
Getting Started
in Technical Writing

Professional
Development
Knowledge Management
Workshop

Chapter Meetings
*June Meeting Preview
*June Time & Place
*May Meeting Review

Humor
The Performance
Review

Introductions
Living the Vida Divina

Tech Issues
PDF Tips and Tricks

Book Review
"The Writer's FAQs:
The Ultimate Quick
Reference Guide"

Advice
Finding a Printer

New Members
Welcome Aboard!

Employment Desired
Members Looking
for Work

Designing the future of technical communication

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June 2002

Feature Article

[Return Home](#)

Get Ready for the E-Learning Revolution!

by [Lana Walker-Helmuth](#)

E-learning is hot and getting hotter. Even though there's been a lot of hype and dashed hopes (and budgets) because e-learning is in its infancy, advances in Internet technology are changing the way businesses learn, communicate, and collaborate.

Why is it hot? Because it's all about companies getting and remaining competitive and profitable in the information age. Don't ever forget the bottom line!

What is it?

So, what is e-learning? Definitions vary, including the narrow view that it's simply delivering training courses over the Internet. But I prefer the scope Marc Rosenberg promotes in his book, *e-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*: "E-learning refers to the use of Internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance."

He explains it is based on three fundamental criteria.

1. E-learning is networked, which makes it capable of instant updating, storage/retrieval, distribution, and sharing of instruction or information.
2. It is delivered to the end-user by a computer using standard Internet technology.
3. It focuses on the broadest view of learning — learning solutions that go beyond the traditional paradigms of training.

Rosenberg emphasizes that learning and training are not synonymous, that there are many ways we can learn. He says, "In the context of business, learning is the process by which people acquire new skills or knowledge for the purpose of enhancing their performance."



You can think of e-learning (some call it "online learning") as an umbrella term for Web-enabled instruction, knowledge management, performance support, and collaboration.

So what?

E-learning is hot because of its huge potential to turn

businesses into lean, mean, profit-creating machines. Together, knowledge and information content is king. And the fighting has begun over who owns and manages chunks of information such as learning objects and knowledge objects.

Why is this important to understand? Because technical communicators often are at the hub of enhancing performance without realizing how important their skills and contributions are to the new information-based economy.

E-learning is not the domain of a chosen few, even though some would have you believe it is. To truly shape and direct its power, all who are interested in enhancing performance must share it across several areas, including training, documentation, knowledge management, and performance support. In fact, these distinct disciplines are starting to converge and overlap as they focus on performance-centered business outcomes.

More definitions

Technical communication has changed dramatically over the years. For example, software manuals used to be product centered. When software became easier to use and ubiquitous, writing morphed to center on the user. Now we're learning about creating just-in-time information and performance-centered design.

Can you easily describe knowledge management? Do you think it's just a glorified database? What about instructional design? Electronic performance support systems? Until recently, I couldn't describe these areas very well. I knew that I seemed to do a bit of everything as a technical communicator, but the distinctions were fuzzy.

Following are broad descriptions. Keep in mind that there are no universally accepted definitions.

- Instructional design is the systematic approach to the analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation of learning materials and activities, often referred to as ADDIE.
- Training is a structured event intended to enable performance (develop skills) and to promote awareness (knowledge).

An example of Web-enabled training, of course, is online classes.

- Information architecture aims to organize information so people can find what they're looking for. Architects design organization systems, create consistent labeling schemes, and devise navigational paths.

An example is organizing information and knowledge on

Web sites and intranets.

- Electronic performance support systems (EPSSs) provide whatever is necessary to generate performance and learning *at the moment of need*. Gloria Gery coined the term and defines an EPSS as "an electronic system that provides integrated, on-demand access to information, advice, learning, and tools to enable a high level of job performance with a minimum amount of support from other people."

An example of performance support on the Internet is programming that guides novices through a series of questions and prompts to determine appropriate actions.

- Knowledge management refers to capturing, analyzing, cataloging, and storing the knowledge (both explicit and tacit) and experiences of people within an organization and making it available to others. More advanced systems encourage collaboration and allow workers to amend and update resources.

A Web-based knowledge management system might be a simple help system or a complex portal that delivers targeted information according to job profiles.

Now what?

It was only a matter of time before people saw the potential synergy of merging disciplines. So now we're seeing practitioners from diverse fields working together to create systems that work in the information age.

Do you see how you are or could be a major force in the e-learning revolution? Now is the time to shed any outdated beliefs about the role of technical communicators. If you want in on the revolution and to reap the rewards, do whatever it takes to position yourself.

It may mean changing the terms for what you do. Instead of being a technical writer, maybe you're an e-learning content developer, information developer, information architect, knowledge engineer, or communication designer.

Maybe you need to take classes to fill in skill gaps. (For an excellent discussion, download STC Conference Session PD 2G paper "Transitioning from Technical Writing to Instructional Design" at www.stc.org/49thConf/Session_Materials/show_IE.asp. Also, see the article I wrote for the May 2001 Signature "Your Fast Track to Instructional Design.")

Maybe you need to join organizations that are more visible in e-learning such as the American Society for Training and Development (www.astd.org) or the International Society for Performance Improvement (www.ispi.org). Both have San Diego chapters.

Maybe you need to attend e-learning conferences. I plan to attend the Online Learning 2002 Conference & Expo in Anaheim, September 23 through 25. (See www.vnulearning.com for details.)

If anyone has advice or suggestions or would like to write a follow-up article, feel free to email me at Lana@pe.net.

The e-learning revolution is here, and technical communicators are and should be major players. Don't let real opportunities and rewards pass you by!

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

Editor's Desk

June 2002


[Return Home](#)

Editor Sees Two Eventful Years

by [Rick Bradshaw](#), Editor

As many have said before and others will say in the future, this is my last column for and my last issue of *Signature*. It has been an eventful two years since I took over as editor. We've gone from a print publication with a dated appearance and largely borrowed articles to an electronic publication with a more updated appearance and articles largely written by local people. Along the way, we've managed to win a couple of awards.

We have a new team of editors coming in next year. Hopefully, they will be able to continue to improve the publication. To them I say, never let it stand on laurels of the past. Go forth and conquer new issues in new and better ways.

Many of you, our membership of more than 300, don't regularly attend meetings. Many of you may not have an idea of what is required to fill the various council positions and of the staff of volunteers behind them that is required to do the job. The newsletter staff is the largest in the chapter in some regards. Some are core staff while others are more of an adjunct staff since they may only contribute one article or service per year. While not everyone can contribute each month because of time constraints, many do; others have contributed multiple times both monthly and throughout the chapter year. Every one of these people have risen to the challenge and performed admirably.

For those of you who may download this issue and read it but not come to the June meeting, I'd like to introduce to you and thank those people who have helped to make *Signature* what it has become in chapter year 2001/2002. There are many. This is not a one-person show by any means. They are listed in no particular order. They will be individually recognized at the June meeting.

Copy Editors:

Elizabeth Vollbach

Pamela Fridle

Illustrator:

Ann M. Throckmorton

Authors:

L. Sharon Bradshaw

Lana Walker-Helmuth

Erica Ueland

Karen Field

Matt Sullivan

Nadine Barter Bowlus

 The advertisement for Technical Standards, Inc. features a dark background with a blue and white color scheme. At the top left is the company logo, which includes a stylized book icon and the text 'Technical Standards, Inc. Documentation Solutions'. To the right of the logo is a photograph of a person working at a computer. Below the logo, the text 'What are you missing?' is written in a bold, blue font. Underneath this, three sections are listed: 'EXPERIENCE', 'PROFESSIONALISM', and 'DEDICATION', each with a list of bullet points. At the bottom, the text 'PROJECTS - STAFFING - TRAINING' is displayed in a bold, blue font, followed by the website 'www.tecstandards.com' and the phone number '800.889.7116'. A circular badge in the bottom right corner contains the text 'Contract or Direct-hire Staffing'.

Technical Standards, Inc.
Documentation Solutions

What are you missing?

EXPERIENCE

- Eight years in Southern California
- Large selection of skilled candidates
- Proven screening processes

PROFESSIONALISM

- Knowledgeable and attentive staff
- History of lasting partnerships
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Henry Garcia
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Bonni Graham
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I also thank all the current council members who have contributed in order to let you, the membership, know what is going on with their efforts on the council.

This month we have a nice assortment of articles for you. Our [feature article](#) is on e-learning. While e-learning is not new, it is becoming more widely used. Find out more about it. You might find yourself documenting it or doing some e-learning yourself.

Need a pocket guide of all those FAQs you might need on the job? Check out our [book review](#) this month. You might find the answer to your questions in this handy little book.

Are you starting out as a tech writer, or are you out of work and wondering if there is something else you might do to help your chances of employment? Check out our [visiting author](#) column. Rhonda Bracey, from the Australian Chapter, has written an excellent article. It was first printed in the *Solitary Scrivener: The Newsletter of the Lone Writer SIG* (www.stcsig.org/lw/newsletter.htm) and then reprinted in Bracey's home chapter's newsletter, the March 2002 issue of the *AuSTCom* (www.stc-aus.org.au).

Our usual columnists are also present. [Karen Field](#) does her best to pick up our spirits once again this month with an article about performance reviews. [Lana Walker-Helmuth](#) introduces yet another member this month while [Matt Sullivan](#) provides some good information about creating PDF files.

If you are looking for a position, put an ad in our [Employment Desired](#) section. We have had people find positions as a direct result of STC networking. If you have a job to fill, I encourage you to check out those individuals who are listed. Whether you are looking for a position or have a position to fill, increase your chances of finding a match; network within your STC chapter!

Well, that's about it. My final column in my final issue is history. If you would like to help with the newsletter next year, contact Lana (lane@pe.net) or Sharon (sbradsh2@san.rr.com).

Have a great summer, and next year come back with tons of support for the newsletter team.

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

[Return Home](#)

June 2002

Presidential Podium



A Fond Farewell

by [Kris Oden](#)

[Return Home](#)

[Council members for 2002-2003](#)

This will be my last column as president of the San Diego Chapter. Over the past two years, the San Diego Chapter council has accomplished quite a bit. I'd like to take a moment and recognize the people and teams that made it all happen.

Thanks to Bonnie Blackfield, our Membership VP. Bonnie maintains the chapter membership list and works constantly with Pat Ray to make sure email addresses stay current so that you all stay current with our events. In addition, she organized the New Member Orientation Dinner held in October—to much acclaim from our new members.

Thanks to Rick Bradshaw and his award-winning newsletter team, we moved from a print newsletter to an online newsletter, saving production time and bulk mail and printing costs. In addition, the newsletter now generates income from advertising. Rick has successfully recruited many of you to write articles for the newsletter, making this newsletter truly a chapter newsletter. Finally, by offering space in the newsletter to those of you looking for jobs, he has increased networking opportunities for members in the chapter. I know of at least two instances when members have obtained positions because of advertising themselves in the newsletter.

Thanks to Carla Coleman and Elaine Tsang, both of whom have served as VP of Programs, for organizing a wide variety of monthly meetings, arranging for food and accommodations with the hotel, and taking reservations.

Thanks to Walter Hanig and his team of greeters for their able check-in of members at the chapter meetings. Walter introduced preprinted nametags and receipts to streamline the check-in process, and he worked with Suzy Hosie and Elaine Tsang to develop the online reservation form. I would also like to acknowledge Walter for the idea for our new library service and Suzy Hosie for buying the books and setting up the check-out process.

Thanks to Suzy Hosie and her Web team, we have continued the tradition started by Mike McGraw and Bill Sullivan of having a Web site that consistently meets members' needs. It is easy to use and is constantly updated and maintained. I particularly want to acknowledge Suzy and her team for their collaboration with Walter Hanig and Elaine Tsang on creation of an online reservation form for chapter meetings.

Thanks to Mary Larkin and her team for organizing and

offering an extensive list of professional development workshops. Mary was very creative and teamed up with local training centers to offer low-cost workshops for members and the technical writing community.

Last, but certainly not least, thanks to Tom Lorr, Judy Keene, and Ken Wilson and the Employment team. Tom, Judy, and Ken have all taken their turn as VP of Employment during my tenure as president. Because of their efforts, the Employer Database is more current and useful for searches. Judy Keene was particularly enthusiastic and made sure that every technical communication position advertised in the media was represented in JobMail or presented at meetings.

In addition, thanks to Tiffany Gerstmar, JobMail is now hosted as a listserve and is distributed twice a month.

This is my opportunity to thank the council publicly for their efforts and accomplishments. I'm sure I've missed someone or something, and for that I apologize in advance. We couldn't do all we accomplished without the help of volunteers. Be sure to attend our June 12 meeting where we recognize all of our volunteers for their individual efforts.

Have a great summer!

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Visiting Author

[Return Home](#)

Getting Started in Technical Writing: Advice For Beginners and Wannabes

by [Rhonda Bracey](#), Australia Chapter

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[About the author](#)

In the past few months, I've been asked my advice by a number of people interested in pursuing technical writing as a career. This article is a summary of my replies.

What do I need on my résumé?

There are several skills that I tell people are essential. First, you must be able to write concisely and clearly. Second, you must be pedantic about spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting. Third, you need solid editing skill. Fourth, a love of reading is essential; reading a wide range of materials makes for better writing.

Advertised positions for tech writers too often emphasize the software tools you'd be expected to use — an emphasis that's usually at the expense of writing skills. It is far more important to be a good writer and negotiator; if you have one or two software packages under your belt, then learning the others is not a difficult or insurmountable task. Convincing employers of this should be part of your arsenal of negotiation skills.

This isn't to discount the value of computer skills, though. Technical writers need to have excellent computer skills in general when they're entering the field. It's a reasonable expectation. If you're struggling with the concept of using a mouse, are you really the ideal person to be writing documentation for network servers?

To find out what software packages potential employers will be looking for, read job postings for technical writer positions. Most employers look for excellent (even expert-level) skills with desktop publishing programs (e.g., Quark Xpress, PageMaker, and FrameMaker), word processing programs (e.g., Word and WordPerfect), help authoring programs (e.g., RoboHelp, ForeHelp, and HDK), graphics programs (e.g., Paint Shop Pro, PhotoShop, and Visio), Web authoring with HTML or some Web design package (e.g., DreamWeaver and FrontPage), and others (e.g., CSS, JavaScript, and XML). This is not to say that you need to develop proficiencies in all of these at once, but it won't hurt to start building some expertise in one package/skill in each category.

What type of background should a tech writer have?

Journalism is a solid background for tech writing. Typically, tech writers seem to fall into this game from some other job (e.g., teaching, quality assurance, or help desk), often because they're the only person in the organization who enjoys writing procedures, policies, and so on. Bottom line: your background is nowhere near as important as your skills.

Beyond the so-called hard skills I talked about above, there are a

number of other skills that employers look for, including the ability to:

- learn quickly and continue learning
- negotiate to get reviews done and done on time
- organize projects, time, and information
- define the audience for which you are writing
- interpret technical information and translate it into plain, simple, jargon-free language
- interview subject-matter experts to find out what you and your audience need to know in order to use your company's product(s)

What industries could I work in?

Any industry with a set of procedures, instructions, and so forth can use a tech writer. The problem is, most of them don't know it and work on the premise that "The receptionist took some composition classes and she's not busy at the moment, so she can do it."

Convincing businesses that it may be cheaper to get a tech writer to do the job properly is still hard. While a lot of work is available in software documentation and many Web sites feature online documentation, don't forget that the tractor manual has to be written, as do the instructions for operating the CD/radio/cassette players in cars or the instructions for the treatment of snake bite.

Talk to people who work in different industries, starting with friends and family, then their colleagues. You will be surprised how your network of contacts will grow and how much you will learn. You also can look through the article archives of different organizations on the Internet to get a sense of the writing needs in different industries.

For example, software writing tends to be fast and loose because of rapid development cycles, whereas defense contract writing tends to be slow and meticulous with rigid adherence to specific standards.

How do I get work?

In a word: *networking!* You need to learn who knows someone who may be looking for someone like you. Word of mouth is the best advertisement. But it also can work against you if you burn bridges or bad mouth anybody. Don't.

When you're first starting out, you may need to use recruitment agencies in order to get those first assignments that will help establish your reputation. Poll more experienced technical writers, and you'll get a mixed bag of opinions about this. Some people have told me that, if they relied on recruiters to find them work and hadn't networked, they wouldn't have worked at all for the past few years. Others have had extraordinarily good luck with recruiters and use them consistently to find new permanent or contract positions.

It can't hurt to have your résumé posted with some recruiters;

sometimes they're the way to find work with the primo employers in your area. But you should do so as a complement to, rather than instead of, your own networking efforts.

Everybody has a network they can use when they're looking for work. For example, you can network with:

- family (who probably know people who know people)
- friends
- former coworkers
- former bosses
- professionals you meet in any field, from your dentist to your hair stylist, who may know someone
- church contacts
- former teachers, professors, and school advisors
- sport and hobby contacts

How can I promote myself to my network?

Self-promotion can be uncomfortable for a lot of people at first. It requires that you talk frequently and confidently about what you can and want to do.

There are other things you can also do to get your name out and widen your circle of possibilities.

- Bulletproof your résumé so it's free of misspellings, typos, punctuation errors, formatting faux pas, and grammar gaffes.
- Create a Web site with your résumé and work samples, particularly if you're promoting HTML skills on your résumé and don't have other examples of Web work.
- Print business cards with a few bullet points on the back that list your skills or areas of expertise. If you have one, include your Web site address. Then be sure to always have some with you to hand out when opportunities arise.
- Create a portfolio of the best work that you've done.
- Keep a good, up-to-date contact list, and email your contacts that you are looking for work. Give them permission to forward your name to others when they hear of an opportunity, and let them know the URL for your online résumé.
- Use employment ads to build your contact list even if the ads you find are not for tech writers. Sometimes a big push to hire engineers or software developers now can mean a need for technical writers later.

Memo to all aspiring tech writers: if you write or email someone to ask them for their advice, thank them (promptly) for the time and effort they put into answering your request.

About the Author

Rhonda Bracey was a high school teacher - librarian and vice principal for 18 years. She then spent six years working for software companies.

As a result of downsizing, Rhonda was forced to reevaluate her career directions, so nearly three years ago she set up her own independent contracting company, focusing on technical writing, training, editing, and Website development.

Rhonda is Managing Director of CyberText Consulting Pty Ltd, www.cybertext.com.au

How can I get experience?

Sure, you can wait for your first job, but it's a vicious circle. How do you get a job without experience, and how do you get experience without a job?

Try volunteer work. It looks good on your résumé. If you can help in your areas of expertise (or where you want to get expertise) then all the better. Does SD STC need help with their Web site? Could you work on the newsletter? Manage the membership database?

Many small community organizations are nonprofit or at least strapped with tight budgets, and they can't hire someone with the skills they need for certain projects. Because their existing staff is already overloaded, no one may have the time (or interest) to develop the required skills. So they hope that a volunteer will turn up.

What can I expect to earn?

Tech writers usually earn more than journalists, novelists, poets, and other creative writers. In fact, it is rumored that we are the highest paid writers of all. For an idea of salary rates in the U.S. and Canada, check:

- Monster (<http://www.monster.com>)
- WinWriters annual salary survey (<http://www.winwriters.com/salaryresults01.htm>)
- Society for Technical Communication (<http://www.stc.org/salary.html>)

How do I learn more?

The Internet is full of articles, links, and sites dedicated to tech writing, but you need to wade through a lot to get the essentials. Start with:

- "Getting Started" on the Techwr-I site (<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/newbiegettingstarted.html>)
- Suite101 (http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/technical_writing/)

These should give you enough to get going. For an official description of the technical writing job, see http://www.fullfont.com/techwriter_desc.htm.

Don't forget the online discussion lists, such as Techwr -I (<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/subscribercentral.html>) and HATT (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HATT>) and specific lists for the software tools you use.

[Return Home](#)

June 2002

Professional Development



Knowledge Management Workshop

by [Mary Larkin](#)

[Return Home](#)

Date
June 1, 2002

Location
Invitrogen
1600 Faraday Avenue
Carlsbad, CA

Time
9:30 a.m. to noon

Cost
\$20

Registration
Follow the links at
<http://www.stc-sd.org>

Our workshop leader, Patrick Morrissey, defines *knowledge management* as "preserving of intellectual capital within the enterprise." The process of capturing knowledge and transforming it into intellectual property will be explained and demonstrated. You will gain insight into how knowledge management can benefit your company and your career. Morrissey will also offer tips on how to sell knowledge engineering to management.

Morrissey's presentation will cover:

- defining knowledge management
- capturing, manipulating, and distributing knowledge
- why technical writing is key to a successful knowledge-base deployment
- knowledge bases at work, including help desks, user manuals, and corporate knowledge bases
- creating a knowledge capture and making a simple knowledge entry
- tools in the marketplace
- demonstration in which participants will become a virtual company using a knowledge management database to resolve customer service and internal training issues
- wrap-up and Q&A

Morrissey has been creating knowledge bases for engineering firms for the last two decades. Currently, he is a knowledge manager at IDC-MCS.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Chapter Meetings


[Return Home](#)


June Meeting Preview:
 The Best of STC's 49th Annual Conference/
 Volunteer Recognition Night
 by [Elaine Tsang](#), VP Programs

What did *you* miss at the big conference? Couldn't make it to Nashville? Or went to Nashville but missed some interesting programs?

To cap off the chapter year, we'll examine the best sessions at STC's 49th Annual Conference. We've asked five people to attend the conference, seek out the most valuable content, and distill it down to a useful summary delivered in a panel presentation.

Volunteer recognition
 This will be the last meeting of our chapter year, and it wouldn't be complete without a special awards ceremony to recognize all of our dedicated volunteers. It takes a great deal of effort to run a successful chapter, so we hope you'll join us in thanking those who have been busy in the background, working on your behalf.

Speaking of volunteers, I would like to extend my gratitude to two fantastic volunteers, Christopher Bates (taking reservations), and Nadine Barter Bowlus (making hotel arrangements). Thank you!

[Return Home](#)

May Meeting Review:
 PhotoShop 7.0 Upgrade Discussed
 by Sean Griffin

Elaine Tsang opened the meeting and made announcements, then introduced Matt Sullivan of Grafix Training and Consulting.

[Announcements](#)

Sullivan explained that there are not many major changes to the version 7.0 upgrade of PhotoShop in terms of quality of corrections. Most of the changes are to make it simpler to use-"more tactile," as he says.

[Upcoming Events](#)
[Drawing Winners](#)

Sullivan divided his presentation into three parts: new features, retouching, and digital photography.

[Attendance](#)

New Features

File Browser can access and work with files from within PhotoShop. You can organize, rename, and preview all image files from within PhotoShop-even files that don't have a preview function associated with them. Because File Browser operates from within PhotoShop, it's faster than switching to Windows Explorer.

ImageReady converts from PhotoShop for Web design. There are new options for what-ifs with photos-you can preview



Presenter Matt Sullivan

download time, type, and quality.

Retouching

Sullivan offers these retouching tips:

- Use the Layers Palette to create working layers for nondestructive editing.
- Turn layers on and off to compare before and after.
- Use the Lasso tool to select and limit correction area.
- Use the Magic Wand for flat color areas (like sky); using the Color Range settings works better for most situations.
- Look at the Options Bar immediately after selecting a tool; change the settings as desired before using the tool.

Digital Photography

Sullivan explained some of the features of PhotoShop 7.0 that can be used with digital photography:

- The Optimize Palette allows you to drag files or even directories to a desktop icon, then reformats all photos to match settings you've selected -without necessitating that you reformat each photo individually.
- Contact Sheet 2 automatically puts all files from a directory into one file of contact sheets that can be configured several ways.
- Picture Package (the Olan Mills feature) allows you to print photo files of different sizes onto a single page-just like those school photo packages your kids bring home every year.
- Web Photo Gallery includes a choice of predesigned templates-click and drag a folder and *voilà* — your Web photo gallery is complete.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The following announcements were made at this meeting.

Chapter Library

We have our own chapter library that contains books on subjects of interest to technical communicators. Books are available for checkout at chapter meetings. This service is free for members, so drop by and check out a book at the next meeting. Suzy Hosie will bring the books to the STC meetings; however, she would like some volunteers to assist during the meeting. If you're interested, please email Suzy at suzy@wote.com.

Job Seekers and Job Openings

During the meeting, job seekers described the job they are looking for, and job openings were announced.

If you are unemployed, consider posting an add in the

Signature [Employment Desired](#) column.

UPCOMING EVENTS

These events are coming soon.

- STC is sponsoring a Knowledge Management Workshop on June 1 from 9:30 a.m. to noon. Cost is \$20. Follow the links at www.stc-sd.org to register. The workshop will be held at Invitrogen, 1600 Faraday Avenue, in Carlsbad.
- The next SD STC meeting is Wednesday, June 12. We'll have a panel presentation reporting on this year's STC annual conference.

DRAWING WINNERS

Mike McGraw won a gift card for Barnes and Noble.



From left, Ken Gaither and Mike McGraw

Ken Gaither won a WallyBux, which can be exchanged for one STC meeting and dinner.

ATTENDANCE

We had 30 members and four nonmembers, for a total of 38 attendees. There were four no shows for dinner and three for the program only. Thank you, Elaine Tsang, for another great program.

Please remember, STC pays for no shows. If you would like to hear the presentation and want to skip the dinner, the cost is \$10 to members and \$15 for nonmembers.

If you have reserved for the meeting but find that your plans have changed and you cannot attend, please give Christopher Bates (christopherbates@earthlink.net) your cancellation.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Humor

[Return Home](#)

"I sat evaluating myself. I decided to lie down."

Peter McWilliams

Performance Review, or What Have You Done for Me Lately?

by Karen Field

It's performance review time again—you know, the time when you rate your performance over the last year, your boss rates your performance over the last year, you and your boss discuss your performance over the last year, and then three months later, you get a raise (which, of course, has nothing to do with your performance over the last year).

I hate performance reviews. It's not that I get bad reviews, though. Aside from the odd negative comment about my candor — which, by the way, isn't going to change — I've yet to receive a bad one. (And not everyone thinks candor is bad. Honest people like it.) I just don't like seeing opinions about my work in writing.

That said, I go through the motions. I fill out the forms, thinking about where I can improve, where I meet general expectations, and where I excel.

Writing about where I excel — my accomplishments — is the hardest part for me. I'm not good at self-promotion. (I'm a tech writer, after all, not Don King.) And part of me thinks, perhaps naively, that it should be obvious that I'm a hard worker. I meet all my deadlines, don't I? The development teams I work with like my work, don't they? I've survived four rounds of layoffs, haven't I? Doesn't that speak for itself?

Apparently not. I am still expected to list my accomplishments. So the other day, I began to ponder my worthiness, and I realized this: given that I am candid, my performance is reflected not in what I do but in the restraint I've shown over the last year. In other words, I excel in negative space; it's what I *don't* do that should make headlines.

For example:

- When a developer told me that her functional spec was probably "too complicated" for me to understand and that I would find it "a painful experience" to read, I did not reach over and slap her, even though I probably could have.
- When the marketing folks changed the name of the product suite I work on from its original name to another and then back again in the span of four months, I did not threaten to refer to the product line as *Whatever* in my documentation, even though I probably could have.

- When the people who manage our building (known as Facilities) began leaving citations on our cubes for things like messiness or displaying irreverent Dilbert cartoons on the outer wall, I did not rally my coworkers to TP the Facilities offices, even though I could have.

Yup, I've been pretty busy this year. Not only have I met deadlines, written special reports, and rescued a dying project when the tech writer on the project had to leave it, I've also kept my mouth shut a lot.

And people say I never do anything around here.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Introductions


[Return Home](#)

Living La Vida Divina

by [Lana Walker-Helmuth](#)

Kathy Wittert loves, truly loves, to untangle sentences. The harder it is to decipher the mangled prose, the better. As a technical editor at Bechtel working on environmental reports, she gets plenty of opportunities to practice her craft.

Introducing a great opportunity!

Do you like meeting and learning about people? Do you like writing? (Of course you do!) Do you want an interesting service opportunity for your chapter? Yes, you can have it all.

You're invited to write the monthly "Introductions" column, starting with the September 2002 issue. If interested, please e-mail Lana Walker-Helmuth at Lana@pe.net.

Before joining Bechtel a year ago, Kathy spent 11 years as a contract editor in the environmental health and safety field. She got her start in editing while working in the Methods and Procedures Department at HomeFed Bank.

Love of Literature

While growing up in the Chicago suburbs, Kathy discovered an old series of Childcraft books her mother inherited, and she fell in love with reading. Because no one else in her family was a voracious reader, books were practically forbidden fruit.

She took her love of literature to Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa, and earned a bachelor's degree in English. She continued her studies at the University of Iowa and earned a master's. Realizing she had a practical nature about writing, she decided not to continue in a Ph.D. program.

After leaving college, Kathy taught English at a tough high school in Illinois for a year. The experience was disillusioning. Mercifully, her husband, who was in the restaurant business, was transferred to California. Only low-paying substitute teaching jobs were available, so Kathy decided to try the business world. In administrative jobs she gravitated toward writing how things were done. Her first employer noticed her efforts and gave her a \$100 bonus. She was totally jazzed and on her way to a better job at HomeFed Bank, where she led classroom training and developed self-study guides.

After a two-year absence, Kathy returned to the bank and worked as an editor in the Methods and Procedures Department. When the bank started to fold, Kathy decided to go off on her own. She got into environmental editing by answering a newspaper ad. Although new to the field, she quickly learned the lingo and processes.

Love of Life

Eleven years flew by. She enjoyed consulting work but missed being with an editing team where decisions can be made with others. She jumped at the chance to join Bechtel, only six blocks from her downtown condo and boasting the nicest people around. She walks to work. Once a week she gets in her car to burn out the carbon and to haul groceries.

"The world is about trying different things," Kathy says about

their move from the North County suburbs to downtown San Diego. She's excited to be in the heart of a growing town that she envisions becoming a world-class city. She and her husband enjoy the wonderful cultural offerings such as the San Diego Repertory Theatre and the San Diego Symphony. They also enjoy international travel and have a trip to Switzerland planned for this summer.

She gets to return to a job that she loves, to the nicest boss she's ever worked for, and to one of the finest cities in the world. Simply divine.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Tech Issues

[Return Home](#)

Matt Sullivan is the training director for GRAFIX Training, Inc.,

an Adobe-certified training provider with offices in San Diego and Tustin.

Among his Adobe certifications are Acrobat, FrameMaker, FrameMaker+SGML, and Photoshop.

Direct questions on technical issues to matt@grafixtraining.com

Find previous "Tech Issues" columns at www.grafixtraining.com/stc/stc.html.

PDF Tips and Tricks

by Matt Sullivan

Ask 10 different people to describe Adobe® Acrobat®, and you'll likely get 10 different answers. At its core, Acrobat is a delivery mechanism. It allows any application to create a file viewable on virtually any platform using the free Acrobat Reader® viewer. The file stores all the resources necessary for viewing and printing the file.

So, given the simplicity of Acrobat (or Portable Document Format [PDF]) file creation, why do you need to keep reading? Because Acrobat files should be tailored for your intended audience.

For an example of this document as a tailored PDF, see <http://www.grafixtraining.com/stc/stc.html>.

Many factors add to the usability of a PDF file. Among them are:

- *Delivery Method*. Will this be emailed, posted on the Web, or delivered on CD? See "Compression" below.
- *Final Purpose*. Will this be viewed on-screen, laser printed, or sent to a commercial printer? See "Compression" below.
- *Relevance*. Is this document related to other PDFs? See "Indexing" below.
- *Linking*. Are there other PDF or Web files that have to be accessed from this file? See "Links and Bookmarks" below.

Creating a PDF

To create a PDF, you need the Acrobat Distiller application (a part of the ~\$225 Acrobat suite) installed. Then you use either the File|Save As|PDF or File|Print|Acrobat Distiller commands.

MS Office® products and Adobe FrameMaker® have some of the best Save As PDF options, giving you more options for retaining electronic links in your final PDF document.

These products also allow you to automatically create navigational structures in your PDF file on the basis of text flow as well as Paragraph Styles.

Defaults

Both creation methods allow a choice of default settings to help optimize file size and quality on the basis of your intended purpose. (These defaults range from Screen for online material to Press for commercial printing projects.)

To access these options for MS products, see the Acrobat|Change Conversion Settings menu item.

To access these options in Adobe products, see the PDF Setup options, typically under the File or Edit menus.

If you are using products that do not allow Save As PDF, you will print to the Acrobat Distiller printer driver. This driver allows you access to the compression settings discussed earlier by choosing the Properties button in the Print dialog box. Upon printing, a temporary PostScript file is sent to Acrobat Distiller and processed automatically using your selected settings.

Big tip: If you don't choose a setting, the default (usually Screen) will be used, resulting in a very compressed file.

Custom Job Options

If you need files with specific conversion settings, Acrobat allows you to create custom setting files if the four defaults are not enough.

Compression

Compression is the most common reason for custom settings. Under the Compression tab, you can specify both the maximum image resolution and the method for compressing images.

These settings affect your final PDF file size and quality more than any other factor.

Image resolution is fairly straightforward: 72 dpi is a typical maximum resolution for on-screen viewing; 300 is typical for any type of printing.

The actual compression checkbox allows a choice between *lossless* compression (which retains all file quality, typically ZIP or LZW formats) and *lossy* compression (which averages the color values of adjacent pixels, typically JPEG format).

The *Automatic* option will generally use the JPEG compression for color and grayscale images.

Fonts

Sometimes the typefaces on your machine don't agree with the Distiller and will show up as missing or garbled type in the final PDF document. Typically, these will be the ornate display faces that came on a disk with 3,000 other faces for \$14.99. If you can't bear to part with that face, you can manually force Distiller to download it into your PDF file. Fortunately, this will not make your file appreciably larger.

Big tip: Stick with the four default settings unless you run into a big problem with printing or fonts.

Indexing

Acrobat has a full-text indexing function that allows your audience to quickly search for a word or file attribute across a collection of documents.

For a workgroup environment, this index could be on a common server and accessed by every machine in the workgroup.

If your PDFs are distributed or archived on CD, then the index can be supplied on the CD, and you can associate all files within the collection with the supplied index.

Big tip: Summary information is given a higher priority in the index than document text. Fill out the information under File|Document Properties|Summary.

Links and Bookmarks

Links are hotspots similar to those on Web pages. They can jump to a specific location, open a new file, or perform actions such as playing a sound. Bookmarks are links but stored in the Navigation Pane of the Acrobat application.

Used properly, these tools provide effective navigation through a PDF file. Though they can be created manually, the best way to create Links and Bookmarks is through the Save As PDF option if it's available. Most electronic links from the original application can be transferred to the PDF, meaning if you update the original file later, the electronic links will still exist in the new file.

Big tip: Create your links within the original application. Another big tip: Plan your use of styles to better convert to bookmarks.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Special Assignment](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

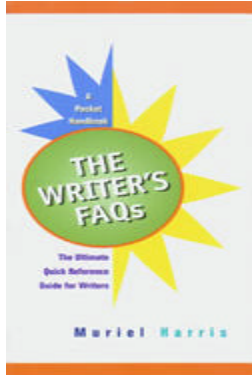
Book/Software Review


[Return Home](#)

"The Writer's FAQs: The Ultimate Quick Reference Guide for Writers"

Review by Erica Ueland

If you leaf through *The Writer's FAQs*, your first impression might be that this is a little book suitable for beginners only. Muriel Harris, author of this portable gem, provides novice writers and other interested parties with compact sections on grammar, punctuation, and word usage.



The tidy little FAQs book, which measures eight inches by four inches and is just one-half inch thick, slips conveniently into your briefcase or handbag. This reference book is handy to have around when you, expert that you are, have one of those frequently asked questions about abbreviations, modifiers, or active and passive verbs. In fact, a whole host of questions are answered in this pocket handbook.

Muriel Harris

Prentice Hall, 2000,
232 pages

Elementary, you say. Who needs this? The person who needs this is anybody who would like a reference guide with the basics complemented by a few more bonuses. In addition to the standard fare on grammar and punctuation, you will find sections on multilingual applications, research, and online sources. You will also read about styles and formats such as MLA (Modern Language Association) and APA (American Psychological Association) style.

HINT boxes throughout the book answer any budding author's or seasoned writer's FAQs with advice on how to escape the horror of committing common errors. For example, incorrect uses of reflexive pronouns, capitalization, and nonessential clauses are displayed in the HINT boxes.

Two glossaries, the "Glossary of Usage" and the "Glossary of Grammatical Terms," provide increased insights into the language we know and love. If you are one of those rare birds who struggles with correct usage of *bad* and *badly*, the "Glossary of Usage" will show you the way.

I will appreciate having this book at my side whenever I need to choose between *lie* or *lay*. The *lie-lay-lain-laid* verbs have always seemed like a barbed hoop for me to jump through. Did you cringe when I mentioned "a barbed hoop for me to jump through"? The "Glossary of Grammatical Terms" states "Prepositions usually precede their objects but may follow the objects and appear at the end of the sentence." Whew!

You will find answers to many questions, including:

- What are some style manuals with formats for writing in other fields (such as chemistry, journalism, or political science)?

- How and when do I use the two Council of Biology Editors (CBE) styles for notes and the reference list?
- What is *Chicago Manual of Style* format, and how and when do I use that?
- How do I cite Web sites in bibliographies?
- Am I overusing commas?

The Writer's FAQs can probably answer some of your questions. This concise reference guide is helpful to have near your computer while you are writing either a brief report or your big masterpiece.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Special Assignment](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Advice

[Return Home](#)

Finding a Printer

by Suzanne Hardy

In this era of online delivery methods, we seem to rarely hear about printed manuals and the problems that we face delivering this type of product. In addition to the time and effort involved in writing, editing, and formatting a printed manual, having a manual printed has its own set of challenges. If you already have a printer you trust, consider yourself lucky. If you're in the process of switching printers or need to find one for the first time, here are some tips for the journey.

Technical writers are often required to handle the production of printed materials after they've written them. This may include choosing a third-party vendor who not only has the right price but who also will deliver the high-quality product you need in the right time frame and using a process that works for you. Where do you start?

When you're looking for a local printer, ask for references. Not only can you get these from the prospective vendors themselves but also from the company that packages your product or burns your CDs and other writers and graphic artists you know.

Once you have a list of prospective printers, develop a list of questions. If you are responsible for getting price estimates from printers, have some specifications on hand so that you can accurately compare prices. Specs you can gather include the number of manuals to be printed, estimated page counts, types of binding, sizes of manuals, and whether the insides are black and white or color (if color, how many). To find out how many manuals you may need for a three-month period, for example, look at the trend from the previous three months.

When you have these specs in hand, prepare a specific scenario to give the printers you have selected. (For example: how much would it be to print a manual that has 100 pages; is perfect bound and black and white; and needs a print run of 300, 500, and 1,000 copies?)

During the bidding process, you can start interviewing each printer on the phone or in person. What is their process for providing proofs for you to review? Do they require a certain file format? What is their turnaround time? Can they handle your workload? What kind of quality control do they provide? Do they outsource any work (which may drive the cost up)? Where are they located, and will they make pickups?

When you find a printer that seems like a good fit, try to be patient with the first job. It takes time to work out the kinks

and get to know each other. As with any relationship, communication and trust are crucial. If you find that it's just not working, move on and start the process again. The best printers will work with you as a team and help you succeed so that you don't have to worry during crunch time.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Special Assignment](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

New Members



Welcome to the San Diego Chapter!

by Bonnie Blackfield, VP-Membership

[Return Home](#)

Please welcome these new members:

Interested in joining
the STC? [Click here](#) for
Society information.

Dudley Dabbs

Susan Johnson

Amy Parker

Mark Riley

Sarah Ward

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Employment Desired



[Return Home](#)

Members Looking for Work

How to submit an ad

Notices are submitted each month and are limited to STC members. Submissions must be approximately 100 words or less.

Please send your mini-ad/bio to the editor at stcsignature@yahoo.com

Ads should reach the editor no later than the 20th of the month. Earlier submission is encouraged. Ads received after the 20th will be inserted if possible. If not, they will be inserted in the following month's newsletter.

Nadine C. Barter Bowlus
chezbowlus@earthlink.net

Experienced developer of tutorials for computer training modules for common office productivity programs. I have practical knowledge of course development, document design, production, and editing. I am interested in contract positions where I can apply my skills and continue learning.

SKILLS: Instructions and procedures, document templates, document design and editing, graphic design and layout, basic web design and HTML, developer documentation (databases, Java, C++).

TOOLS: Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, FrameMaker 6.0, Systat 10, Windows 2000, MacOS 7 through 9.

Ken Wilson
Looking for full-time or contract work as technical writer, training course developer, or Web site developer.

These general categories describe the diverse experience I can provide a company from 7 people to Fortune 100. During thirteen years of contract work I was involved in all aspects of documentation development. My last three years with a dot.com gave me the opportunity to become involved in all aspects of a company's operation; tech pubs, marketing, usability design and analysis, Web site development, project management, quality assurance, engineering, and inventory scheduling.

Contact Ken Wilson at 760-431-2429 or view complete experience details at www.lgtechnology.com/ta.

Faye Rivkin
frivkin@aol.com

Desired: contract or full-time marketing or technical writer position.

Creative writer, editor and proofreader with experience in different industries, including telecom, pharmaceutical, chemical and medical diagnostics. Coupled with a degree in Chemistry, this detail orientated, project management

background allows me to get up to speed quickly in new environments.

My diverse writing portfolio includes user manuals, case studies, Requests for Information, journal articles, training materials and white papers. The project of which I am proudest is the complete rework of a website, including design, user interface and content.

SOFTWARE EXPERIENCE: MS Office, Visio, Adobe Acrobat. Currently learning PageMaker.

Erica Ueland
eeewe@earthlink.net

Writer with background in computer-based training, instructional design, editing, QA, and team management is available for contract or permanent assignment. Eight years experience researching and writing interactive courseware, lesson specifications, objectives, job aids, tests, scripts, storyboards, management plans, manuals, reviews, test plans, QA plans, checklists, government reports, brochures, news releases, proposals, booklets, recommendation reports, and aviation materials.

Recent work is on IMI (Interactive Multimedia Instruction) DoD contract. Active security clearance.

TOOLS: Proficient/familiar with Microsoft Office Suite, WordPerfect, PhotoShop, Access, Dreamweaver, Visio, Quark, SnagIt, HTML.

Judy Edelblute
judyedel@san.rr.com
(858) 278-0255

Looking for permanent or contract work as a technical writer. My recent experience is in biotech. I have experience preparing software user manuals for technically trained users, biotech Standard Operating Procedures, Quality Control and Material Specifications, Certificates of Analysis, and Performance Qualification validation reports. The project I enjoyed most was writing summaries of Quality Control testing procedures and how they were validated for a Biological License Application submitted to the FDA.

TOOLS: Proficient in Word 97, WordPerfect 9.0, Excel 97, Visio, digital cameras, and PowerPoint. Classes in FrameMaker 5.5, Access 97, CorelDraw, Acrobat, Illustrator, and Photoshop.

Sean Griffin
sgriffiner@juno.com
(760) 500-1367

I am an experienced writer/educator/manager seeking a position in the technical communications field. I have eight years experience teaching writing skills, business skills, and computer skills; seven years experience in retail management; a Bachelor of Science degree in Business and Management; and a California Teaching Credential.

SKILLS: Research, writing, editing; document design; development/adaptation of training courses and materials; implementation of training in classroom and seminar settings

TOOLS: Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Publisher, FrontPage, PageMaker; Windows and Macintosh operating systems

Lana Walker-Helmuth
lane@pe.net
(909) 302-1794

Chief cook and bottle washer in the communication field available. Extremely versatile, I have broad experience in writing, editing, and publishing across several industries. Recently I've specialized in software user support, including writing user guides, developing Help systems, and designing and producing training materials.

I'm enthusiastic and proactive, show initiative, and always go above and beyond what's expected. For example, while at San Diego City Schools, I initiated, designed, and developed a Web-based performance support system for users of a new student information system.

TOOLS: RoboHelp Office, Microsoft Office, Dreamweaver, FrontPage, NetStudio, Image Composer, QuarkXpress, and many more.

Howard Bush
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Senior Mechanical Processes Technical Writer/Photo Illustrator, with thirty-five years work experience in industry, government, education, and business. I conceptualize, design, research and interview to produce original, step-by-step photo-illustrated text in office or field context. I write in plain, practical terms: instruction sheets, operation guidelines, SOPs, assembly and construction manuals.

TOOLS: Adobe PageMaker and Photoshop, Word, Excel, Outlook, Visio, Lotus Notes with Database; learn new programs easily. I have a high level of curiosity and keen interest in complex, mechanical and electrical processes. References. Portfolio of writings and illustration formats.

PERSONAL INTERESTS: SCUBA/snorkel, reading about science, cooking, painting portraits on commission.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

San Diego Administrative Council



[Return Home](#)

[New Council members
for 2002-2003](#)

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[Return Home](#)

June 2002

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[Return Home](#)

[More about the
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[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Special Assignment](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Newsletter Information



About the San Diego *Signature*

[Return Home](#)

Reach hundreds of technical communicators for little cost!

[Advertising Rates \(PDF\)](#)

Signature is the newsletter of the San Diego Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, a nonprofit professional organization dedicated to educating and advancing the careers of technical communicators. Newsletters are published monthly during the chapter year (September through June).

STC has more than 25,000 members and 150 chapters nationwide. For more information about the San Diego Chapter visit our Web site at www.stc-sd.org or call our hotline at (619) 525-7716. Write to us at:

SD-STC
P.O. Box 910577
San Diego, CA 92191-0577

or

Society for Technical Communication
1120 Sycamore Avenue, Suite 2B
Vista, CA 92083

Article submission

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles to be considered for publication. Note: By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.

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Submissions and letters to the editor are welcomed and should be e-mailed to stcsignature@yahoo.com or sent to the STC address shown above, Attn: Signature Editor. Submissions may be edited to meet space requirements. Submission deadlines are the 1st of the month prior to the publication month. Publication is dependent on space availability.

[Return Home](#)

[Feature](#) | [Editor's Desk](#) | [President's Podium](#) | [Visiting Author](#)
[Professional Development](#) | [Chapter Meetings](#) | [Humor](#)
[Introductions](#) | [Tech Issues](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Advice](#)
[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)

June 2002

Mission Statement



STC Mission Statement

[Return Home](#)

Our mission statement is: Designing the future of technical communication

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22203-1822

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703.522.2075 (fax)

Email: stc@stc.org
Web site: www.stc.org

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is an individual membership organization dedicated to advancing the arts and sciences of technical communication. STC is the largest organization of its type in the world. Its 25,000 members include technical writers, editors, graphic designers, videographers, multimedia artists, Web and Intranet page information designers, translators, and others whose work involves making technical information available to those who need it.

Society membership provides opportunities for ongoing learning and professional networking. Through the efforts of a small, full-time staff and a large network of volunteers, STC promotes the public welfare by educating its members and industry about issues concerning technical communication.

o Member: \$110 per year (plus a one-time \$15 enrollment fee)

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[New Members](#) | [Employment Desired](#)