



blue pencil



History of the STC

The following was reprinted from the STC site. The original can be found at <http://www.stc.org/history.html>.

In 1953, two organizations concerned with improving the practice of technical communication were founded on the East Coast: the Society of Technical Writers, and the Association of Technical Writers and Editors. These organizations merged in 1957 to form the Society of Technical Writers and Editors.

In 1960, STWE merged with the Technical Publishing Society, which had been founded in 1954 on the West Coast. The merger produced the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers.

In 1971, the organization's name was changed to the Society for Technical Communication. Today, STC is the largest professional society in the world dedicated to the advancement of the theory and practice of technical communication.

Through information sharing and industry leadership, STC helps professionals design effective communication for a technical world. Because technology touches everyone, STC promotes public welfare by encouraging the development of better-educated professionals whose jobs are to make complicated information usable by many.

The organization's growth has mirrored our growing dependence on technology. Initially, STC was primarily made up of engineers who, among other activities, wrote instructions and descriptions of how electrical and mechanical products worked. A profound change took place as the pervasiveness of technology and the need to understand it became an integral part of our everyday lives. With the emergence of the Internet and online communication, our members now focus on supporting all aspects of the rapidly evolving world of technology.

The organization began because those working in the field recognized themselves as professionals with unique training and career issues. Today, STC is nearly 50 years old, with 150 chapters and 25,000 members worldwide. It is the largest organization for technical communicators. STC offers industry leadership and the education, networking, and information required in a world where change is "the way it is."

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Letter From the Editor

Looking Back and Forward in the Technical Communication Timeline

By Christina Downs

The next two issues of *Blue Pencil* will be devoted to the history and continuing development of the technical communication profession, the STC, and STC communication media for the Pittsburgh chapter.

Blue Pencil, which has been in existence for almost 45 years, has recently gone online. This is a new era, and not just for

Blue Pencil or for the STC. The technical communication profession is changing, and the world is changing. Changes are evident right here in our hometown of Pittsburgh. Gone are the large steel and manufacturing companies. Oakland is ripe with small software start-ups now. Today, the "steel city" is a city of technology and research. It is an exciting

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Blue Pencil

Blue Pencil is the official newsletter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), Pittsburgh chapter. It is published monthly from September through June by the Pittsburgh chapter to inform and promote communication within the chapter and the Society. Material contained in this publication may be reprinted by other STC chapters, provided credit is given. Please send a copy of the reprint to the editor. Readers are invited to submit ads, short articles, news, reviews, and other material of interest to technical communicators by the 10th of the month prior to publication to:

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President's Column

I have a B.A. in Anthropology. At first glance this seems completely unrelated to the field of technical writing, but I wear my Anthropologist hat on a daily basis. Whether it's knowledge of human factors, linguistics, interviewing skills, cultural issues, or using "participant observer" techniques while working with developers or other "tribes" such as users, I use nearly everything I learned in school. However, I've never before had much chance to be an archaeologist, until now.

The December 2001 and January 2002 issues of the *Blue Pencil* are dedicated to celebrating the newsletter's 40th anniversary. In preparation for this occasion, Chris Downs, Nancy Carpenter, and I met over pizza after work at my house a couple of weeks ago to go through *Blue Pencil* back issues. Unlike archaeologists digging down through time with each layer of dirt, we began with the oldest issue (1959) and worked our way forward through time. We covered about 3 decades in a couple of hours, and the dig yielded many interesting things to the light of day. It was a remarkable experience that I hope you will all get to share while reading these issues.

It was truly fascinating to discover cultural artifacts, such as the changing logo styles, and the discussion about changing "chairman" to "chairperson," which took place in the early 1970's. We discovered that the content of the newsletter changed as the industrial base of Pittsburgh (and the U.S.) changed dramatically during the 70's and 80's. We saw evidence of changing technologies, such as references to word processors when those were so rare that the chapter featured a meeting that included a tour of one.

What we also saw, like any good archaeologists, was that not much has changed about people over time. Technical writers have always worried about keeping up with changing technologies, addressing users' needs, working with developers, etc. It was comforting to see those core concerns expressed over time, in the midst of all the turmoil.

I hope you enjoy this trip into the past as much as I did, and that it gives you some encouragement as we struggle together toward an uncertain future.

Sincerely,

Mary Ecsedy

1973 -- Ten Commandments for Technical Writers

From the Boston Blue Pencil, reprinted in Blue Pencil, September 1973.

1. Thou shalt remember thy readers all the days of thy life; for without readers thy words are as naught.
2. Thou shalt not forsake the time-honored virtue of simplicity.
3. Thou shalt not abuse the third person passive.
4. Thou shalt not dangle thy participles; neither shalt thou misplace thy modifiers.
5. Thou shalt not commit monotony.
6. Thou shalt not cloud thy message with a mass of technical jargon.
7. Thou shalt not hide the fruits of thy research beneath excess verbiage; neither shalt thou obscure thy conclusions with vague generalities.
8. Thou shalt not resent helpful advice from thy editors, reviewers, and critics.
9. Thou shalt consider also the views of the layman, for his is an insight often unknown to technocrats.
10. Thou shalt write and rewrite without tiring, for such is the key to improvement.

What We've Learned About Language and Style

by Janis Ramey

When *Blue Pencil* editor Chris Downs looked around for someone who might remember the old days, her glance somehow fell on me. She's right, I've been around long enough to see changes in the technologies we use, in the types of companies we work for, in the balance of men and women in the field, in the respect and status we now enjoy, and in language and style. Each of these changes deserves separate articles, but this article focuses on only one: changes in language and style.



We as a profession have learned a lot about technical writing over the years. We now know more about what readers need and how to fill that need. We write in a more accessible style — pushed along by the casualness of e-mail. We write shorter paragraphs, construct simpler sentences, and are more likely to use language that is easily translated. We're better at providing transition from one idea to the next using word order and word repetition. We're more likely to use bullet lists, tables, graphs, and other easily grasped methods of presenting information.

Learned from writing online help

A big change has come, I think, from the world of online help. We've learned to collect ideas into small logical groups and create standalone text bites (like the sound bites in the news business) that fit onto one screen. This carries over into lots of other areas. We don't assume readers will start at the beginning and work straight through a manual or proposal or even a short brochure. Our paragraphs are tighter, more on topic. We write meaningful headings and use them to tell our story, in case a reader chooses to skim our work.

Even the staid old world of technical reports has noticed this change. Report

writers used to slavishly follow the format and style of the old school lab report.

Most professional technical writers now lighten up a bit and at the very least add meaningful subheads under the conventional main section headings (Introduction, Method, Results, Conclusions, Recommendations, Summary). This allows readers to skip around in the report if they want to.

Learned from writing for the world

Another big change comes from the global nature of most of our work. We've learned to use words that are easily translated or understood by readers from other cultures — we avoid sports, political, or other cultural references that are not recognized outside our own sphere.

We've even had to *unlearn* some principles. Some years ago, for example, proponents of "Basic English" convinced us that we should use common phrasal verbs because they are so easily understood. However, we now know that they don't translate well. (For example, "speed up" is difficult to find in the dictionary — use "accelerate" instead.)

Learned from digital formatting

Our ability to control format (margins, boldface, etc.) at our desktop and to digitally integrate graphics has also improved the quality of our writing. Not too long ago, inserting a drawing or photograph on a text page was done only in expensive typeset documents. Ordinary business documents like reports or proposals were typewritten, and graphics and tables were appended on separate sheets at the end. Equations were most often handwritten after the page was typed. This meant of course that writers were hesitant to depend on a graphic or an equation to relay meaning. Now we're free to insert a screen image, icon, photograph, equation, or whatever else

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1983 -- What Is Technology?

Reprinted from the March 1983 issue of *Blue Pencil*.

If you think we are living in an age of technology, you are perfectly right. If you think this is a phenomenon of recent years or of recent centuries, you are entirely wrong.

Technology is the knack of doing things by means of objects that are not part of your own body. If you try to crack a nut with your teeth, you are being natural. If you place the nut on a rock and hit it with another rock, you are being technological.

Technology and the Rise of Man

Isaac Asimov

1978 -- Computers

Getting Your Foot in the Door with Computers

Reprinted from the October 1978-79 issue of *Blue Pencil*.

Pittsburgh Chapter members and guests who attend the October 17 meeting will hear Trisha Shannon's first Pittsburgh Chapter meeting program. Because she is more known for doors she kicks down, her topic, "Opening the Door to Computers," is enough to raise an eyebrow. Guests and seldom-seen members who are at Carnegie-Mellon's Skibo Hall are in for a rare experience. Trisha's presentation is a small step from Foster Grosh's "Opportunities in Communication." The number of positions which require or prefer candidates with computer systems or science background is soaring. Specifically aimed at practicing technical communicators who otherwise qualify for computer-oriented positions, the presentation will provide a syllabus for computer technology self-education. Specific course work, texts, magazines, and trade journals will be identified so the listener may tailor the syllabus to his particular interests and skills.



Chapter Membership:
211

Total STC Membership:
23,840

**New members in October
and November:**

Katherine S. Bailey
Kimberly A. Calaghan
Erin L. Friess
Yolanda R. Harvey
Charles Wesley Kimple
Michael P. Kolesar
Phillip J. Rydeski
Sherri R. Tobias
Elisa Z. Vettier
Marsha A. White
Joyce Hall
Robert P. Reitman
Dena J. Tsamitis
Kevin G. Vitale

**Transferring into
chapter:**

John H. Thomstatter

1977 -- Style

Accolade to Kahn for Stand on Style
*Reprinted from the December 1977 issue
of Blue Pencil.*

Accolade of the Month goes to new CAB chairman Alfred E. Kahn for his recent memorandum to his bureau, office, section, and division heads and fellow Board members deploring "the artificial and hyperlegal language that is sometimes known as bureaucratese or gobbledy-gook". He then goes on to cite examples of the kind of thing he objects to. They are worth noting, if only briefly:

- "Herein", "hereinabove", and "hereinunder" can almost always be replaced without meaning loss by "here", "above", and "below", respectively.
- Use the passive voice only when essential, not, as is so often done, to conceal, confuse, or obscure.
- "Data" is the plural of "datum".
- "Media" is the plural of "medium".
- "Criteria" is the plural of "criterion".
- "Presently" means "soon", not "now".
- In beginning a letter, try to work immediately into the substance of your message without resort (sic) to

phrases like "this is in reference to your letter of...".

- "Regarding", "concerning", "with regard to" can almost always be replaced by "about".
- "Prior to" should not be used as a substitute for "before" but only when the preceding item is a condition of what follows.
- Avoid using "hopefully" to mean "I hope" rather than "with hope".
- Avoid using "appropriate" as a weaselword when you really mean "legal", "fitting", "proper" or some other more precise adjective.

CN salutes Chairman Kahn for taking a stand for style. As he concludes: "I have heard it said that style is not substance, but without style what is substance?"

Originally printed in Communication Notes from the Washington Post.



Society for Technical Communication

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Technological Snowballs

By Marlene Miller

There is a framed Dilbert cartoon from 1995 hanging over my desk. It shows Dilbert and Dogbert walking together. Dogbert says, "People are getting stupider every day, relatively speaking. The complexity of the world is increasing geometrically. But your ability to learn is at the same slow trickle it has always been. Information is gushing toward your brain like a firehose aimed at a teacup."

That same year I wrote an editorial for the *Blue Pencil* lamenting my lagging ability to keep up with the technology now inherent with the profession of technical communication. In researching this article, I discovered that it wasn't my age or imagination that made me think that the technology is advancing faster than we are—it is!

The printing press was invented in the 15th century, but the typewriter didn't come along until 400 years later. According to The Virtual Typewriter Museum (<http://www.typewritermuseum.org>), the Industrial Revolution made machines cheaper than labor so it became practical to invent a device to take over the cumbersome task of hand writing. The manual typewriter was first mass produced in 1873. The electric typewriter appeared in the workplace after World War II, and the electronic typewriter, video writer, and word processor replaced it in the 70s. Desktop PCs came along for many of us by the early 80s, and the Internet made its presence well known by the mid-90s. The long gaps between technological innovations in our profession are quickly closing.

I became a technical writer in 1987, working on a mainframe CRT, composing on an in-house text editor. We used pound signs (#) at the beginning of a line to indicate text format: #B for Bold, #C for Centered, and a lone pound sign for Page

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Employment Issues Column

Tips for writing a great resume

By Pam Schmidbauer

Associate Area Manager - Aquent

The economic downturn is forcing many highly skilled people to the unemployment lines. With that being said, I thought I would give some tips on how to write a great resume.

Keep in mind that a resume is a self-promotional document that presents you in the best possible light and gets your foot in the door for an interview. A resume is not just about past jobs. It's about you, how you performed and what you accomplished in those past jobs — especially those accomplishments that are most relevant to the work you want to perform in your next position.

One way that is sure to impress any employer is by using "PAR" statements on your resume. PAR stands for Problem-Action-Results:

- State the problem that existed in your workplace.
- Describe what you did about it.
- Point out the results of your actions — what the employer got out of it.

You don't necessarily have to use an objective. Your career ambitions aren't the chief concern for most employers; their primary focus is finding someone capable of doing the job. Instead of listing an objective, provide a specific and highly condensed summary of qualifications and then go right into your work experience.

Appearance is key, so pay attention to how your resume looks. Strive for a simple but elegant design. Don't be overly creative with the layout. You also want to differentiate between full-time, freelance, and work experience positions.

Nothing puts your resume in the "no" pile faster than a typo. Ask several people to look over your resume before sending it. Other people may be able to spot

problems your spell-check function did not.

Many people ask how far back they should go in their work history. The Rule of thumb is: not that far, 10-15 years is usually enough. You can avoid potential age discrimination by not presenting your entire work history. You can simply label that part of your resume "Recent Work History" or "Relevant Work History."

My last words of advice shouldn't be hard for writers. Use power/action words to get attention. Instead of "I did this," try "I conceived this" or "I initiated this."

I hope these tips are helpful! If you are looking for work, good luck to you in finding your next rewarding position.

Pam Schmidbauer is Associate Area Manager at Aquent and can be reached at pams@aquent.com or 412-322-4940. Aquent is the world's largest talent agency for creative professionals. Headquartered in Boston, Aquent leverages both the Internet and a network of 58 offices in 12 countries to provide independent professionals access to work, training, and the same insurance, retirement, and cash-flow management benefits enjoyed by traditional W-2 workers. <http://www.aquent.com>

When Communicating Information Matters

Penn State's new Technical Communications Certificate program—coming March 2002



- Find the right words
- Develop effective editing strategies
- Use items such as tables to convey ideas
- Build project management skills

To find out how, please visit:
www.psutechcommcert.org/ofbp

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY



Penn State is committed to affirmative action, equal opportunity, and the diversity of its workforce. Produced by Outreach Marketing Communications
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1976 -- Meeting Emphasizes Technology

Kickoff Meeting Emphasizes Technical Communications Technology

Ron Field Featured Speaker

Reprinted from the September 1976 issue of Blue Pencil.

The first meeting of the new year was held at Skibo, on the Carnegie-Mellon University campus, on September 21, 1976. A gathering of about thirty enjoyed sampling various types of liquids, renewing old friendships and establishing new ones, and consuming a superior London Broil.

After dinner, Chairman Bob Zabielski read a letter from former Chairman Barbara Lydick, in which she regretfully resigned from the office, citing the varied duties, travel commitments, and educational requirements associated with her new position as preventing her from contributing the time and energy that the chapter deserves.

Harry Pappas, our new Director-Sponsor, emphasized the rewards of working to further Chapter and Society goals, and pointed out that the benefits accruing to an individual are in direct proportion to the amount of effort expended. His message in brief: Get Involved!

Ron Field, Manager of Communications Services at Westinghouse's commercial nuclear group, gave a quick tour of methods of communication from Cunei-form to present-day electronic technology, with emphasis, naturally enough, on the latter. Some of the hardware available now includes:

- Full-color copiers which can reproduce an original in "living" color in a few seconds.
- Graphics generators which can display, within the parameters of a stored program and under the direction of a console operator, a virtually limitless number of sym-

bols, diagrams, charts, graphs, and text statements in a variety of sizes, locations, and colors on the face of a CRT, and then transfer the image to hard copy or slide form and/or store it for future retrieval.

- Microfiche which can bring the cost of mailing 4000 pages of information down to less than a dollar.
- Acoustic couplers which enable typewriter-like terminals to enter information into, and print information from, a data processing system, using ordinary voice-grade telephone circuits.
- Remote scan television cameras which can read printed information directly into a data processing system.

After stretching our minds with the variety, complexity, and speed of the hardware available, Ron made two important points. First, the information explosion requires that everyone who communicates on a level more complex than speaking or writing a postcard to mother must recognize some of the options available for more efficient information handling. Second, anyone who falls in love with the hardware without knowing how it will interact with present machines and methods and future needs is doomed to failure. In other words, "Think Writing System!" Only if a system is designed from the start with the capabilities and limitations of each of its components concretely defined will it do what its designer wants it to do.

The natural sequel to Ron's talk is a tour of the facilities at NES Monroeville, where we will be able to see some of the new technology in operation. Plan to join us there in October; details will be forthcoming in a flyer.

1978 -- Metric Quiz

Reprinted from the October 1978-79 issue of Blue Pencil.

Most of us will soon be trying to use a new measurement language. Are you ready? Well, even if you're not sure of your metric knowledge, give these nine questions a try. Questions 1 through 6 have hints but 7, 8, and 9 are hintless, thus really testing you.

Questions

1. What should you wear when its 24°C? (30°C bikinis and 100°C = overcoat and gloves)
2. If you went to a metric butcher shop, how much steak would you order for four adults? (A pound of butter = 500 grams)
3. Approximately how tall is the average basketball forward? (A metre is slightly larger than a yard)
4. How long will it take you to get to Washington, D.C. if the distance is 450 km? (90 km/h = 55 mph)
5. If beer brewers sell 350-ml instead of 12-oz bottles at the same price, is it fair? (8 ounces = 236.6 ml)
6. If liquor distilleries go from fifths to litres, will they raise the price? (A litre is slightly larger than a quart)
7. A 200-lb man weighs (masses) _____ kg?
8. If a woman measures 90-60-90 cm, will she be pleased with her measurements?
9. How long is a left- or right-hand field home run? _____ m

(Answers on page 12)

Memberandums

Get Well, Dave

Dave Ross, our excellent and long-term treasurer, is still in the hospital. Marlene Miller is his liaison. Dave is at the Passavant Hospital (UPMC system) and would love visits and phone calls.

Educational Programs in Technical Communication

By Christina Downs

Twenty years ago, even ten years ago, and possibly even as recently as five years ago, we would not have seen a technical writing degree program at many major universities. Students who later became technical writers typically pursued one or the other — either a general writing degree or a technical degree — found they had an aptitude for writing and technology, and then learned the rest on-the-job. Over the years, as technology advanced and as the technical communication profession grew, there evolved a need for an educational program that could teach what many technically-oriented companies needed from their writers: the ability to explain complex technical concepts to every-day people.

Today, many colleges and universities offer technical communication degrees, at both the undergraduate and graduate level. For example, Northeastern University, in Boston, has a variety of undergraduate, graduate, and certificate programs in technical writing, technical communication, and professional writing. Some universities, such as Arizona State and Penn State, are just starting programs, while others, such as Carnegie Mellon University right here in Pittsburgh, have had technical writing programs for years — in fact, CMU's undergraduate major in technical writing is the oldest undergraduate technical writing program in the country. CMU is unique in this, having implemented the program at a time when technical writing as a profession was not yet as well known and respected as it is today.

CMU also offers graduate and undergraduate degrees in professional writing, communication design, and human-computer interaction, which can all be related to the technical communication field. One of the unique aspects of obtaining a technical writing degree from

CMU is this university's strong ties to both technology and the arts. CMU is renowned for its engineering programs as well as its fine arts programs. What better university to integrate writing and technology, to merge the two halves of the brain, to prepare students for careers as technical writers?

Also in the area, Penn State recently started a certificate program in technical writing, which Pittsburghers can take advantage of at the McKeesport campus. While Pitt has not yet followed suit, it is still possible to tailor a program toward a career in technical writing by combining the English degree with a technical degree (which is the path I took for my undergraduate education, although I didn't have technical writing specifically in mind until near the end of my college career). Although this path was successful for me, I would certainly recommend an actual technical writing program to a student looking to pursue this career. Technical writing programs teach you specialized skills and tools that two separate degrees (such as English and engineering) simply cannot provide — which is why I am excited to see so many programs in technical communication and why I hope to see more, particularly at Pitt (one of my alma maters).

That said, I also firmly believe, from my personal experience, that some training in a very technical field is also helpful — possibly majoring or minoring in a second area such as math, engineering, computer science, or one of the physical or biological sciences. I have degrees in both writing and engineering, and, although I am first and foremost a writer, my engineering education has provided me with an analytical mindset, a familiarity with math and science, and a feeling that I can understand and explain anything. I don't try to "sell myself" as an engineer, but I do recognize that being educated as

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November Meeting Minutes

Educational Opportunities

By Nancy Carpenter

On November 27, 2001, representatives from Penn State University, Carnegie-Mellon University, and Point Park College described the exciting programs in writing that they offer. All of these programs were developed to meet the needs of both those who aspire to be writers and those who want to broaden their skills. Here is a synopsis.

Penn State University

Robert Reitman

Director, Institute for Technical Communications

Penn State's Technical Communication Certificate will be offered for the first time in March 2002. It is a part-time program consisting of five courses that will be taken over a period of about 60 weeks:

- Technical writing and what a writer does. This course was developed by Noelle Conover and Bar Sturni.
- Technical editing, describing how to do the various levels of editing and how to maintain consistency.
- Information design — layout, graphs, charts and other visual solutions to communications problems.
- Usability analysis.
- Project management, including estimation.

This program was structured to meet the needs of students who do not want a full four-year program. It gives the students experience with real work situations, developing portfolios, and working in different media and industries. Courses can be taken at the Altoona, Philadelphia, and State College campuses, and at a location still to be confirmed in Pittsburgh.

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Letter From the Editor

(Continued from page 1)

time for technical communicators in Pittsburgh.

Yet, as times change, looking into the past grounds us, helps us forge into the future; we learn from our history.

Technical communicators in the past were concerned with many of the same issues we are concerned with today, such as writing style, keeping up with changing technology, and attracting STC members and volunteers. This revelation validates our concerns of today and may also help us resolve long-standing debates (such as what we should call ourselves—or if it really matters considering the larger issues at stake in the world today).

In this two-part series, the December 2001 *Blue Pencil* focuses on the technical communication profession and the STC, while the January issue will focus on STC Pittsburgh communication media: the web site, the newsletter, and the mailing list.

The December issue contains articles on:

- Advancements in the tools of the technical writing trade (from cu-neiform to word processors to computers).
- The implementation of educational programs specifically addressing the needs of technical communicators.
- Changes in language and writing style throughout the years.
- How evolving from an industrial/manufacturing base to a home for software start-ups and technology and biomedical research has influenced the direction of the technical communication profession in Pittsburgh.

The January 2002 *Blue Pencil* will discuss STC communication media,

focusing on the web site, the newsletter, and the mailing list. Chapter President Mary Ecsedy will discuss changes in the *Blue Pencil* over the last 40 years, and the issue will again contain tidbits from past issues (including a list of previous editors and a display of *Blue Pencil* logos from throughout the years).

If you would like to contribute to the first issue of 2002, please email Chris Downs at stcdowns@aol.com and Nancy Carpenter at carpentn@genco.com ASAP.

Since we are discussing change in this issue, now would be a good time to tell you about some additional changes happening with the *Blue Pencil* as we transition into the new year. Pittsburgh chapter Secretary Nancy Carpenter has joined the newsletter staff as Production Editor, and former chapter President Heather Lum has joined the staff as Editorial Assistant. Since October, Heather has been producing the post-cards you receive in the mail, and past chapter President Marlene Miller continues to mail the postcards. Nancy started as Production Editor for the November issue and is producing the final HTML and PDF for each issue. Together with chapter webmaster Joan Bondira, we will be redesigning the online version of the newsletter. This also means, with Nancy and Heather handling production, that we will have the time to make the PDF versions much more attractive again, and that we will also have the time to more thoroughly plan issues and write articles.

I am excited about the changes in *Blue Pencil*, and I am especially excited that there actually IS a newsletter “staff” now, rather than a single person. This new arrangement (having a Managing Editor, a Production Editor, and an Editorial Assistant) will ensure even better quality in newsletters and will help us better meet your needs and try out your suggestions. Nancy and Heather, thank you for volunteering your time to join the staff.

Together, we will move forward into 2002 and make the *Blue Pencil* better than ever.

Please email future contributions to both me and Nancy (at the email addresses listed above).

Thank you, and enjoy the December/January series.

Christina Downs

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What we've learned about language and style

(Continued from page 3)

we need and know that the reader will have it where it's needed. This has dramatically improved our ability to explain technical concepts.

With automatic cross-referencing, we no longer have to use numbered headings which has eliminated a lot of awkwardness (such as in this: "For more information, see Section III.A.2.b."). We now provide a page number or hyperlink.

Learned from problems solved

We've learned to control some old problems:

- Gender biased language
- Passive voice
- Acronyms
- Overuse of third person
- Fancy ponderous language
- Jargon (an old reference to using unexplained or unnecessary technical terminology)
- Gobbledygook (a popular early name for writing filled with jargon, acronyms, and fancy phrases)

Learned from earlier research and guidelines

We've assimilated ideas from years of research and practice that have gone under a number of names. Here are some of them:

- Fog index
- SMOG (Simplified Measure of Gobbledygook) test
- Flesch Reading Ease/Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level test
- Plain English
- Storyboarding
- User testing
- Basic English
- Document design

- Information mapping
- Hypertext
- Chunking
- Global readership
- Casual writing
- Minimalist writing

The fog index is an interesting methodology that was wildly popular for a while.

The index is a number derived from an equation containing variables such as sentence length, length of words, number of sentences in a paragraph, etc. A low fog index supposedly indicates clear, straightforward writing because it has few complex sentence structures or long words. Of course, since this is a purely mechanical measurement, it does not really measure whether the writing is clear, comprehensive, accurate, or any of the other attributes of good technical writing.

However, engineers I worked with loved it and to this day will proudly show me what the fog index is for their latest writing effort.

I believe that our writing has improved since I first entered the field. Unfortunately, I occasionally see text written by people who seem to be stuck in a previous era. Those folks could benefit from the lessons offered over the years.

Free-lance writer Janis Ramey joined STC as a student in 1959 when she won the very first STC scholarship and has been actively involved with the Pittsburgh Chapter ever since. She's held a number of different chapter offices over the years and is currently head of the Speakers Bureau as well as Chapter Historian. She can be reached by e-mail at ramey@technical-writing.net. Her website is www.technical-writing.net.

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Tools and Tips

Creating Well-formed XML Files with Word's User Forms and VBA

By Bob Mohr

Last month this column introduced you to Word's User Forms and how they can be used to turn user input to character-delimited text files. This month's column takes the use of a User Form a step further by showing how it can be used to create a well-formed, hierarchical XML file.

Why use a form to create an XML file? Well, let's say you're gathering survey data and wanted to save your findings in an XML file. How would you do it? Would you use a paper form, key in all of the data *and* type the XML tags surrounding each data elements? Would you use some method of collecting the data electronically then manually key the tags around the data elements? You have to add the XML tags some how, right? Either method invites opportunities for typos in the XML tags. Using a form, as suggested in this column, eliminates the possibility of typos in the tags because the XML tags are not entered manually. You concentrate on the data and let the form handle the XML.

Figures 1 & 2 show the User Form used to collect survey data necessary for a sample XML file. The information at the top of the form represents the highest level in the hierarchy. The tabbed areas of the form represent sublevels in the XML hierarchy of tags. Each field in a tabbed area contains the lowest level of data elements.

Figure 1. Sample form showing the Job Info fields

Figure 2. Sample form showing the Contact Info fields

The User Form is created using the VBA editor. The quickest way to start the VBA editor is by pressing Alt+F11. Once there, you can start designing your form. (Refer to last month's article for details on creating a User Form.) You can also download this same sample form from my Web site (www.writemohr.com) and actually run it for yourself to see the XML file that it creates. You'll find the form listed under Free Stuff in the table of contents.

Aside from the obvious differences in the appearance of this form from last month's form, the operations of reading input values and writing them to a file remain the same. The only difference lies in adding to the code the XML tags used to label the form's data elements. (Refer to last month's article for details on creating/opening a text file.)

The following code starts the ball rolling by adding the XML header information to the output file:

```
Public Sub XML_form()
    enter_filename           'call the new file dialog box
    Open filename For Append As #1 'open file for writing
    Print #1, "<?xml version=""1.0""?>" 'write XML header info
    Print #1, "<customer>" 'outermost XML tag
    UserForm2.Show         'call and display the user form
End Sub
```

(Continued on page 11)

Tools and Tips

(Continued from page 10)

Since each form element is known, along with its position in the XML hierarchy, it's easy to devise XML tags for each element. When the **Save Data** button is clicked, the tags are simply included with the data being written to the file. For example, the following code snippet shows how the XML tags are wrapped around the output data:

```
Private Sub CommandButton2_Click()
`This is the Save Data button
`Wrap appropriate XML tags around textbox data
`Write data to the file when the button is activated
    Print #1, , "<contact>"
    Print #1, , , "<fname>"; TextBox1.Value; "</fname>"
    Print #1, , , "<lname>"; TextBox2.Value; "</lname>"
    Print #1, , , "<title>"; TextBox3.Value; "</title>"
    Print #1, , "</contact>"
    Print #1, , "<job_info>"
    Print #1, , , "<company>"; TextBox4.Value; "</company>"
    Print #1, , , "<address>"; TextBox5.Value; "</address>"
    Print #1, , , "<city>"; TextBox6.Value; "</city>"
    Print #1, , , "<state>"; UCase(TextBox7.Value); "</state>"
    Print #1, , , "<zip>"; TextBox8.Value; "</zip>"
    Print #1, , , "<webURL>"; TextBox9.Value; "</webURL>"
    Print #1, , "</job_info>"
    Print #1, , "<contact_info>"
    Print #1, , , "<work>"; TextBox10.Value; "</work>"
    Print #1, , , "<home>"; TextBox11.Value; "</home>"
    Print #1, , , "<cell>"; TextBox12.Value; "</cell>"
    Print #1, , , "<pager>"; TextBox13.Value; "</pager>"
    Print #1, , , "<email>"; TextBox14.Value; "</email>"
    Print #1, , "</contact_info>"

    initialize_boxes                `empty the textboxes/input fields
    TextBox1.SetFocus                `return cursor to first name field
End Sub
```

Near the bottom of the subroutine above is a call to another subroutine that sets the values of the input fields back to null values to prevent writing data from a previous entry. The "TextBox1.SetFocus" command simply places the cursor in the first input field as a convenience to the user.

Since this subroutine is doing most of the work for this form, let's take a closer look at it. By the time the **Save Data** button has been clicked, a new XML file has already been created and is waiting for data to be written to it.

Clicking the **Save Data** button causes the subroutine above to write *strings* of data to the waiting file. These strings can be characters literally strung together and enclosed in quotes or they can be character strings combined (*concatenated*) with data values and other character strings. A comma in a print line represents a tab stop and a semicolon means to add the next character immediately following the previous character. Consider the first 5 lines being output:

```
1.   Print #1, , "<contact>"
2.   Print #1, , , "<fname>"; TextBox1.Value; "</fname>"
3.   Print #1, , , "<lname>"; TextBox2.Value; "</lname>"
4.   Print #1, , , "<title>"; TextBox3.Value; "</title>"
5.   Print #1, , "</contact>"
```

(Continued on page 12)

Tools and Tips

(Continued from page 11)

When the five lines above are combined with the XML header info, the result might look like this:

```
<?xml version="1.0"?>
<customer>
  <contact>
    <fname>John</fname>
    <lname>Doe</lname>
    <title>Technical Writer</title>
  </contact>
```

Notice the tab effect caused by the commas, and the lack of spaces between the data elements and their tags caused by the semicolons. The remainder of the file's content would follow in like manner, according to the groupings of the tags. The macro continues to "loop" indefinitely until the **Close** button is clicked. At that time, the last tag is written, the file is closed and the macro stops:

```
Private Sub CommandButton1_Click()
  ' this is the Close button
  Print #1, "</customer>"      'write the last closing tag
  Close #1                    'close file when finished
  End                          'end macro
End Sub
```

That's all there is to it. The form collects the data. The macro wraps the data with corresponding tags, and both are written to the file. Imagine having to enter 50 data records to create your XML file. Now imagine having to enter the XML tags for all 50 records—not to mention tab stops to improve the readability of the file. That's a lot of extra typing!

If you use Word, and you need to create data files, get to know User Forms and VBA. They're a powerful combination.

Bob Mohr is a senior member of STC and a technical writer at BillingZone, LLC. He can be reached via email at bob.mohr@billingzone.com.



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Metric Quiz

(Questions on page 7)

Answers

- 24°C is short-sleeve weather
- 1 kilogram (250 gram servings)
- 2 metres
- 5 hours
- No, because 350 ml is less than 12 oz.
- Yes, a litre is slightly more than a quart and a fifth is 0.80 of a quart
- 100 kilograms
- Yes, 90-60-90 cm is very close to 36-24-36 in.
- Approximately 100 metres.

Didn't do well? Maybe buying a copy of Valerie Antoine's "The Metric System ... Are You Ready?" (available from STC, \$4.00) would be helpful.

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Educational Programs in Technical Communication

(Continued from page 7)

one has helped to shape me as a technical writer.

Other related writing programs, such as journalism, can provide technical writers with transferrable skills or an entrance to the technical branch of journalism; being a journalist also gives writers experience interviewing subject matter experts, organizing information, identifying important concepts, and writing concisely — some of the key skills necessary to succeed as a technical writer. At our November STC chapter meeting, we heard from CMU, Penn State, and Point Park College faculty about their exciting programs related to technical writing, professional writing, and journalism.

Beyond the invaluable training technical communication degree programs provide to technical writers-to-be, the expansion of such programs also validates the technical communication field as a worthwhile profession. Gone are the days when you need to “pretend” to be doing

another job only to actually be documenting your company’s products. Gone are the days of arriving at the technical writing profession after years in another field. I suppose saying goodbye to those days may be a little sad — there’s certainly something to be said for arriving at a field with years of subject matter and life experience behind you. Yet, at the same time, it reassures us that technical writing as a profession is going strong. Young people are choosing to become technical writers right out of college, or even high school. That is a comforting thought, as we look to the future — as we look to the next generation of technical communicators. (As you will see in my upcoming article this spring, “Raising the Next Generation of Technical Writers,” I have been thinking about the ways in which our society shapes young people and how we are going to train an extremely technical-literate generation to explain technical information to novices, if any novices remain.)

Relevant websites:

<http://english.cmu.edu/>

<http://english.la.psu.edu/>

<http://www.ace.neu.edu/>

www.east.asu.edu/ecollege/multimedia36

<http://www.ppc.edu/academics/programs/programs.html#Journalism>

http://www.stc.org/academic_database.html

Christina Downs, who has been a technical writer in the software field for over 6 years, holds an M.A. in Professional Writing from CMU and a B.A. in English Writing and a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Pittsburgh. She currently works at Ansoft Corp., at Station Square, documenting engineering software. Chris is also Managing Editor of the Blue Pencil and can be reached at chrdowns@aol.com or stcdowns@aol.com.

November Meeting Minutes

(Continued from page 7)

Penn State is also finalizing a technical publishing certificate program. It will concentrate on the tools of our trade, and it, too will be a part-time program.

Carnegie-Mellon

Karen Schnakenberg, Ph.D.

Director of Professional and Technical Writing and Senior Lecturer, Department of English

CMU offers many degrees in writing. These include a BA and an MA in Professional Writing, and a BS in Technical Communication. All three programs concentrate on the craft of writing. The MA degree is a 3-semester program that teaches writing, design, and rhetoric, and gives the student experience in writing for various industries. It also allows the

student to take some electives in other university departments.

CMU also offers a Masters of Design in Communication Planning and Information Design. This program combines verbal and visual skills and requires experience in either design or writing.

Some graduate programs could be done part-time, but many of the courses are offered only during the day. CMU has an excellent job placement record. Students can be aspiring writers or professionals already in the field.

Point Park College

Dane Claussen, Ph.D., M.B.A

Associate Professor and Director of Journalism and Mass Communication Graduate Program

Point Park focuses on journalistic writing. The college offers a masters degree in journalism and mass communication. Graduate work at Point Park is geared to the working student. Most courses are offered both in the evening and during the day. Courses include both theoretical and practical skills work and emphasize development of writing skills. Students typically obtain work in journalism, advertising, or corporate public relations. There has been an explosion in weekly and special newspapers, so print journalists are most likely to find work in small cities. And salaries are rising — a welcome surprise.

Point Park also is also developing a masters degree that combines business with journalism.

2000 -- Rules for Writers

Reprinted from the February 2000 issue of *Blue Pencil*. Editor's note: Some of these rules have become guidelines rather than firm rules, which are readily "broken" as necessary for clarity, style, or audience needs.

1. Verbs HAS to agree with their subjects.
2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
3. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
4. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
5. Avoid clichés like the plague. (They're old hat)
6. Also, always avoid annoying alliteration.
7. Be more or less specific.
8. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are (usually) unnecessary.
9. Also too, never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
10. No sentence fragments.
11. Contractions aren't necessary and shouldn't be used.
12. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
13. Do not be redundant; do not use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
14. One should NEVER generalize.
15. Comparisons are as bad as clichés.
16. Don't use no double negatives.
17. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
20. The passive voice is to be invoiced.
21. Eliminate commas, that are, not necessary. Parenthetical words however should be enclosed in commas.
22. Never use a big word when a diminutive one would suffice.
23. Kill all exclamation points!!!
24. Use words correctly, irregardless of how others use them.
25. Understatement is always the absolute best way to put forth earth shaking ideas.
26. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
27. If you've heard it once, you've heard it a thousand times: Resist hyperbole; not one writer in a million can use it correctly.
28. Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not needed.
29. Puns are for children, not groan readers.
30. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
31. Even IF a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
32. Who needs rhetorical questions?
33. Proofread careuly to see if you any words out.
34. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement... and finally.

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1979 -- Ten Guidelines for Business Communicators

Communication Consultants Offer Ten Guidelines for Business Communicators

Reprinted from the September 1979-80 issue of *Blue Pencil*.

After twenty-five years of working with the top management of many national corporations, Ronald Goodman and Company of Des Moines, Iowa, have put together a set of ten guiding principles for good business communication. They offer them as "fundamental trueisms that have stood the test of time" because most of them sound so familiar to those in the business. But how many of us can say we have never failed to observe them? Here is their list:

- Keep it simple (avoid jargon).
- Be dramatic (let the excitement of the business show through).
- Be sensitive (to why people react as they do).
- Be ambisextrous (half your audience is women).
- Be imaginative (in packaging your message).
- Be brief (with important things up front).
- Be open (without legalistic coverups).
- Be sure your product backs you up by giving full value.
- Be honest (tell it straight).
- Be human (admit your mistakes).

Reprinted from "Communication Notes", Vol. 5 No. 6; Source: Ronald Goodman and Company, Inc.

STC: How Things Have Changed

By Beverly Spagnolo

When I was asked to write an article about technical writing, STC in particular, and how it has changed over the last 45 years, I had an opportunity to read over *Blue Pencils* since 1973! My main goal in the research was to find out what has changed, what has stayed the same, and how those things may have affected our profession.

I decided to look not only at the major sweeping differences—technology in particular, for example—but look at the little things that are different, and those that have stayed the same. Here, then, are some observations of the last three decades.

What has Changed

- **STC meetings.** They used to have a “social hour with cash bar” that was eventually called “R&R” (should this really be the first thing mentioned?). What a sign of the changing times that we gather now generally in places without alcohol, and there’s not an official social hour. Perhaps our schedules have become so hectic that we only have time for a meeting, but is it at the cost of valuable networking?
- **No longer at Skibo Hall.** For years, the local chapter of STC regularly met at Skibo Hall at Carnegie Mellon University, but the building has been torn down. So now, the chapter meets at different locations—restaurants, corporations, and libraries—all of which provide a nice variety for our monthly meetings.
- **Women’s roles.** It’s hard to remember when “you’ve come a long way, baby” was such an important slogan, but in 1975, the subject of the March meeting was “Will Women Survive in Communication?” It was noted that “women’s contributions to the direction of human striving are be-

coming ever more significant”. Ten years later, the Pittsburgh chapter was 52 percent women, and now, it is even higher.

- **Blue Pencil—should it change its name, or logo, or design?** Every couple of years, the masthead of the BP changed, and the general layout also changed somewhat. And every couple of years, the question arose about changing the name—was the name’s connotation obsolete? Was it catchy? The biggest change probably occurred this year, with the BP going to a completely online format.
- **Interaction with other organizations.** Our chapter used to meet regularly with the local chapters of the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) and the Special Libraries Association (SLA). It has also met with the Chemist’s Club, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), and ARMA (does anybody know what this organization is?). Were the joint meetings advantageous? Did we gain from meeting with other organizations? Or were they more a hindrance to advancing our Society’s goals?
- **Remember metrics?** In 1978, a BP article cautioned that we would soon all be using a new measurement language. Metrics generally did not catch on in the U.S., but do you wonder why we buy 2-liter bottles of Diet Coke, but half-gallon cartons of milk?
- **Obviously, technology:**
 - An article in the September 1973 *Blue Pencil* talks about a new software called Electronics Document Communications (EDC), which includes spelling and grammar checking, electronic mail, word

processing, and other capabilities, all for the bargain price of \$100,000. Now, what does it cost to upgrade to Microsoft Office XP?

- The September 1973 meeting featured a presentation on word processing centers in corporations and how they would increase productivity and reduce costs. By 1980, we were learning about gradually phasing word processors into our corporate lives, replacing the typewriter, and predicting the paperless office by 1990. In 1983, we got the news that staring at a computer terminal was inevitable, and that soon we would be giving up our typists to write and edit our work ourselves.

- When word processors started to become common, we were faced with a myriad of software products, some of them even with a spelling dictionary! How many of these are familiar to you now? WordStar Professional, PCWrite, Multi-Mate, Works, not to mention good old WordPerfect and Word. Don’t forget that you could save your documents on 5 1/4” floppy disks!

- In the same issue of *Blue Pencil* that tells us we are becoming more than just writers, but also document designers (this was in 1989), we were invited to an upcoming meeting on stress management. Does anyone else see any correlation there?

- By 1995, we were preparing a seminar on “Creating Interactive Media,” which was sponsored by IICS, IABC, and STC. That’s a long way from the paper and pad of 1975. We were also getting started with Windows Help and learning about Rich Text Format (RTF), topics, hyperlinks, tags, and index entries.

(Continued on page 17)

1975 -- Women in Communication

Will Women Survive in Communication? March 12 Meeting of Pittsburgh Chapter STC

Reprinted from the February 1975 issue of Blue Pencil.

Mrs. Christy McClure, account executive with Ketchum, McLeod, and Grove, is a much-sought speaker. The Chapter can confidently expect that she will ably and entertainingly represent the ladies. Women's contributions to the direction of human striving are becoming ever more significant. Mrs. McClure has, in more than one role, sat at a vantage point for affecting as well as reporting on the latest developments. Two years ago she was appointed to the new consumer group in Ketchum's Public Relations Department. That assignment followed a three-year stint in the Editorial Promotion Department of the Pittsburgh Press. She prepared for these active posts by earning a degree in journalism from Ohio University. Come to the March meeting at the Pittsburgh Press Club, 300 Sixth Avenue, downtown. In addition to enjoying the featured speaker, you can join the discussion on the Chapter's communications employment service. That's Wednesday, March 12. Social hour with cash bar is 5:30. For \$7.25 you can dine on pot roast at 6:30. Or you can attend the 7:30 program only, at no cost. For dinner reservations call John Castelli, 923-2345, no later than 5:00 P.M., Monday, March 10, 1975.

STC Joins PTC

STC Pittsburgh began interacting with the Pittsburgh Technology Council in November 2001. We now have been accepted into their IT network. This gives us access to their meeting facilities in the VoiceStream building at the Technology Center on Second Avenue. It also taps us into their advertisements and information exchanges. The PTC web site is www.pghtech.org.

1978 -- Top Secret

Reprinted from the November 1978-79 issue of Blue Pencil.

One of the most closely guarded secrets of the era can now be told, how an anonymous group of grammarians, working in secrecy in a remote section of the country, has succeeded in splitting the infinitive!

The so-called "Bronx Project" involved the use of a specially designed electronic device patterned after the digital computer and called the Infinitron. Although exact design details are withheld for reasons of national security, it is possible to describe the general process.

From a stockpile of fissionable gerunds, encased in leaden clichés to prevent radioactivity, a suitable subject is withdrawn and placed in the Infinitron together with a small amount of syntax. All the material must be handled with great care as the slightest slip may lead to a painful solecism. Once inside the apparatus, the gerund is whirled around at great speed while being bombarded by small participles. A technician with a gender counter stands by ready to warn the others if the Alpha-Betical rays are released in such number as to render the philologists neuter.

The effect of the bombardment is to disassociate the whirling parts of speech from one another until, at length, an infinitive splits off from its gerund and is ejected from the machine. It is picked up gingerly with a pair of hanging clauses and plunged in a bath of pleonasm. When it cools, it is ready for use.

The effect is often asked, "Can other countries split the infinitive?" I think we can safely answer, "No." Though it is true that Russia, for one, is known to have large supplies of thesaurus hidden away behind the Plural Mountains. However, it is doubtful if the Russians possess the scientific technique. They have the infinitive, but not the know-how.

And that is something on which to congratulate our own pioneers in the field of grammatical research. Once it was thought that the infinitive could never be split - at least not without terrible repercussions. But in our time it is quite possible, given the necessary skill and courage, to unquestionably and without the slightest shadow of a doubt, despite numerous unbelievers and others of little foresight and imagination, let alone the willingness to bear the cost no matter how high or troublesome, troublesome in the sense of devoting time, time that could otherwise be devoted to more pleasurable tasks, as our forefathers once said and has been heard throughout the land, a land beautiful for spacious skies accomplish this modern miracle.

See how easy, once you know how?

From Steel to Software: Industrial Age to Information Age

By Christina Downs

Pittsburgh has been transformed over the past 40 years from an economy of industry to one of information and technology that is very service-based, from a city rich with large manufacturing companies such as steel mills and glass makers to a city ripe with small technology companies such as software start-ups. This evolution has certainly affected the technical writing profession. Today, more technical writers specialize in software documentation, while in the past, many specialized in hardware documentation, engineering reporting, and other manufacturing-related documentation or testing. Software documentation is probably the fastest-growing specialization of the past five to ten years. (I don't have any statistics, so this is just a guess from my experience and that of others I've spoken with.)

(Continued on page 17)

STC: How Things Have Changed

(Continued from page 15)

- No sooner did we get the hang of online help than we were learning about that newfangled World Wide Web, and learning the essentials of website design. All of a sudden, everybody was posting a website, looking for his or her 15 minutes of fame.

- Today, many of the articles in the *Blue Pencil* cover the tools we use to create our instruction documents, reference information, procedures, reports, proposals, presentations, training materials, websites, or whatever else we may be producing—the list is endless. And there's always something else new. We have to keep running just to stay in place.

Recurring Themes

- **Blue Pencil continuing to win STC awards.** The writers, editors, and contributors to the *Blue Pencil* have obviously been doing something very good over the last 25 years. As I read through the past issues, I noticed that the BP won awards in STC competition several times. So for all the consternation about whether the name is right or the layout or design should change, many people think we're doing a good job.

- **Increasing membership.** Nearly every year one of the goals of the incoming STC officers has been to increase membership, not only at the local level but also at the regional and national levels. In 1977, total membership in STC was 3,085; today, its more than 25,000 members including "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" (from the national STC website)! That's an astounding 810% increase! The theme has remained the

same with great success.

- **Evaluating the need for certification/accreditation.** An ad hoc committee was formed in 1975 to study a program for accrediting technical communicators, and the subject was mentioned again in 1981. At this past November's meeting, we heard about different writing degrees and certifications available here in Pittsburgh. The debate continues on whether or not this should occur, since there are also those who believe that while a basic education is essential, the value of additional schooling or certification is relatively small once someone is on the job.

- **Meeting the challenge of presenting technical information simply.** Isn't that what our profession is really all about? Whether the writers of 1975 were using a pen and paper, or we in 2001 are using a keyboard and monitor, we are still always faced with the challenge of taking huge amounts of detailed and frequently confusing information and making it understandable for whoever our audience might be.

- **Looking back at how things used to be.** In October 1976, then-Chairman (the title changed to President in 1979, with no explanation in the *Blue Pencil*; does anyone know why?) Bob Zabielski wrote an article entitled "The More Things Change, the More They Are the Same". He was reflecting on the previous 10 years, back to 1965, and he asked these questions:

- How can we get new members?
- How can we get members involved?
- What kind of programs will boost attendance?
- Should we strive for certification?
- Is there an echo in here?

Do the questions sound familiar?

When you get down to the bottom line, however, and look at our profession— as technical writers, documentation specialists, communications gurus, or whatever the current buzzword is to describe us— Janis Ramey, in an article she wrote in January 2000 about how things have changed in the Pittsburgh STC chapter, said it best: "I still have to put words together."

Beverly Spagnolo has been a member of the writing world (technical and otherwise) for over 15 years. She has written user guides, how-to manuals, on-line help, policies and procedures manuals, training programs, marketing proposals and brochures, and resumes (when she's job hunting). She holds an M.A. in English from Duquesne University. Currently, she is owner and vice president at Klauscher & Harai Architects, where her husband (the Klauscher) designs terrific buildings, and she runs the business, and is always trying to get business. Writing still takes up a good portion of her time, completing proposals, marketing collateral, and doing some freelance on the side.

From Steel to Software

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What does this mean for the technical communication profession?

Well, for one, the computer now plays a much larger role for the technical writer, both in production and in subject matter. Advances in tools have led writers from cuneiform to word processors to computers — meaning more technical writers today need to understand computers on some level, whether as a production tool or as subject matter to document.

Writers today are more often considered a part of the development team, rather than a member of the support team. This change has been especially evident over the past 5 years or so and is probably

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Technological Snowballs

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Break. There was no formatting for less than a line, no selection of font styles or sizes, no automatic word wrap, hyphenation, or spellchecking, and certainly no callouts or graphics. The writers printed documents on long streams of perforated paper from dot matrix printers and proofed them carefully. We had to proof the format characters as well because they weren't translated until the final document was printed at the printer's from an electronic file. We got only one free "proof print" from the printer, so the copy had to be as near perfect as possible to minimize corrections—that proof print was the first time we got to see what the document would actually look like. The file was delivered to the printer on a big reel of magnetic tape.

For every technical communicator who was born and raised with PCs, there's another who has a technological history story similar to mine. But, at the time, we were considered to be high-tech. I remember snickering when I spoke with a recruiter who was looking for technical writers for a nuclear submarine plant—they were still writing copy longhand and submitting it to a word processing unit. Soon after that, I saw a demonstration of Kodak's Interleaf publishing system and realized just how behind the times we really were.

Some chapter members recently dug through the *Blue Pencil* archive in search of information for this issue. We found some interesting articles that demonstrated how technology has evolved for STC Pittsburgh Chapter members.

- September 1973: "Word Processing Centers Featured at September Meeting"—This article (and the meeting it referenced) discussed the then-innovative word processing concept that was intended to achieve higher productivity and lower costs. Typists who were usually assigned to individuals were segregated into a word processing unit and worked on whatever document was next in the queue. This prevented any single typist from having "down time," as would often happen when she (and they were all shes) had been assigned to an individual. It also meant that typists (or word processors as they became known) could do what they did best instead of filing, answering phones, or other office tasks, which were relegated to lower-paid staff, and the higher-paid writers could concentrate on and produce more writing. The word processing center remained the standard for office management until desktop PCs became more cost-effective.

- September 1976: "Kickoff Meet-

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1975 -- Typical Typos

Dateline Houston, reprinted in Blue Pencil, March 1975.

"The typographic error

Is a slippery thing, and sly.

You can hunt till you are dizzy

But it somehow will get by.

Till the forms are off the presses

It is strange how still it keeps;

It shrinks down in a corner

And it never stirs or peeps.

The typographic error

Is too small for human eyes,

Till the ink is on the paper...

When it grows to mountain size.

The boss, he stares with horror,

Then grabs his hair and groans;

The copy reader drops his head

Upon his hands and moans.

The remainder of the issue

May be clean as clean can be,

But that typographic error

Is the only thing you see."

1979 -- The Technical Writing Game

By Marguerite Krupp

Reprinted from the September 1979-80 issue of Blue Pencil.

In many respects, producing a technical manual is like playing a game. The number of players can vary, but there are certain fixed rules, including a given starting and ending point and a criterion of success. There is also a certain element of change involved. Using the metaphor of a game, this paper/presentation examines some of

the critical areas of decision and chance that shape a technical writer's world.

Instructions for Playing

This is a game for one or more players. In addition to this game board you need a spinner, die, or other random number generator, and one playing piece (button, eraser stub, etc.) for each player. Assume that at the start of the game, each player has just been given the mythical specifications of a new product. The goal is to

produce a printed user manual for that product. If two or more people are playing, the winner is the one who achieves the goal first.

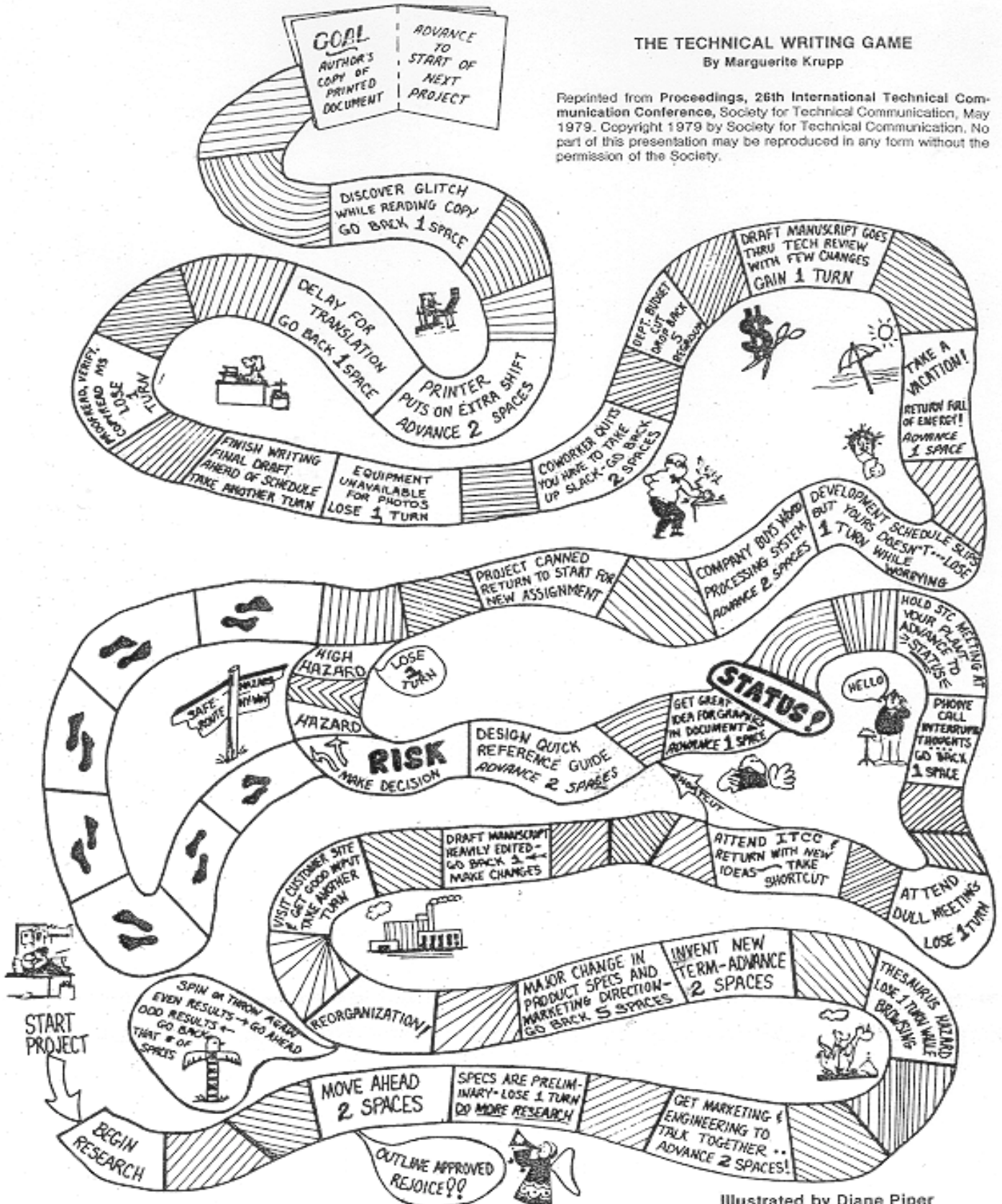
Note: Although the game is written from the perspective of a software technical writer who works for a multinational company, the situations it presents are common to a number of technical writing operations. The players in "The Technical Writing Game" may be writers, editors, and managers, but the real winners of the game are the users of the documents we produce.

(Instructions given on page 18)

THE TECHNICAL WRITING GAME

By Marguerite Krupp

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Illustrated by Diane Piper

Technological Snowballs

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ing Emphasizes Technical Communications Technology”—Chapter members were introduced to current marvels of electronic technology including full-color copiers, graphics generators, microfiche, acoustic couplers (“enable typewriter-like terminals to enter information into, and print information from, a data processing system using ordinary voice-grade telephone circuits”), remote scan television cameras (“read printed information directly into a data processing system”), and a Rapidfax (“transmits a perfectly clear document to Brussels in about 30 seconds”). At this meeting the presenter, Ron Field, Manager of Communications Services at Westinghouse’s commercial nuclear group, pointed out that “the information explosion requires that everyone who communicates on a level more complex than speaking or writing a postcard to mother must recognize some of the options available for more efficient information handling.”

- October 1976: “Computer, Mini-computer, Microcomputer—The Technological Snowballs Roll On”—Chapter members learned the difference among the types of computers and what they could do, but desktop PCs were still years away.
- October 1978: “Getting Your Foot in the Door with Computers”—Technical Communicators are discovering that the number of jobs requiring candidates with computer systems or science background is soaring. The presentation provided a “syllabus of computer technology self-education” that included an electronics fundamentals course. The presenter emphasized that “computer-oriented technical communications must continue to read to stay on top of this rapidly changing field.”
- November 1981: Jim Oeschlager, a freelancer, talked on the transition from writing for printed media to writ-

ing for electronic media. “Electronic media,” in this context, meant a video presentation.

- December 1981: “On-Line at Westinghouse”—A field trip to Westinghouse Industry Systems Division introduced visitors to the new Genigraphics slide production equipment. “Sitting at a keyboard, a young artist began to produce color slides on the CRT right in front of us. Using the language of the system, he specified shading, color, typeface, type size, and actual textual material. As we watched, the slide was created on the screen, line by line. It was fascinating.” Microsoft PowerPoint wasn’t invented yet.
- March 1983: “Own Your Own?”—Chapter members leaned the facts to be considered in buying a personal computer. (I bought a Compaq PC in 1984 that included Microsoft Word and a dot-matrix printer for \$7,000, almost the price of a new car at that time.)
- April 1983: “Graphic Arts: Innovation and Revolution”—Technical artists of the day were expected to become familiar with new terms like image display and image processing, plotters, light pens, joysticks, trackballs, graphic tablets, user-programmable overlays, menu choices, and high-resolution monitors. “Several text processing computers are already on the market that also produce graphs and bar charts.”
- October 1983: “Documentation of Computer Systems”—The career shift to user documentation as the primary emphasis for technical writers is well underway.
- October 1983: “The Fading Blue Pencil”—Stan Higgins, a long-time chapter member, laments the passing of the blue pencil in the wake of online editing. A blue pencil, considered **the** tool for technical writers and editors

since the very beginning of our profession, was used to mark up copy (paper copy, not SGML markup!) and was preferable to a red pencil.

- November 1987: “Technology Update” becomes a recurring column in the newsletter. The first column reviewed WordStar Professional 4 and a shareware program, PCWrite.
- December 1988: What do technical writers want for Christmas? According to the chapter president John Clark, “a Sun workstation, or maybe an “almost typeset quality” 600-dpi laser printer,” neither of which was affordable for most of us.
- December 1988: “User-friendly” appears in print for the first time!
- February 1993: Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is a topic for a feature article.
- Summer 1995: “Multimedia” is the topic for a seminar sponsored jointly by the Pittsburgh chapters of the International Interactive Communications Society (IICS), the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and the Society for Technical Communication (STC).
- September 1995: “Getting Started with Windows Help,” a reprint of an article published in *The Edge*, the STC newsletter for the Advanced Technology Professional Interest Committee, gave many members their first look at online help authoring.
- May 1996: “Internet Opens Doors of Opportunity for Technical Communicators”—Chapter member Chris Keefer discovers the Internet.
- September 1997: “Writing for Translation”—The word “globally” enters into our everyday conversation and consideration.
- 1998–1999: The chapter email list

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Technological Snowballs

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is launched, and the chapter website goes online.

- January 2000: “Then and Now”—Janis Ramey writes about how the profession (and Pittsburgh) have changed

since her student days. “I’m expected to write, type, layout, create graphics, revise, proofread, format, work with printers, transfer files electronically, add motion and sound, manage databases and search capabilities, index,

learn and use specialized applications, upgrade both software and hardware, link files and sites, convert file formats, and on and on.” And she has the technology sitting on her desktop to do it all.

Those technological snowballs roll on.

From Steel to Software

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related to the size of today’s companies, the type of technology documented, the type of documentation, and the broadening of the roles of technical writers (from writer to designer and tester).

Typical subject matter experts have also changed over the years. In the past, writers worked with the engineers and factory supervisors, and some of the writers WERE the engineers. Today, the majority of technical writers probably work with software developers (although some also do work with engineers and other SMEs, in addition to the programmers). The key difference is that, in the past, with computers playing less of a part or no part, there were fewer programmers for technical writers to question as subject matter experts; today, computer programmers are abundant, and other subject matter experts (such as the engineers or others designing the underlying technology) are now more behind-the-scenes.

In general, no matter whom the SME, the relationship between writers and SMEs has dramatically improved over the years. I believe this has occurred primarily for five reasons:

- Technology has become more accessible to everyone, including technical writers.
- More technical writers are trained in both writing and technology, whether on-the-job, self-taught, or through a university.
- SMEs have recognized writing as a specialized skill they are not quali-

fied to do (or do not want to do) and that technical writers provide valuable skills.

- Companies have recognized the need for good documentation.
- Companies are growing smaller and more open, with flatter management structures and improved overall communication.

Whatever the reasons, however, this improved communication and mutual respect has dramatically improved the quality of documentation at many companies.

A further even more recent trend, spurred by the ease of use of computers, is that of online documentation, such as online help and web design. HTML and XML have made coding much more accessible to everyone, and online media can reach many more users. In the industrial age, customers couldn’t log on and buy products immediately or ask support questions electronically. The information age has changed every area of a company’s corporate strategy: from marketing to sales to customer support to documentation.

Technical writers are also starting to become much more concerned with the overall design of the documentation they write (whether print or online), and more writers are being trained in design and some are calling themselves information designers. Appearance and usability matter more today, so it is no longer good enough for the content to be clear, concise, accurate, and engaging. It must also look good, and it must be easy for

users to find what they need. During this information age, customers demand more from companies than ever before.

A technical writer still needs to know how to address his or her specific audience appropriately, just as twenty years ago, but the audiences and subjects are different now — meaning writers have had to change some of their methods over the years. As Pittsburgh continues to become even more known for technology and medicine, technical writers will continue to find their roles changing. The key trait required by writers is flexibility. We must be willing to learn new technologies that we cannot even begin to imagine today. We need to be willing to transfer our skills to different areas and learn new things and not always do everything the “same old way.” If writers over the years had not welcomed change, the technical writing profession would not be at the point where it is today. Our profession is all about change.

In ten years, someone will again be writing an article about how the changes in Pittsburgh over the previous decade have affected the technical communication profession. After witnessing the rate at which technology has been advancing, I know they will have more than enough to talk about!

Christina Downs is a technical writer at Ansoft Corp., where she documents engineering software, and Managing Editor of Blue Pencil. Chris can be reached at stcdowns@aol.com or chrdowns@aol.com.

Holiday Party Cancelled

After much discussion, Alan Houser and I have decided to cancel the December STC holiday party. We wanted to have a nice event for members and their families, but everything we considered was either cancelled (the Zoo lights for example), too expensive, or was otherwise impossibly problematic for one reason or another.

We'll try again next year.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful holiday filled with the true spirit of the season. Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year!"

Regards,

Mary Ecsedy

President, STC - Pittsburgh Chapter



**SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS
AVAILABLE**

Each year, STC offers scholarships to full-time graduate and undergraduate students pursuing careers in technical communication.

Fourteen awards of \$2,000 each will be granted for academic year 2002-2003.
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LOOKING BACK AND FORWARD IN THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION TIMELINE

