

October 2002

Volume 36 No 2



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October Poll

If you're unemployed, please indicate length of time.

- Less than a month
- 1 to 3 months
- 3 to 6 months
- 6 to 9 months
- 9 to 12 months
- Over 1 year
- 12 to 18 months
- Over 18 months

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October 2002

Feature Article

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Jumping From Journalism

By [Michael Abrams](#)

Both technical writing and journalism appeal to people who love to write and are capable of doing it professionally. But technical writing is a growing field aligned with the future. Print journalism has been in retreat ever since television took over, with the Internet just accelerating the trend. This imbalance is creating a growing pull on journalists.

Money plays a role, but opportunity is the main force. Freelance journalists (as well as cub reporters) are truly among the earth's wretched. The rule of thumb is \$1 a word for freelance copy. National magazines sometimes pay three or more times that, but the work is hard to come by. The *New York Times* pays \$15 an hour to stringers, which is a typical rate. A career journalist I know, who strings for national trade publications and news outlets, tells me the most he ever earned freelancing was \$38,000 annually, and that included no benefits. Some make more, but they are the exceptions, as many do worse.

Journalists who make it onto the staffs of trade publications and magazines and some newspaper reporters do better. Journeymen reporters at *The San Diego Union-Tribune* make between \$50,000 and \$60,000—not that much when you consider the pressure but still a living wage. But the odds of landing such positions are increasingly unfavorable now that the UT has shifted to a two-tier pay structure. Hard-working cub reporters, dubbed "community news writers," now make about \$25,000 a year, far less than entry reporters would have earned even five years ago.

Vanishing Act

Mirroring national trends, the local print scene has seen substantial shrinkage at the major news organs at the same time that the number of employers of technical writers has mushroomed. Over the last decade *The Los Angeles Times* pulled the plug on its San Diego edition; the Copley Press merged *The Union* and *The Tribune*; Oceanside's *Blade-Citizen* and Escondido's *Times Advocate* were combined as *The North County Times*; and *The San Diego Reader* purged most salaried long-time writers. JournalismJobs.Com posted 57 journalism jobs in all of California in July. Of these, only two were in San Diego, one seeking a video editor at Channel 4 and the other an advertising position for a scuba diving magazine.

Publications Specialist Marsha Fickas used to string for the *Times Advocate* and AP in Temecula. At the end of July, she checked the number of job leads the San Diego Press Association had posted. She reported there were only two,

and they were both for high-level managers. In comparison, the dwindling stream of tech writing jobs seems, from a journalist's perspective, like a flood of opportunity.

It's hard to say with precision the number of journalists who have already beaten the path. STC's Ed Rutkowski, an editorial assistant at STC headquarters, e-mails me to say that the organization's database isn't equipped to respond to a query about previous careers of members. But evidence handed over by *Signature* Associate Editor Sharon Bradshaw attests to a healthy migration.

In a recent thread on STC's Lone Writer SIG Listserv (www.stcsig.org/lw/listserv.htm), members shared biographical information. Of the 62 respondents, 12 confessed to having committed journalism in the past, mostly in college or small trade publications. That compares to 15 people with other sorts of writing credentials and 15 who were "techie" up front. Others entered the field from a variety of other backgrounds, including art historian, song writer, and waitress. (The numbers don't add up because of overlap and, also, because some people didn't give enough information to be counted.)

What's the Difference?

Though kindred disciplines, journalism and tech writing have differences, and it's revealing to try to tease them out.

- **Generalists vs. Specialists.** A piece of print journalism or a broadcast segment aims at either informing or entertaining an audience at leisure. In contrast, the mission of a technical writer is to document and often tell readers how to do something, usually about a technological or business process or object. That often means delving into the very details journalists are free to ignore.

Of course, there are exceptions. White papers and other technical materials, including too-cryptic help documentation, sometimes leave out the details. Meanwhile, some of the longer features in niche-directed newsletters can be very detailed without providing full documentation. Still, I believe I'm on firm ground asserting that journalists are master generalists, while tech writers master the details. Many things flow from this.

- **Only the Facts:** Given its broader mission, good journalists spend lots of time setting the context. But a technical writer often addresses people under stress. When the software won't load or a printer won't plot or a piece of equipment has to be serviced in the field, readers don't have to be told why they've grabbed the manual.

- **Nattering Nabobs:** Journalists, hoping to generate reader interest, are prone to sensationalism and negativity. A tech writer, in contrast, often handles material that some journalists might think boring, and rarely is a tech writer a naysayer.
- **Form Following Function:** Suzanne Hosie, owner of Write on the Edge, Inc., has observed stylistic differences. A journalist may engage in sentence contortion to avoid repeating a word in a paragraph, lest the flow of the article be interrupted. But tech writers often repeat words in their texts when it makes things easier to understand.

I've also noticed that some tech writers don't mind using personal relative pronouns (that is, who, whom, and whose) for the inanimate (that is, for a piece of software or hardware or a process). The practice horrifies journalists. While it also horrifies some technical writers and editors, others shrug it off, countering that anything that eases understanding is beneficial, including even occasionally violating a grammar rule. Journalists have their religious wars too but this isn't one of them.

Knowledge Manager Patrick Morrissey, who escaped from television journalism more than 15 years ago, says the key difference between the two disciplines is varying "windows" of time and access. Journalists are regularly terrorized by three forces: too little time to report a story, too little time or space to tell it, and limited access to sources. Tech writers also face similar pressures, but they don't regularly have to turn out copy in the space of a few hours, nor do they find their work threaded between the advertisements.

Because newspaper and magazine column inches are expensive, only the most important articles are supplemented by photos or graphics, leaving room for the ads. But tech documents often have numerous graphics to illustrate instructions or steps in a process. Often the flow of a document will come from the graphics.

- **Culture:** There are cultural differences as well. Journalists operate as outsiders. Even if they are contractors, tech writers are in the company employ, normally gaining access a journalist would envy, even if it's never enough. In tech writing a premium is placed on collaborative skills and teamwork, while many journalists like to think of themselves as lone wolves.

Tech writers esteem technological know-how. They regularly boast of being masters of the latest tools. Many tech writers fall into the profession after developing expertise in a technological area. Morrissey, for example, was a network administrator when he

started documenting processes and programs for his employers. Of the lone writers mentioned earlier, 25 moved into technical writing when nobody else was available to do the job or when a position opened.

It can't hurt for a journalist who wants to be a tech writer to learn something technical. Being able to extract information engineering source materials, for example, is the type of skill that could come in handy, but coming up with a full list of such skills is fodder for another article.

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Editor's Desk

October 2002

New Chapter Year Already in High Gear

By [Lana Walker-Helmuth](#), Managing Editor [About [Lana](#)]

Fall seems to be a time for kicking in gear. After lazy days of summer, fall classes start, football season ramps up, the cooler air invigorates. And, as we move into the second month of the chapter year, we have a lot of activity going on. Much of it is behind the scenes. This newsletter, for instance, has gained several new contributors, and I'd like to acknowledge them.

Mike Abrams has taken on the "Introductions" column and is doing a fabulous job. He also wrote the feature for this month, [Jumping From Journalism](#). Don't miss his insightful look at the differences between journalism and technical writing.

Noreen Norris searches out the nuggets of wisdom for the animated treasure chest (the brainchild of Associate Editor Sharon Bradshaw). And stay tuned for improvements—we now have a seasoned Flash user, **Mark Riley**, who will spiff up the animation.

Valerie Lipow answered the call for a reporter to seek member achievements for the new [Kudos Corner](#) column. This is a tough assignment, and we welcome more reporters who have a nose for news.

We even heard from a Central Connecticut Chapter member, **Christine Abbott**, who is moving to San Diego and eager to volunteer. She's scheduled to write an article next year.

Other Chapter Volunteers

Patrick Morrissey, from our chapter, has volunteered to manage the Region 8 STC Conference! It's a huge job, and he deserves a special round of applause. Be sure to read his [conference update](#).

I'd also like to acknowledge the chapter's new Volunteer Coordinator, **Tiffany Gerstmar**. Many of you will recognize her name as a former JobMail coordinator. ([Click here](#) to see volunteer opportunities listed on the chapter Web site.)

Special thanks goes to **Audrey Johns**, our VP-Professional Membership, for arranging great price discounts for software training classes at Blue Star Software. [Click here](#) to see the schedule of classes and signup information.

Last but not least, let's thank our chapter council for their ongoing efforts to make the San Diego Chapter the best ever. Council members attended the STC Southern California



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Leadership Summit in Long Beach on September 21. We'll have a report in the November issue.

A Farewell

On a sad note, our newsletter illustrator, **Ann Throckmorton**, is returning home to Ohio. She's done a wonderful job of adding sparkle to *Signature* and will be missed. We'll continue to use her encouraging illustration in [Employment Desired](#).

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President's Podium

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How Do You Define a Professional?

By [Walter Hanig](#), President

Fellow members,

By the time you read this, I'll have completed midyear performance reviews. (No, we're not on some strange Scandinavian calendar. Getting product introduced successfully has taken precedence over personnel-management matters.) One term I sometimes use in reviews is *professional*. I'd like to spend this space explaining my idea of a professional.

My dad once explained that a professional was simply a label applied to someone who got paid for doing or producing something. Well, that's certainly true, but I think of a professional as someone who brings certain attitudes and abilities to a situation, job or otherwise.

What are these attitudes and abilities? In no particular order, here are some traits that characterize professionals in my book.

- **Pride in their work and their profession, independent of the organization's respect for technical communications.** Your product is unlikely to have your name on it, but you know whether you've done the best you can under the circumstances.
- **Awareness and acceptance of the constraints that may limit the quality of work.** A professional understands other departments' policies and respects those charged with following them, even when she or he disagrees. You understand the goals of your immediate and broader organizations and align with them. A great manual two months after product release does not help generate revenue.
- **Desire to develop professionalism in others.** The most valuable members in an organization seek not to just improve their knowledge of products and tools and procedures; they also look for ways to share their knowledge and experience with others.
- **Respect for the other members of the immediate and broader teams.** Professionals assume that that everyone involved with the product development is essential, from the system architect to the hardware lab tech to the IT whiz who brings your system back to life.
- **Independence.** A professional makes every decision as if she/he owned the company. You're willing to act now

and deal with the consequences later. In dynamic organizations (sometimes perceived as chaotic), doing nothing in the face of challenges is at least as harmful as doing the wrong thing.

- **Initiative.** Professionals deliver new ideas for more effective technical communications products or solutions to ineffective processes or contentious personnel situations without waiting to be asked.

I'm sure that each one of you can think of a current or past colleague who earned your respect as a true professional. Ask yourself what her or his valuable traits were. I invite your observations on the characteristics that define a professional technical communicator.

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October 2002

Visiting Author



Breaking Into Technical Communication

By [Kathy Graden](#), Senior STC Member, Phoenix Chapter

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Special thanks to Kathy Graden from the Phoenix Chapter for sharing this great article, originally published in the February 2001 *Rough Draft*. It nicely complements our feature, [Jumping From Journalism](#).

When STC members attend parties or family gatherings and especially when we greet guests at our monthly chapter meetings, we're often asked, "How did you get started in technical communication?" Others ask, "How can I break into the field as a technical writer (or illustrator, Web developer, etc.)? I'd like to, but I don't have a technical background."

Well, guess what? Though some technical communicators start out as programmers or engineers, many people in our profession aren't former software or hardware geeks. A large number of people have left behind short- or long-term careers in a broad range of fields, such as teaching, music, medicine, and anthropology, to become developers of art, online documents, and publications that help people understand how technology works.

What motivates people to want to break into technical communication? The reasons are as different as the men and women who make the move.

One woman I know took up technical writing because, despite a wonderful voice, she wasn't making enough money as a rock singer to afford more than an occasional pizza. Other friends became technical communicators to escape the only career that guidance counselors used to recommend for women who were good with words: English teacher.

The man who gave me my first technical writing job gave up his dream of becoming an engineer because his girlfriend became pregnant during their senior year of college. The first job he could find was doing technical writing. Thirty years later, he's still happily writing, still married to the same woman but with several more kids. He never went back to complete his engineering degree.

Some people have more complex or unusual reasons for becoming technical communicators. In my case, it took a combination of a failed business venture, a wise brother-in-law, and a funny-smelling chicken suit.

More about that chicken suit later. The important things to remember if you want to become a technical communicator are:

- Technical skill or knowledge isn't all you need to succeed. You also need traits such as curiosity, flexibility, skill at organization and analysis, desire and ability to learn, and, of course, the ability to express yourself clearly.

- Many of the skills and habits you've gained from other jobs and activities transfer well to technical communication work.

This article briefly tells the story of several women who used their skills and experience from other jobs as springboards into successful technical communication careers.

The article also suggests some ways in which would-be technical communicators can prepare for their first jobs in the field.

From Sideline to Full-Time Profession

Irene Garcia's story demonstrates how skills gained in projects outside of work can lead to technical communication success. Twelve years ago, Irene was a secretary whose job taught her how to organize information and projects but offered little to stimulate her creative energies.

"As a sideline," Irene recalls, "I created a series of nonprofit publications called *Marschild*. I enlisted the help of writers, photographers, and artists to produce small books, posters, and postcards for a mailing list of more than 50 people.

"A position opened up in my employer's graphic design group. My manager and coworkers encouraged me to go for it. I put together a portfolio of my *Marschild* projects. This portfolio won me the position of entry-level graphic artist.

"While I worked in the Graphic Design Department, we began doing work for outside clients. These clients required copywriting for print ads, brochures, and sales letters. I was the only person in the group who could spell and communicate well in writing. So I wrote the copy. I enjoyed it and was good at it.

"Later, a job became available in the Documentation group. I prepared a variety of copywriting samples. Based on them and my interview, I was offered the job and a \$6,000 raise. Not bad for a woman with no formal post-high-school education!

"Since then I have gone on to write documentation for two high-tech equipment providers in Arizona. One day, I was talking with two colleagues. Someone spoke a word and none of us was quite sure what it meant. Simultaneously, we all reached for our dictionaries. I knew then that I had arrived. I had found my place."

Teaching Yourself to Communicate

People with teaching experience often find the switch to technical communication easy. This is true not only for English teachers but also for those who have taught other subjects.

All of the tricks and techniques teachers use to engage students' interest in subjects also work when you're communicating with customers and trying to provide materials that excite them about using your company's products.

Giovanna Patani is a technical writer in Phoenix whose teaching background prepared her well for the technical communication world. A New Zealander by birth, she began as an elementary school teacher in Europe, moved to Africa, and then branched out to teach English as a second language.

"It was great training for a technical writer," Giovanna says, "because the linguistics and grammar skills are excellent training both for understanding the logic of program code and for learning the techniques of being a better writer."

After her multilingual experiences, she found explaining concepts to product users in her native language—as well as translating the jargony language that engineers and programmers use—to be a much simpler task.

From Chicken Suit to Docu-Chick

Are you still unsure that someone with no technical training can have a successful technical communication career? I wasn't sure either 18 years ago. But I was frustrated enough with my work back then to try making the switch.

While still in college, I started working as a copywriter and editor for a small public relations company. A few years later, the company's owner retired and sold the business to a partnership of employees, including me.

I liked the writing and enjoyed interviewing clients and turning their words into press releases. But when the economy nosedived into recession and the company started to lose money, relationships among the partners curdled and the workplace atmosphere turned hostile. I began dreading coming to work.

Then one day, the local chapter of the American Cancer Society called us, frantic. They had planned to have a volunteer in a chicken suit walk around downtown handing out buttons that said, "Don't chicken out. Quit smoking today!" But the volunteer had called in sick and they had nobody short enough to wear the chicken costume. I'm 5'3", so you can guess the rest: I found myself standing on a street corner dressed in a felt beak and funny-smelling feathers.

As miserable as I already was in my job, the chicken suit convinced me that I was in the wrong career. I was relatively shy in those days and I thought (naively) that if I switched professions, I'd never embarrass myself in public again. (Little did I know!)

Shortly thereafter, my then husband and I went to Arizona to visit his brother, a technical writer for Motorola. When I told Bob how things were going at work, he immediately suggested that I switch to technical writing.

"I can't!" I protested. "You have a master's degree in electronics engineering. I know nothing about electronics or computers!"

"But you're bright, you learn quickly, and you know how to ask questions and analyze information," he shot back. "You can learn the technology. The important thing is, you're good at communicating clearly."

After returning home, I immediately enrolled in evening classes in computer programming at a local technical school. A year later, I had an associate's degree in computer science to go with my bachelor's degree in English—and my first technical writing job. The position was half secretarial chores and half writing, and it paid only \$16,000 a year. But it was a start.

And I found that my brother-in-law was right. I was totally ignorant about the scientific principles behind my employer's automotive and chemical testing products, but the reporting and interviewing skills I had honed in public relations helped me to learn (as did hands-on practice with the products). In no time, I was developing and designing manuals from scratch.

Finding Mentors and Jobs

Finding an established technical communicator to be your mentor is a good first step for someone looking to break into the field. The more experienced your mentor, the more he or she can tell you about the benefits, challenges, pitfalls, and fun that are part of a technical communicator's typical day. Mentors and their network of contacts can also guide you toward job opportunities.

Many technical communicators feel flattered and excited when they are asked to be professional mentors, so don't be afraid to ask! If you don't know anyone well enough to ask, attend your local STC chapter's meetings and get acquainted.

Many companies offer summer internship positions, part-time internships, or both. Consult your local STC job bank to find out about available openings. You also may want to contact local companies to see if their technical communication groups are looking for entry-level trainees. Cold calling takes a little bravery, but it might produce the break you need. And don't underestimate the power of your personal network of family and friends; Uncle Joe or cousin Jackie may know someone who can help you fit into your first technical communication job.

Getting Training and Experience

These days, you can find training in technical communication skills through Web-based e-learning programs and at an increasing number of local colleges and universities. Public seminars and workshops, including those sponsored by STC, also are available in most parts of the country. Although companies' training budgets have dwindled in today's tight economy, if you're persuasive enough, you may be able to get your employer to cover at least part of the cost of growing your skills.

If you think you lack the skills to be a technical communicator or you just want to try the field on a small scale, volunteer opportunities can help you gain experience. For example:

- If you're interested in Web information development, offer to develop a Web site for your church, synagogue, or club.
- Volunteer to write materials for your family or a charity. One technical writer I know got her start editing fundraising literature for a group offering resources to her son and others challenged by Down's Syndrome. Another friend found her life's calling at age 9 when she helped her mother write down old recipes and compile them into a family cookbook.

Accumulating a Portfolio

The best way to demonstrate that you have what it takes to be a good technical communicator is to assemble a portfolio of documents you've written, illustrations you've created, or other documents you've developed. If you're a student, your portfolio can include class assignments. Your portfolio can also include schedules or procedures you've developed. (They show off your ability to organize and manage projects.)

The challenge of breaking into a new career can be difficult, but the potential rewards are great. Good luck in your transition, and remember that no matter where you start, you control where you end up.

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Region 8 Director-Sponsor Report


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To volunteer to help with the conference, contact Kathryn Munn at kathrynmunn@attbi.com or Bonni Graham at bgraham@manuallabour.com.

Direct your questions and comments to Conference Manager Patrick Morrissey at patrick.morrissey@idc-mcs.com.

Be sure to see the information below on nominating Associate Fellows.

Region 8 Conference: January in Paris

By [Bonni Graham](#), Region 8 Director-Sponsor

Report from Patrick Morrissey, Region 8 Conference Manager

From Bonni Graham: Yes, folks, we will be having a Region 8 Conference this year. Well, not quite this year but more this year than not. Here's the latest from our new Conference Manager Patrick Morrissey.

We're planning to hold the 2002-2003 Region 8 Conference in mid-January in Las Vegas. The tentative theme, if we get the accommodations we seek, is "January in Paris" (a hint as to where I'd like to have the conference). Conference tracks, subject to approval, include:

- "Passport and Maps" (content and knowledge management)
- "Exploring the Countryside" (writing and editing)
- "Exploring the Infrastructure" (technology and applications)
- "Understanding the EURO" (localization and usability)
- "From Writing at Your Favorite Bistro to Teaching at the Sorbonne" (your career)

With a great deal of assistance from Bonni Graham and Kathryn Munn, our next conference has been jump-started, and we'll be putting the committee together in short order. Those initially involved with the conference planning will be contacted right away to see if they can still provide their expertise. Of course, there's always room for more victims, er, volunteers. I also fully intend to use the Southern Nevada Chapter's resources to ensure this will be a stellar conference, keeping in the tradition of Region 8.

If you have questions or comments, please feel free to direct them to Bonni at . . . just kidding! You can contact me by e-mail at patrick.morrissey@idc-mcs.com. I'll be presenting at Region 5 (Oklahoma City) and Region 7 (Vancouver, British Columbia) so, if you're attending either or both, please say "hello" in the appropriate regional accent.

Cheers!

Patrick, thanks so much for taking this on! Cheers to the Southern Nevada Chapter and the conference committee.

I hope to see all of you there in January.

If you're interested in volunteering to help with the

conference at any level, contact Kathryn Munn at kathrynmunn@attbi.com or myself at bgraham@manuallabour.com. We'll be happy to answer any questions you may have and get you set up to move forward on the safest management opportunity you'll ever have!

Nominating Associate Fellows

Don't forget to start thinking about your nominees for Associate Fellows for your chapter. Any voting member of STC can endorse the recommendation of a senior member for the rank of associate fellow. Please contact Bonni if you'd like to make a nomination, bgraham@manuallabour.com.

- The guidelines appear at http://www.stc.org/bylaw_requirements.html.
- The nominating process is described at http://www.stc.org/afellows_nominating.html
- Required information is listed at http://www.stc.org/required_information.html.

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Competition



Southern California Technical Publications Competition

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Why should you enter the competition? See [Stand Out From the Crowd](#) in the September *Signature*.

Hurry! Competition entries are due **October 4** so that distribution and judging can be complete before the holidays.

Winners at the Distinguished level will be sent to the society-level competition.

More Judges Needed

The competition needs more judges. To volunteer, please contact Jack Molisani by October 14. Send an e-mail to jackm@prospring.net or call 888-378-2333.

Learn More at the Competition Web Site

Complete information for this year's contest is located on the Web at www.ocstc.org/competition.asp. Visit the site for information about the schedule, various types of documentation that you can enter, the entry forms, cost of entries, and other details.

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New Members



Welcome to the San Diego Chapter!

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By [Simrita Dhir](#), VP-Membership

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

Please welcome new members:

Lindsey M. Dagget
Jan M. Emigh
Jim Guarino
Natochia L. Henry
Lyn Sable
Genevieve T. Silverio
Jared E. Young

and reinstated member **Mark D. Hall**.

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October Meeting Preview: SandCHI Brings Usability Home

By [Elaine Tsang](#), VP-Programs

First of all, what is SandCHI (pronounced san'-de-ki), anyway? It is the local chapter of the Association for Computing Machinery's Special Interest Group for Computer-Human Interaction. Appropriately, as the group is dedicated to examining issues in human factors, ergonomics, usability, and general ease of use, SandCHI (San Diego Computer-Human Interaction) is much simpler to say and to remember.

With so much interest in the topic of usability among our own STC members, we have a great deal in common with SandCHI. So we thought it would be fun to have some of their experts prepare a crash course in usability for our group.

Drawing on years of experience, we'll hear from three heavy hitters: **Dave O'Brien**, a manager of Human Factors at Qualcomm; **Garrett Goldfield**, a usability manager at Intuit; and **Michael Korn**, a senior user interface designer at AOL.

What do they have in store for us? We'll learn why usability "ain't just for software" and participate in their spoof of a classic show, "Mystery Usability Theater." Doubling the fun, they will present their "top ten usability dos" followed by their "top ten usability don'ts."

If usability has been a concern for your organization or you want to help your company be more effective, then don't miss the October meeting. [[Meeting details.](#)]

Attendees: 61

September Meeting Review

By [Sean Griffin](#)

San Diego's first STC meeting for the new year took place on Wednesday 9/11 at the Wyndham Hotel conference room. The meeting began with a networking period followed by dinner.

After dinner, **Walter Hanig**, incoming San Diego Chapter president, welcomed all members and guests. He spoke of the events commemorated on September 11, reminding us of the values of the freedoms we enjoy in the United States of America.

Following his opening remarks, Walter introduced the new STC San Diego council members, inviting each to speak about plans for the upcoming year.

- Vice President of Finance **Lance-Robert** asked for

volunteers to help with the check-in process at each month's meeting, including entering each attendee into a computer database and distributing tickets for each month's drawing.

- Vice President of Professional Development **Audrey Johns** polled members present regarding interest in possible training courses to be offered this year. Topics under consideration include HTML, Dreamweaver 4, Framemaker 6.0 and 7.0, Photoshop (including basic 1 and 2, color correction, and printing), Illustrator, Indesign, a jobs workshop, indexing, 508 documentation, Webworks Publishing Pro, Go Live 6.0, Live Motion 2.0, RoboHelp, multilingual translation, Framemaker-to-XML conversion, and Intro to XML.
- *Signature* Associate Editor **Sharon Bradshaw** invited members to submit their writing to the chapter newsletter, explaining that there are mentors available for assistance and that often articles run in our local newsletter are picked up by newsletters from other chapters and published again in those.



Standing: Sharon Bradshaw and Walter Hanig

She also mentioned a need for a FLASH expert to help with the animated treasure chest in the new online editions of *Signature*.

- Vice President of Membership **Simrita Dhir** reminded members of the New Member Dinner on October 2 at the Kings Garden Restaurant, 1066 Pacific Heights Blvd., San Diego 92121.
- Web Site and Library Manager **Suzy Hosie** was unable to attend; Walter spoke on her behalf. Suzy seeks assistance for the chapter Web site—including someone qualified in HTML coding, in converting text to HTML, and in background scripting for the reservation system.
- Vice President of Programs **Elaine Tsang** described some upcoming meeting topics, including e-help in December, and productive learning and leisure in January. She welcomes requests for possible meeting topics.



Standing: Simrita Dhir and Walter Hanig

Announcements

After remarks by the new council members, chapter President Hanig made the following announcements.

- There will be a southern California competition this year; check the chapter Web page for details. Judges are needed. [[Click here](#) for competition update.]
- A Region 8 conference is tentatively planned for January in Las Vegas. [[Click here](#) for conference update.]

- The San Diego Community College District contacted Walter with a request for someone to interview with a student about how to get into the field of technical writing.

Mike McGraw, technical writing instructor, announced upcoming classes at SDSU in the technical writing field, including several sections of Introduction to Technical Writing, each with focus in a different area (educational technology, science and English, and general), technical editing, and program management in the technical communications field.

After remarks from new council members and general announcements, chapter members seeking employment were invited to stand and describe their credentials and job wants, after which members with jobs available announced those.



Speaker Scott Hamlow, Adobe Systems

Guest Speaker

The evening's featured speaker was **Scott Hamlow**. Scott is a trainer with Adobe Systems and has worked in the documentation field since 1991. His qualifications include a degree in technical communications, and he has worked as a senior systems engineer for Adobe Systems. Scott's topic for the evening was Adobe's Framemaker 7.0.

New features of Framemaker 7.0 include:

- combined product
- full XML support
- workgroup collaboration
- ease-of-use enhancements
- accessibility enhancements (so that saving files into PDF format really works)

Other 7.0 features include:

- powerful XML authoring/publishing
- scalable, powerful authoring
- multichannel publishing
- WYSIWYG editing
- structured and unstructured editing modes (so that, in structured Framemaker, you can work with XML without working with XML)
- repurposing information, which can be applied to different applications automatically

Non-XML features include:

- master pages that can accommodate up to 12 running headers and footers
- the possibility of more than 50 master pages
- master pages that can be reordered in a dialogue box
- use of tables to set up master pages formatting rules

- saving files as PDF that actually work
- ability to set up many different pack job options
- preselected zoom size on page opening (so that document opens with correct page size and width)
- bookmarks that can be placed through multiple levels
- ability to generate tagged PDF for such devices as screen readers and palm pilots.
- automatic tagged PDF reflows with the click of a button during zoom-not repagination, just changing views



Celeste Rutherford

Drawing Winners

The meeting concluded with a drawing for prizes.

- Celeste Rutherford won a Wally Buck, good for one STC meeting and dinner.
- Cheryl Nemeth won *FrameMaker 7.0 Classroom in a Book*, donated by Technical Standards.
- Mike McGraw, Nadine Barter Bowlus, Sharon Bradshaw, and Alison Butler won Framemaker 7.0 tryout disks donated by Adobe Systems.



Cheryl Nemeth

Special thanks for Lynn Sornson for volunteering as librarian for the evening.



From left: Sharon Bradshaw, Mike McGraw, Nadine Barter Bowlus, Alison Butler

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October 2002

Tech Issues


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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.

FrameMaker's Handling of XML

By [Matt Sullivan](#)

I'm not sure if it has anything to do with school starting again, but it seems that everyone is done with summer vacation and ready to get back to work.

For the last few weeks, that has meant tons of inquiries for us at GRAFIX about FrameMaker 7.0 and its handling of XML. Consequently, we've been answering lots of questions regarding Frame's ability to export XML from both unstructured (normal Frame docs) and structured (previously FrameMaker+SGML docs) FrameMaker files. Considering we had Scott Hamlow from Adobe present Frame 7.0 at our September 11 meeting, I didn't see how this month's article could be about anything else.

Here are a few of the topics we've been fielding questions on.

- Can we output our existing (unstructured) documents to XML?
- Should we switch to a structured workflow?
- Should we use Frame's built-in HTML and XML conversion or use the standard version of Quadralay WebWorks Publisher, which ships with Frame?
- Do we need WebWorks Publisher Pro?

Obviously, these questions don't have clear-cut answers, but we can at least discuss some of the issues involved with each of them.

Can we output our existing (unstructured) documents to XML?

Yes, existing docs can be output as XML, just as they could be output to HTML from Frame. This does usually require some manual tweaking of the conversion tables as well as an adherence to the template used to create the conversion table. (Translation: adding to or changing the names of the tags and formats used in the template will result in more editing of the conversion table.)

The good news is that your information is now in XML. The bad news is that most of your stuff is mapped into generic elements not much more helpful than HTML.

Should we switch to a structured workflow?

This really depends on why you want your info in XML. If you heard XML is cool and you want to add it as a delivery format along with print, PDF, and HTML, then you don't need to author structured documents.

However, if you plan on sharing this information laterally with clients or vendors and need to have a common file format to enable this, then structured documents might be for you. Keep in mind that structured and unstructured Frame documents have little in common when it comes to creating the content that makes up your files. Plan on three days of training for any of your authors as well as an additional two days of training for the person(s) responsible for template development.

Should we use Frame's built-in HTML and XML conversion or use the standard version of Quadralay WebWorks Publisher, and do we need WebWorks Publisher Pro?

Using any of the three XML output options will be dictated by the complexity your output requires.

Again, if you need to just get your stuff on the Web and don't care too much about how it looks, whether you've got navigation buttons on your pages, or what format your graphics will convert to, then stick with Frame's default conversion. You can wade through the conversion on your own and not have to invest a lot of time in the process.

If you find the converted XML material lacking in its ability to describe your data and to translate your graphics appropriately, then you may want to investigate the WebWorks Publisher products. They will give you more options for outputting pages that fit in a sophisticated Web project.

Where to go from here?

Unfortunately, in this small article, I can't do more than simply raise the questions about whether XML is right for your organization. Be ready, though, because XML is coming, and it will likely be the format you use to transfer information in the near future. Not only will you use it to create Web content, but it may also become the universal information-transfer format, smoothly linking your database, text editing, and Web-content systems.

With any luck, next month's article will discuss tools for authoring and editing XML using MS Word.

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Advice

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Single Sourcing

By [Suzanne Hardy](#)

Single sourcing is an industry buzzword that actually has more than just "buzz" to it. In these lean times of one technical writer doing the work of three, the concept of single sourcing is more appealing than ever. Even if your company has enough writers to cover the workload, the idea of using one set of source files to create multiple outputs has definite allure.

Primarily, single sourcing can reduce the time spent maintaining multiple sets of files used for different deliverables. For example, if you maintain a large printed reference manual that contains information straight out of your help system, do you make changes in two sets of files? If so, not only does this method take plenty of time, but it increases the likelihood of typographical and formatting errors, not to mention missed information in one of the outputs. Single sourcing can eliminate these problems.

Single Sourcing Tools

So is it really possible to single source? The answer to this question depends partially on the tools you use.

For example, various features in popular publishing and authoring tools provide ways of hiding certain information in the output. Conditional text (or "build tags") is one such feature. This process involves "tagging" the content you want to exclude from a selected deliverable (such as a version of your online help that will be delivered with beta software).

Then, before you deliver the files, you select an option in the software to exclude content marked with the tag. In another tool, you can use fonts or templates to exclude information. There are also large content-management databases that store pieces of information that you assemble as needed, but these systems can be expensive and are typically used at companies with large, complex documentation sets.

Planning and Up-Front Work

If you decide to single source, a solid plan and some up-front work can ease the transition.

You will need to start with a single set of files that contains all the information you need to deliver (such as a help system or document files).

Then, analyze the content of the files to determine which information needs to go into each output. (If you have

already been delivering the outputs, this process is straightforward because you know where the content belongs.)

Then, depending on the tool you are using, tag the information (or use another method) that will exclude the content from the output. For example, if you need to deliver a printed manual that includes content from your help system, you can tag any text that says, "Click here for more information," or other references specific to online help. Or maybe your manual is only a subset of the online help, in which case you could tag all information that is not going into the manual (including graphics).

Next, test the deliverables thoroughly to ensure that the right content is going into the right output.

Efficiency

Once you have analyzed, tagged, and tested the existing information, continue this process as you create content. When the system is in place, you will find that it's more efficient than re-creating the information during the stress of deadlines, and it gives you more time to concentrate on your content.

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SandCHI : Usability

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This new column is written by members of the San Diego chapter of CHI (Computer Human Interactions). [Click here to learn about SandCHI.](#)

Author Michael Korn [\[see bio\]](#) is a senior user interface designer at AOL.

He was SandCHI's inaugural chapter chair and founder, and he currently serves as program chair.

Usability and Methodology

By [Michael Korn](#)

In last month's column, I wrote that usability could be viewed as:

- a process
- a methodology
- a bureaucratic gate-keeping mechanism

In practice, usability usually contains a bit of all three of these definitions.

While last month's column focused on process, this column will focus on **methodology**.

Usability test (Utest) observers and visitors are known for making comments such as "I can't believe I saw what I just saw."

This phenomena can be very powerful for those who see real people interact with technology. The long-term effects caused by observing what seems unbelievable are not as resilient and long lasting as quantitative data.

In corporate America, numbers and statistics rule the day, rising to the largest offices in the highest towers. In my opinion, behavioral methodology and quantitative data collection are the keys to bolstering the value of usability testing results and conclusions.

As is the case with most things, there is more than one way to sink a putt. Usability is no exception. While there are multiple techniques used to collect and manage data, some usability procedures and techniques are fairly standard across the technology industry. Generally, usability methodology falls into three phases and 10 to 20 procedures.

I list the phases and steps associated with sound methodology below. The purpose of the list is to emphasize the importance of ensuring sound data collection. Without that, usability differs little from basic market research. I have bolded steps that I will describe in more detail.

Concept Phase

1. Understand the business and user objectives.
- 2. Formulate testing questions or hypotheses.**
- 3. Determine what success and failure looks like, and get buyin from stakeholders.**
4. Identify the user characteristics that will

- influence the achievement of the objectives.
- 5. Identify the relevant product tasks.
- 6. Prioritize the tasks.
- 7. Conceptualize the test flow.
- 8. Choose the primary metrics.**

Implementation Phase

- 9. Recruit participants.**
- 10. Create pretest (data collected before the utest).
- 11. Create posttest and interview objectives (data collected after the utest).
- 12. Run the utest sessions.**

Analysis Phase

- 13. Calculate the results.
- 14. Formulate conclusions.
- 15. Formulate design suggestions.
- 16. Make design changes.**
- 17. Modify step 2.
- 18. Repeat steps 7 through 18.

In theory, every utest should maintain this level of methodological rigor (Rubin 1994). In practice, some of these steps can be removed, tweaked, or replaced. Why then do I waste your time outlining the theoretical procedures? The reason for knowing the formal procedures is to help demonstrate how utesting succeeds in helping designers create more usable products.

Once a professional has breadth of data and experience, some of the steps can be skipped. Problems emerge, however, when steps are changed without an understanding of the consequences of the change.

I can't tell you how often I've heard folks ask me to run a "quick usability test" on the software engineers down the hall. While this is feasible *if* the software engineers do not work on the product *and* the product is being designed for software engineers. It is not feasible, however, if a utest participant works on the product or if the participant is not even remotely similar to the real participants.

Formulate testing questions or hypotheses.

As is customary in the behavioral sciences, research goes from the abstract to the concrete and back again. Research ideas, concepts, and hypotheses are derived from sources such as previous research papers, customer feedback, personal experience, and pie-in-the-sky dreaming. The resultant "great ideas" or hypotheses are the basis for designing utests.

Hypotheses formulated before a utest occurs add credibility to

the test results. The increased credibility is due to the decreased chances of serendipitous occurrences being identified as repeatable, common human effects.

Determine what success and failure look like, and get buyin from stakeholders.

If I hypothesize that novice Web users will find it easy or pleasurable to buy movie tickets online, I accept the possibility from the outset that I might be wrong. If the usability engineer (uengineer) and the business stakeholders agree on what a successful movie ticket purchase is, failure can be defined as what's left. These rigid definitions might seem a bit black and white, but usability doesn't provide maximum value to the team by focusing primarily on behavior's shades of gray.

Once success is defined in behavioral terms, it's time to choose your metrics.

Choose the primary metrics.

Once success and failure have been defined in conceptual terms, we look for observable, repeatable human manifestations to represent the construct outlined in the concept.

WHAT?!

When one tries to measure a concept, one accepts that one is trying to associate something nonconcrete, like motivation, and view it in concrete terms. This is not always easy, but it's a great challenge for the uengineer.

This is one of my favorite parts of the process. We look to identify observable behaviors, effect, and types of comments that can serve as data points. This is one place where a uengineer must be wary of contaminating his/her own test. The goal is choosing the right metrics, not the metrics that are likely to make the uengineer correct.

In the movie tickets example mentioned above, we may want to measure motivation. We then decide that "successfully purchasing movie tickets online" represents high motivation.

We then need to break down this construct into measurable subtasks. These subtasks would include:

- finding the Web site
- registering as an online user
- choosing a movie
- entering personal information
- making the purchase

If we measure success and failure as time to completion or

number of errors, for example, we set a foundation for knowing whether one version of the product design is better than another.

At this point, it should be noted that the uengineer should not be the utest moderator. It's far too difficult for someone close to the utest concept and design to inadvertently influence participants. The utest moderator, who is experienced in the collection of utest data, is responsible for maintaining the integrity of the testing session.

Once the metrics are established and the utest moderator is in place, the credibility of the testing sessions and, hence, the results are enhanced.

Recruit participants.

The implementation phase begins with the recruitment of participants. Recruiting the most common and/or important user populations is the initial step to implementing the test plan.

Say, for example, a software product is being designed for all White House personnel. The software must serve home-maintenance personnel who may be the most common users while also serving the President who is clearly the most important. The utest must address ease of use for both populations.

Run the utest sessions.

The utest moderator executes the utest plan written by the uengineer. The participant follows the directions outlined by the utest moderator during the 1- to 2-hour sessions.

A usability test session is a laboratory simulation of the user experience associated with the tasks being tested. In other words, the laboratory test should take into account situations where users will encounter the product. Therefore, if the product is going to be used at home 90 percent of the time in a home office right before the dinner hour, efforts should be made to simulate that experience.

The session is usually broken down into small tasks that the participant is asked to complete without help. The utester generally interjects as little as possible while the participant uses the product. When more information is needed than is offered by the participant, the utest moderator will attempt to elicit information in an unbiased fashion.

Interviewing styles vary, but techniques necessary to garner valid verbal responses do not. An experienced utester with advanced interviewing techniques is a pleasure to watch because the utester asks only the right questions at the right time, thereby enlisting rich, valid qualitative data from utest participants.

When the participant completes the assigned tasks, participants usually complete a posttest questionnaire. The utest moderator will then do an end-of-session interview to collect rich, qualitative feedback that will add depth and humanity to the quantitative data.

Often this brief interview is the icing on the cake. This process answers many questions and inevitably brings up new ones.

Make design changes.

Once the uengineer formulates conclusions from the utest sessions, it is incumbent on the utest professionals to interact with the designers to come up with design suggestions. A laboratory environment is not real life. It is not the actual experience. As a result, we need to take the utest results and see how they fit in the real-world environment and design.

The utest professional's job is not done until the designers understand how best to modify the product design to make the product more usable (Norman 2002).

Note

There is a lot of information in this column. This column is not intended to be a recipe for doing utesting but, rather, an outline and description of some of the procedures for this type of testing. I hope that usability methodology matures over the next few years to the point that it can become a pillar that business owners can rely on to shorten their development time and decrease their costs.

References

Rubin, J. 1994. *Handbook of Usability Testing*. New York: Wiley Technical Communication Library.

Norman, D.A. 2002. *Interactions*, Volume IX.4.

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Professional Development


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Reserve your spot today! See contact information below.

Blue Star Offers Classes to STC Members and Nonmembers

By [Audrey Johns](#), VP-Professional Development

Blue Star Software has agreed to offer five classes this year to STC members and to nonmembers sponsored by STC members.

These courses will provide an excellent opportunity to enhance your skills and marketability. Blue Star requires a minimum enrollment of 10 students per class, so please contact Blue Star as soon as possible to reserve a seat in each class you plan to register for.

Class	Date	Member Price	Nonmember Price
Dreamweaver 4 Introduction	9/28	\$139	\$159
Dreamweaver 4 Advanced	10/12	\$139	\$159
Photoshop Basic Skills 1	10/5	\$139	\$159
Photoshop Basic Skills 2	10/26	\$139	\$159
XML Introduction	11/9	\$169	\$189

We are working on future classes for Illustrator 10 and FrameMaker 7.0 and will keep you informed.

Please register at least five days before the start date of any class you are interested in attending. If enrollment in any class is low, Blue Star reserves the right to cancel it. A late registration fee will be an additional \$20 per class. A syllabus for each class is at <http://www.bluestarlearning.com>.

You may register online or by contacting:

Blue Star Learning
 5703 Oberlin Drive, Suite 102
 San Diego, CA 92121
 Phone: (858) 622-1201

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Employment Desired


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Ann M. Throckmorton

Members Looking for Work

Mark Hall

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Seasoned professional skilled in writing and editing functional specifications, online help systems, papers, reports, proposals and articles. Knowledgeable of audience assessment and online research techniques. Experienced in the healthcare (eCommerce), market research, financial and aerospace industries. Creative, detail-oriented and customer-focused individual. Have served as *Signature* proofreader for past two years, and will be authoring several articles for 2002-2003 newsletters.

POSITION SOUGHT: Contract position at progressive, financially stable and well-managed company. Open to wide range of industries. Willing to accept short-term work at "very competitive" rate to prove my skills.

EDUCATION & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Bachelor of Science in Engineering; M.B.A. in Technology Management. Continuing education in Copywriting, Cognitive Science and Usability Engineering.

TOOLS: Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Visio, Framemaker, SnagIt, Dreamweaver, Illustrator, Photoshop, Acrobat, RoboHelp.

How to submit an ad

Ads are limited to STC members and should not exceed 125 words. Send your ad to the editor at stcsignature@yahoo.com.

To ensure publication, we'll need your ad by the 20th of the month. Ads received after the 20th will be inserted if possible.

You'll need to renew your ad for each month you want it published.

Sean Griffin

sgriffiner@juno.com

(760) 500-1367

Experienced educator and manager seeks position in training and instructional design. Fifteen years' experience in instructional design and presentation for groups large and small, in business and in educational settings. Ten years' experience in business management—was Business Manager for Number One Sears Store in Southern California. Bachelor of Science degree in Business and Management, and California Teaching Credential for Business and English courses.

SKILLS: Development/adaptation of training courses and materials; implementation of training in classroom and seminar settings; business management; project management.

TOOLS: Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Access, Publisher,

FrontPage, PageMaker; Windows and Macintosh operating systems.

Valerie Finley

vrfinley@hotmail.com

(626) 914-9554

Highly experienced documentation specialist with graphic design background, four years of experience in technical writing and WinHelp development seeking a full-time position creating, developing, and producing technical documentation.

Four years of experience in technical writing and editing user guides, manuals and online Help following the Chicago and Microsoft manuals of style.

Three years of experience in developing online context-sensitive Help for hardware and software in a Windows-based environment.

Served as Publications Manager and Web Designer for the 1998 STC Region 8 Conference.

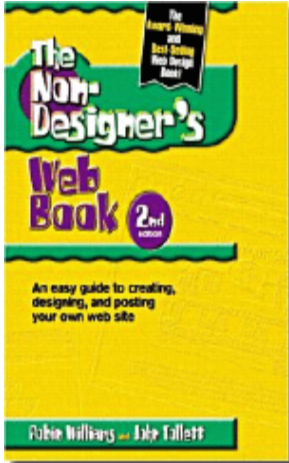
TOOLS: MS Word, ForeHelp, Corel Draw, PhotoPaint, Adobe Acrobat, Illustrator, PhotoShop, RoboHelp, FrameMaker.

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Book/Software Review

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The Non-Designer's Web Book

Review by [Pat Ray](#)

Robin Williams has devoted her writing career to producing easy-to-read books that explain design concepts to nondesigners. With this book, she has collaborated with John Tollett to produce a book on Web design.

The book claims to be for people creating their first Web page. Don't let that scare you away. It has good information for everyone. There are many pictures and example Web pages, which I find especially useful.

I'm going to touch on two of the five sections of the book: "Design Issues on the Web" and "Color, Graphics, and Type."

We start with a repetition of the basic design principles outlined in *Design for Non-Designers* (a great book reviewed in the [September Signature](#)) as they apply to Web design.

By
Robin Williams
and
John Tollett

Peachpit Press
320 pages,
paperback, approx.
\$25

- **Alignment:** Pick one—left, centered, or right—and use it on everything on the page.
- **Proximity.** Squint your eyes at the screen, and see what groups of items fall together. Are they the groups you had in mind?
- **Repetition.** The pages in the Web site should look like they belong together. Repetition makes it happen. Besides unifying a Web site, it is much easier for your visitors to get around.
- **Contrast.** If two elements aren't the same, make them very different. Create a focal point on your screen. Squint at the screen again to see what stands out; you may be surprised at what appears to be the focal point.

Design Principals

Now we go to the bugaboo of many a hated Web site: **design**.

Here are some of the principles they recommend for you to use.

- **A simple plan.** Make a list of the information to be included in the site. Now create an outline, or even better, use sticky notes to create a flowchart. You can keep rearranging the sticky notes as you decide topics would be better in different places.
- **One-size surfing.** Remember that many people still

have smaller monitors or use laptops to surf the Web. Make sure your initial screen fits in a 640 x 460 space. (Twenty pixels are used for the menu bar.)

- **Navigation based on the site itself.** Let the information and topics for the site determine the navigation scheme you use.
- **Text labels with the graphics.** Some people surf with graphics turned off, and some people use text readers to get around. If you don't have text labels for your navigation links, they cannot use your site.
- **Typography.** Use sans serif on screen.

The book also covers color theory, bit depth, and resolution. There's a lot of information about graphic file types and how to use them. In addition, there are tips and tricks for using Adobe PhotoShop to create certain effects.

The book is comprehensive and includes far more information than I can mention here. I find it very useful, and recommend it to you.

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Humor

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Get Real: Are Tech Writers Real Writers?

By [Karen Field](#)

"What type of writing do you do?" asked the poet. I was at my monthly writers' meeting, and she was new.

"Technical writing," I said. "I'm a technical writer."

"Oh, but that's not real writing," said the poet.

"In what way?"

"Well, it's not creative writing," she sniffed.

"I would have to disagree with that," I said. "When I'm writing about a software application with lots of bugs and few workarounds, and if that application was designed by engineers with fragile egos, and if the users need to know about those bugs but the engineers don't want me to mention them, I have to get pretty creative."

The poet cocked her head. "Perhaps. But you have to write down to people; you can't use big words."

I shrugged. "Even rocket scientists like complex information explained in an uncomplicated way. Besides, Ernest Hemingway kept his language simple. Would you say he wasn't a real writer?"

"He was a real writer," said my poet friend. "But, well, your writing doesn't require thinking."

"It doesn't?" I asked. "I read functional specifications and marketing requirements documents. I talk to subject matter experts and quality assurance engineers. I read user evaluations of products. Then I use the product itself. From that, I compile a big picture of the product and determine what information the user needs. Then I start writing."

The poet was getting frustrated: I kept wriggling out of her stereotype.

"But," she said, "you don't have a byline."

"True enough," I said. "Then again, Joyce Carol Oates often writes under a pseudonym. I don't think a byline makes someone a real writer. If it did, every person whose name appears in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the local newspaper would be a real writer."

My poet friend frowned, almost, I suspected, ready to admit

defeat. But then she said, "I know the average annual salary of technical writers. You don't suffer for your craft. Real writers rarely make more than \$20,000 a year for their work."

"That is true," I replied. "I do make more than \$20,000 per year. Each month, after I pay my rent and bills, I have disposable income. On top of that, I love what I do." I hung my head in mock shame. "The horror of it all!"

The poet sighed. "I wish I had disposable income," she said. "How can I get a job as a tech writer?"

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American Literature Scholar Attracted to Technical Writing

By [Michael Abrams](#)

Many of us know **Simrita Dhir** as an STC chapter volunteer currently serving as membership vice president. But there's much more to her than the proficiency with which she answers queries about meetings, library privileges, dues discounts, and other nuts and bolts. A technical writer who has worked for top biotech and software firms, her roots are deeply planted in literary soil.

Simrita grew up in northwest India's Punjab and came to the United States in 1999 with her husband, a business professional with a leading biotech company.

Though far from her native land, arriving in California was an intellectual homecoming for this scholar of American literature. Her PhD thesis is on contemporary women American authors, and she has taught the subject at the Mira Mesa campus of the San Diego Community College District.

"I like American literature for a certain freedom that it embodies," she says, adding, "Since World War I, America sprang into the forefront in literature as with other fields of life. It caught the imagination of people in the Third World and developing countries and is widely taught in Indian universities.

"I became keenly interested in the womens' emancipation movement while in graduate school, and since then I have enjoyed writers like [Toni] Morrison, Alice Walker, Anna Quindlen, and Joyce Carol Oates. Their work inspires women to overreach themselves and, in the process, serve society and fulfill their own potential."

Once in San Diego, Simrita was attracted by the opportunity to enter a growing field. She enrolled in the San Diego State Certificate Program in Technical and Scientific Writing, finishing in a year and a half.

Her first job was an entry-level position at a biotech firm. After that, she took on a contract assignment for a national franchise firm, writing manuals and marketing slates. Then she landed her current position at a major retail industry software developer. She writes user manuals, implementation guides, and Web documents.

Doesn't she find the work confining in comparison to literature (written with a capital L)? No, she says, adding with some soft-spoken though well-spoken passion, there's an art to technical communication.

"There is a great deal of creativity involved in it—in the way you decide to lay out content, the tools you use to take your screen captures, the way you evolve templates and use graphics. A technical writer brings to every document that he or she creates a certain uniqueness that is his or her hallmark alone."

But is there a novel waiting to be born? Simrita responds, "I want to write a book only when I have a powerful story to tell."

Now I've got a hunch that we won't have to wait long.

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Kudos Corner



Kudos Corner: Member Achievements

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"Kudos are good for our collective karma."
—Mark Hall, *Signature* contributor

Got news? Please contact the editor at stcsignature@yahoo.com.

Reporters Needed

We're looking for more reporters to snoop out news. If you'd like to help, contact the editor.

Reporters

Sharon Bradshaw
Valerie Lipow

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News Wanted!

This new column acknowledges member achievements, such as awards, promotions, contracts, and special projects. Do you have any news to share about yourself or other members? If so, please consider sending it in for publication.

At chapter meetings our reporters will keep their ears to the ground for news. Also, when you're at a meeting, feel free to pass news along to any [council member](#).

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Mail for the Muse

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Send your letters to Dear Muse at stcsignature@yahoo.com. We guarantee your confidentiality!

Muse, the inspiration that motivates a poet, artist, or thinker.

Dear Muse: Real Advice for Real People (Sorta)

Dear Muse,

Our company has hit some hard times. Several key people have left for better opportunities, and now my boss asks me weekly if I'm looking for another job. I don't know what to say. I haven't been looking, but if he keeps asking, I'm going to consider it. What should I do?

Searching

Dear Searching,

It sounds like your boss is correctly concerned about losing vital employees. However, bosses often forget that their workers not only have jobs, they have careers. Your job is just one piece of a bigger puzzle. If you decide to look elsewhere, it's not your boss' business. Next time he asks, reply with, "I wouldn't worry about that." Or continue to say nothing at all. In the meantime, continue to do your job well. Keep this rung on the ladder of your career strong, and it will support you until you're ready for the next one.

Dear Muse,

I am a technical writer in a small software company. I am ashamed to admit that I have fallen in love with someone from "the other side"—that is, from Product Marketing. It's a case of opposites attract: He sells vaporware; I write about actual software. He says "features"; I say "functions." He has "customers"; I have "users." Can two people from opposite sides of the same planet find true love? Should we just call the whole thing off?

Bought and Sold

Dear Bought,

It sounds as if you two, as a couple, will create a balanced picture of life. Where you see reality, your partner sees opportunity. Why not lean on each other? On the other hand, if he starts calling his bad habits "features"—for example, if he refuses to shower to the point where he begins to smell and then tries to tell you he's simply saving water—wash that man right out of your hair.

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Mission Statement

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Fall membership drive: Join now and save! [See details below.](#)

Society for Technical Communication
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703.522.4114 (voice)
703.522.2075 (fax)

E-mail: stc@stc.org
Web site: www.stc.org

STC Mission Statement

Our mission statement is: **Designing the future of technical communication**

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.

- **Member:** \$125 per year (plus a one-time \$15 enrollment fee)
- **Student Member:** \$50 per year (enrollment fee not required)

Join After October 1 and Save on Dues

As part of its annual fall membership drive, STC offers a special discount to new members who join the Society on or after October 1, 2002.

For the regular member rate of \$140 (\$125 for dues plus a one-time \$15 enrollment fee), new members will be credited with dues paid for the remainder of 2002 and for calendar year 2003. That's 15 months of Society membership for the price of 12.

Among the benefits of Society membership are subscriptions to *Intercom*, the Society's monthly magazine, published 10 times a year, and to *Technical Communication*, the Society's quarterly journal. These periodicals contain essential articles on the theory and practice of technical communication.

Other membership benefits include discounts on STC's annual conference, the largest gathering of technical communicators in the world; eligibility for association group rate insurance; and access to STC's special interest groups. For more information on these and other benefits, visit the STC Web

site at www.stc.org.

Please pass this article to a prospective member. To join STC, prospective members can fill out an electronic form or download a membership application at www.stc.org. Those who prefer to have a membership application mailed to them can request one from the STC office at the following address:

Society for Technical Communication
901 North Stuart Street, Suite 904
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(703) 522-4114
stc@stc.org

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About the San Diego *Signature*

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

Article Submission

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles to be considered for publication. Send your query and request for writer's guidelines to stcsignature@yahoo.com. Submission deadlines are the 1st of the month prior to the publication month. Publication is dependent on space availability.

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2002-2003 Council Members[Return Home](#)**Chapter President, Walter Hanig**wdhanig@alumni.rice.edu

Walter is a technical writing manager at Ericsson Wireless Communications and has been a council member since 1998, serving as VP-Finance.

VP-Finance, Lance -Robertlance.robert@tarari.com

Lance-Robert is a senior technical publications engineer at Tarari, Inc. in Rancho Bernardo.

VP-Membership, Simrita DhirSDhir@gers.com

Simrita is a technical writer at GERS, a leading supplier of software systems and e-business solutions for retailers.

VP-Professional Development, Audrey Johnsaudrey.1031@att.net

Audrey is a technical communications consultant in San Diego.

VP-Programs, Elaine Tsangelaine@tecstandards.com

Elaine is a staffing manager at Technical Standards, Inc. She's also served as our chapter VP-Membership.

VP-Employment, Ken Wilsonkwilson@lqtechnology.com

Ken is a technical communications consultant in Carlsbad. He served in the East Bay Chapter as Employment Manager.

Newsletter Managing Editor, Lana Walker-Helmuthlwalker@designpro-inc.com

Lana is a proposal writer at MuniFinancial in Temecula. She wrote a monthly column and feature articles before becoming managing editor.

Newsletter Associate Editor, Sharon Bradshawsbradsh2@san.rr.com

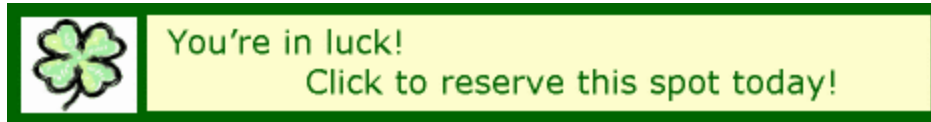
Sharon is a senior technical writer at Dot Hill in Carlsbad. She wrote the monthly meeting review and other articles for the past two years.

Chapter Web Site Manager, Suzy Hosiesuzy@wote.com

Suzy is President/CEO of a technical communications business in Vista, Write on the Edge, Inc. She has also served as our chapter President and VP-Professional Development.

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Signature Advertising Information

Publication Overview

Signature is a Web newsletter published by the San Diego Chapter, Society for Technical Communication (STC). It is issued ten times a year to more than 300 local technical communication professionals, managers, and educators. Other STC chapters, special interest groups, and related organizations also receive e-mail notification when each issue is posted. Because *Signature* is on the World Wide Web, readership is potentially unlimited.

Signature contains information produced by technical communicators for technical communicators. Advertising in *Signature* is the most direct way to reach the growing technical communications market in San Diego and the surrounding area.

Publication Schedule

Signature is published every month except July and August. Each issue is posted on the Web within the first three days of the issue month. Closing date for advertising is the 10th of the prior month.

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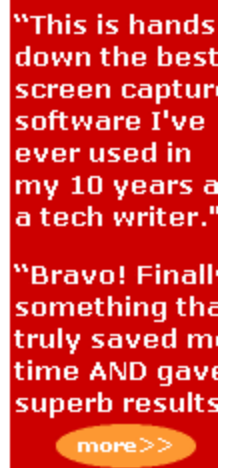
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Editor Sees Two Eventful Years

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 has 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.

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Elizabeth Vollbach
Pamela Fridle

Illustrator:

Ann M. Throckmorton

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