Blue pencil

Adding Value as a Technical Writer

By Nancy Carpenter and Meg Papa

On November 10, John Clark led an information-packed chapter meeting on the value of a technical writer. There was so much information, in fact, that the summary was too big for one issue of the Blue Pencil. So this article is the first of two on the subject.

John started by talking about three mental models of use to technical writers. The first model, KWL, describes what our thought processes typically are/should be: We define what we **know**, we identify those issues we **wonder** about, and we decide how we want to **learn** about those issues. The implication is that the successful technical communicator is never satisfied with what her or she knows, but is trying to find out more all the time.

The second mental model, KTP, defines elements of a tech writer's job skills. The most basic element is the **knowledge** of the product and procedures of the workplace. The second element is the set of **tool** (software) skills we need to perform our duties. The final element is becoming more important all the time: **people** skills. We need to be able to convince people that we can help them, and that we know what we are talking about.

The final mental model John discussed, the AEP model, addressed the level of input the tech writer has to the final product. At the highest level, the tech writer is the **author** of the document/artifact. This is the level we should all strive for, because it is

here we have the most impact on the final product. The next level down is the **editor**, who has some influence on document structure and word choice. At the lowest level, we act as **publishers**, making already finished documents "pretty."

We then discussed what "value" is, and John did his best to make us think like business people: value is defined as what one gets compared to what one pays! We can have all these lofty ideas of what value means to us, but what counts is what it means to the people paying us. Value is money well spent, so our responsibility is to convince those with the purse strings that we are indeed money well spent. How we can do that will be discussed in more detail in the second half of this article next month.

John then had the meeting attendees break into three groups to answer nine questions about technical communication. Group and general discussion yielded the following:

1. *Why is good technical communication important?*

We provide a bridge between the end users and the subject matter experts. We satisfy the needs and help the users to benefit from the product. Tech writers serve as user advocates.

2. *How does good technical communication affect the bottom line? (such as less technical support required, satisfied customers bring repeat business and word of mouth business)*

Good writing results in less wasted demand on technical support, shorter and less frequent downtimes, more return sales, broader customer base.

3. *How can good technical communication prevent or diffuse lawsuits? (such as safety warnings, fewer mistakes in understanding a product or process)*

Clear language helps users to use the product more safely and improves their level of understanding. Warnings can prove that a company made a good faith effort.

4. *How does good technical communication smooth the product development process? (such as represents the user)*

It depends on when we enter the process. During the design phase, we can write the design specifications, which can clarify the work of non-native English speakers, clarify

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President's Column

By Nancy Ott, President, STC Pittsburgh

Back in May, I noticed that the reflector had fallen off the back of my older son's bicycle. I couldn't find a replacement that I liked at my local bike shop and ended up ordering one from an online sports equipment store. The price was great and shipping was free, so I ordered one for everyone in the family.

The reflectors arrived on schedule and were pretty cool. They blink in three different patterns, they came with batteries, and they were easy to mount on our bikes. They've stayed on through a summer and fall of heavy bike riding. My kids really like them.

So what does this have to do with technical communication? Here's the text on the back of the reflector box:

> **WARNING! Not to be used in a falshing mode on the road when attached to your cycle as it is in cotravention of the road veicle and lighting regulations.**

Maybe it's just a bad translation job, but this is one of the sloppiest product labels I've ever seen. Didn't anyone proofread it before it was sent to the printer? And which country's road regulations does a "falshing" light violate? No wonder these reflectors were on sale! Who would buy a product with this kind of labeling? If no-body at the company bothered to read the label, how can we trust them to make a good product? I certainly wouldn't have bought these reflectors if I had seen them in a store instead of ordering them online, sight unseen.

Yet the bike reflectors are not a bad product. They just have bad packaging.

Most of us aren't writing copy for product labels, of course, but a good many of us are writing white papers, brochures, information sheets, web copy, and other marketing collateral. Many of us are also writing installation guides, assembly guides, and other documents that are the first things a customer uses during a product evaluation. These pieces are like the packaging on the bike reflectors.

Customers base their purchasing decisions on the information we technical communicators provide, especially those of us who are working in technical marketing. While good products may have bad marketing collateral and documentation, the converse usually isn't true.

So don't think that what you do isn't important — it is, sometimes vitally. (How to get your employer to recognize this is a topic for another column!)

WorkQuest™ Group Shares Information, Ideas

STC WorkQuest is a support group for technical communicators (and others) looking for work. It's sponsored by the Pittsburgh Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

We concentrate on the specifics of job hunting such as résumé writing, interviewing skills, networking, motivation, etc., and we encourage people to share their successes and frustrations.

We try to both guide the newly unemployed and motivate the ones languishing in their search. It's also for people who are underemployed or thinking of changing jobs. People other than STC members may also be involved.

We meet every Tuesday morning at 10:00 am. For more information and resources, plus our weekly calendar, see our website http://home.earthlink.net/~workquest/, or contact Janis Ramey, ramey@technical-writing.net .

Call for Proposals for spectrum 2004

The Rochester chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is pleased to issue a Call for Proposals for spectrum 2004. The conference will take place Friday, March 26, 2004 at the RIT Inn and Conference Center in Rochester, New York.

 spectrum 2004 is the leading forum for technical communication practitioners in Western New York. For 44 years, spectrum has provided an opportunity for information exchange, skills updating, and professional networking. We invite you to share your ideas and experiences with fellow practitioners at our 2004 conference by submitting proposals for program topics, workshops, and discussions.

2004 Conference Theme: Back to the Future

Technical communicators are facing change totally unanticipated ten years ago. Technology is becoming more pervasive, being seen and felt in every aspect of our 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. Where once our jobs were to write instructions and descriptions of how electrical and mechanical products worked, today we are expected to make a wide variety of complex technical information available to a wide audience.

 The skills we need on the job are changing as are our titles. In the past, technical writer described anyone who dealt with instructions and manuals. Today, we are technical writers and editors, content developers, documentation specialists, technical illustrators, instructional designers, academics, information architects, usability and human factors professionals, visual designers, Web designers and developers, and translators. To be successful, today's technical communicator may need to be experienced in Java scripting, graphics design, and programming.

 But at the same time, we must be grounded in the basics of grammar, spelling, and organization. Our theme, Back to the Future, signifies this tension between the importance of the basics and the skills and knowledge needed for future opportunities.

 We encourage submissions relating to this theme, in addition to a broad range of other topics of interest to STC professionals. Guidelines are in the Call for Proposals posted on the STC Rochester web site:

 http://www.stcrochester.org/

People News

Membership at a Glance

(as of October 31)

National

Total Members: 19,879

Total Chapters: 150

Pittsburgh Chapter

Total Members: 159

New Members:

Benjamin E. Hardesty

Society for Technical Communication

Pittsburgh Chapter
P.O. Box 133
Pittsburgh, PA 15230
Contact: Alan Houser
Phone: 412-363-0387
arh@groupwellesley.com

National Office
901 North Stuart Street
Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1822
Phone: 703-522-4114
Fax: 703-522-2075

Notes from the National Office

Upcoming Telephone Seminars

Wednesday, December 10

Adding Panache to Your Procedures – Leah Guren

Like most technical communicators, you've probably written countless procedures. But have your procedures fallen into a rut?

This seminar covers all aspects of writing effective, powerful procedures. Participants will cover the purpose and theory of procedures and review the basic elements before moving on to advanced aspects of creating added value, using effective design elements, and testing.

All telephone seminars are held from 1:00-2:30 p.m. EST. Members can register for the seminars at www.stc.org/seminars.asp. Cost for a seminar is per site, not per person. U.S. sites: $145; Canadian sites: $160.

Reminder: Scholarships for Technical Communication
STC is now offering four scholarships (two for undergraduates and two for graduate students) for the 2004-2005 academic year. Each scholarship is worth $1,000, paid directly to the school attended.

More details are available in the November 2003 issue of the Blue Pencil or on the STC website (www.stc.org). Application packages must be received by February 16, 2004.

Dues Renewal Invoices
Dues renewal invoices for the 2004 Society year will be mailed in late November to all STC members who have not renewed their memberships online at www.stc.org/renew.asp. Dues payments must be received by January 1, 2004. (A grace period extends to February 28, 2004.) Note that only members who have paid their dues by February 28 will be eligible to vote in STC's 2004 election.

If you pay taxes in the U.S., part or all of your STC dues may be tax deductible.

More information on dues, including deductibility and prorating, can be found in the November 2003 Tieline (www.stc.org/tieline/issues/)

STC 51st Annual Conference
STC's 51st Annual Conference will be held at the Baltimore Convention Center in Baltimore, Maryland, on May 9-12, 2004. Conference registration rates are as follows:

Category	Before 4/23	After 4/23
Member	$495	$570
Non-member	650	725
Student/Retired	120	175
Member, one day	255	330
Non-member, one day	335	410
Student/Retired, one day	120	175

Much more information on the Annual Conference can be found in the November 2003 Tieline (www.stc.org/tieline/issues/), including a comparison of the five official conference hotels in the Baltimore area; or at the conference website (www.stc.org/51stconf). A preliminary program for the conference will be included in the February issue of *Intercom*.

Announcement of Candidates for STC's 2004 Election
A preliminary slate of candidates for STC office is now available in the November 2003 Tieline (www.stc.org/tieline/issues/).

The annual STC election will be held in early 2004, and only members who have paid their dues by February 28, 2004, will be eligible to vote. An option on the dues renewal forms and new membership applications for 2004 allows members to receive their election materials via e-mail. In March, members who selected this option will be e-mailed the slate, candidate biographies, and voting instructions. Members who did not select this option will receive these materials by first-class mail. The election closes April 15. Be sure to renew by February 28 to have a say in STC's future!

Must-Have Macros

by Robert P. Mohr

As a follow-up to last month's article about using macros as alternatives to Word's auto-numbering, this month I'll discuss a few simpler macros that are guaranteed to save you time and effort. Best of all, they are really easy to create. If you can click a mouse, you can create these macros.

Here are three basic, everyday things you probably do in Word, that can be turned into time-saving macros:

- print current page
- delete current line (line the cursor is in)
- delete current paragraph (para the cursor is in)

Sure, you can press **Ctrl+P** to pop open the Print dialog box, but you still have to select the **Current page** radio button and click **OK**. And, you could just double-click on a paragraph or high-light a line by dragging on it, then right-click and select **Delete** to delete that line or paragraph, but I think those are just too much work. With macros, you can do each of those operations with just two key presses. Each macro will be saved in your Normal.dot file so that they will be available to any future document you work on.

Start Word and open a blank document. Type: **=rand()** and press **Enter**. By default, the rand function creates three paragraphs of five sentences each. (Rand was built into Word by its designers as a quick way of creating text on screen. Btw, you can vary what rand generates by adding numbers to the parenthesis. For example, =rand(4,2) generates four paragraphs of two sentences each.)

To create the print current page macro:

1. Choose **Tools > Macro > Record new macro**. The Record Macro dialog box is displayed.
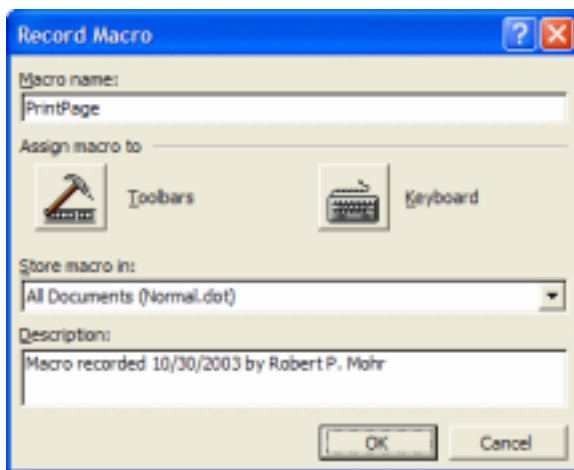
2. Type a **Macro name** (without spaces).
3. Click the **Keyboard** icon. A *Customize Keyboard* dialog box is displayed.
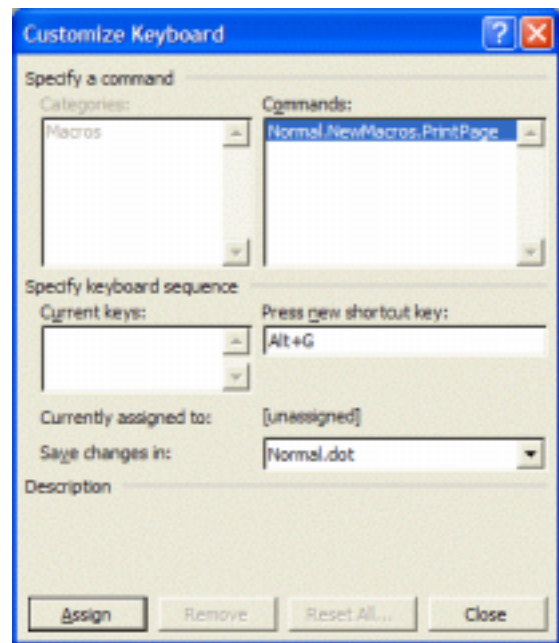
4. Press two keys to create a key sequence that will play the macro, such as **Alt**+**G** (without the +), in the **Press new short-cut key** box, and click **Assign**. A message is displayed confirming if the shortcut is currently unassigned. If it is already assigned, try another key sequence.
5. Make sure the Normal.dot document is displayed in the **Store macro in** box and click **OK**.

   This starts the macro recorder, and displays a small floating toolbar on the screen. Every mouse click and key press will be recorded from this moment forward, so be careful.
6. Choose **File > Print**. The Print dialog box opens.
7. Click the **Current Page** radio button and click **OK**.
8. Click the **Stop recording** icon on the recorder toolbar. The recorder closes and your macro is saved.

That's it! From now on, pressing **Alt**+**G** will print whichever page the cursor is on. Simple enough?

Must-Have Macros

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To create the delete a line macro:

1   Place the cursor somewhere in the mid point of one of those text lines you generated with the =rand() function.
2   Turn on the macro recorder again and assign a key sequence for the macro (refer to steps 1 - 5 in the previous section), such as **Alt**+**L**.
3   Press **Home**, then **Shift**+**End**, then **Delete**. The line is deleted.
4   Click the **Stop recording** icon on the recorder toolbar. The recorder closes and your macro is saved.

Test the macro by moving the cursor to another line and press the key sequence you used.

To create the delete a paragraph macro:

1   Place the cursor somewhere in the mid point of one of those paragraphs you generated with the =rand() function.
2   Turn on the macro recorder again and assign a key sequence for the macro (again, refer to steps 1 - 5 in the first section), such as **Alt**+**P**.
3   Press **Ctrl**+**UpArrow**, then **Shift**+**Ctrl**+**DownArrow**, then **Delete**. The paragraph is deleted.
4   Click the **Stop recording** icon on the recorder toolbar. The recorder closes and your macro is saved.

Test the macro by moving the cursor to another paragraph and press the key sequence you used.

Now that you know how easy it is to create macros, you could probably think of many operations you do everyday that could be turned into macros and played with just two keystrokes. Give it a try.

Bob Mohr is a senior STC member and the author of The Elements of Word. He can be reached via e-mail at *rpmohr@writemohr.com.*

Adding Value as a Technical Writer

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issues, keep a large team informed of progress. We test the product as we write and can discover bugs and provide the user's viewpoint. Sometimes our input does not smooth the process, but can improve it.

5.   *How does good technical communication help other employees? Management?*

Good writing provides a good resource for technical support, clarifies development issues, assists with training new hires and with sales, teaches management and sales people the product. Up-to-date documentation is a requirement for ISO certification. We facilitate the work of others by keeping an information database and promulgating information.

6.   *Why should a company support a technical writer? What should a good technical writer say to the human resources person about the importance of the technical communication position?*

We translate from the subject matter experts to the user. We bring skills in organization, interviewing, information gathering, indexing/navigation, graphic design, and audience analysis. Well written documents improve the company's image. We can write quickly, where subject matter experts will agonize and be diverted from their primary work. We can write to the user, where subject matter experts write to another expert.

7.   *When should good technical writers be laid off?*

Sales is the last department to go, and writers support sales.

8.   *What should be a technical writer's response when product developers, programmers, or other subject matter experts say they'd rather write the manual or report themselves because it takes too long to explain the subject to a writer?*

Our training as writers saves them time, provides the voice of the user, a different perspective.

9.   *How is good technical writing different from the kind of writing an engineer, manager, PR writer, or other employee does?*

We write to a different audience, discover information, and provide teaching and explanation.

Are we feeling good about our value yet? Next month's article will examine ways we can measure and increase our value as technical communicators.

Practice Makes Perfect

By Meg Papa, Blue Pencil Managing Editor

If you ask those people who spend any amount of time with me, they will tell you, if they are being honest, that I am a grammar snob. I love to rail against newspaper head-lines, commercials, and advertisements which contains assaults on all that is good and decent about the structure of the En-glish language. Anyone with me?

So, when thinking about a new feature for the Blue Pencil, I considered writing a gram-mar and style column. But, how dry is that? Then inspiration struck (on the bus, as is typical for me). We perfect our craft by practicing it. Sooo, lets practice!

For each issue, I will write a short column that will contain deliberate errors. I will give you the number of (intentional) errors at the end of the column. Some installments will have more errors, some less. While some of the errors will be obvious, others will be more sutle. The columns not only will contain grammar errors, but also spelling, punctuation, and word choice mistakes.

The first person to respond to me with all the corrections will have their name listed in the next issue of the Blue Pencil. The "answer" will also be published.

P.S. If you haven't already figured it out, the preceeding paragraphs serve as the first installment. There are five intentional er-rors. Please send your corrections to me at mv0t@andrew.cmu.edu by Friday, Decem-ber 12. Happy hunting!

December Meeting
Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About a Style Guide…but Were Afraid to Ask

Date: Monday, December 8
Time: 6:00-8:00 p.m.

What is a style guide? Why do I need one? Why does my company need one? What do I include in a style guide? How does one even get developed? Is there a reason why I am procrastinating on putting one together?

If you have been asking yourself these questions or if you keep thinking life would be so simple if you just had a style guide to tell you how to phrase it, then the December chapter meeting will be beneficial to you.

The focus of the meeting will be on style guides and will try to answer these as well as other questions that arise about style guides, how they are used and why they are such a necessity for corporations today. There are all types of style guides available, but perhaps the most important part is just getting started on one.

Roz Tregar will be the featured presenter for the evening. She has a master's degree in English and has worked as both a teacher and an editor. She has taught composition at Point Park College for approximately 20 years and edited the Ellis School alumnae magazine for 10 years. From 1996-2002 she worked as a technical editor at the IBM Pittsburgh Lab (formerly Transarc Corporation) and continues to do freelance editing.

Because style guides contain not only specific corporate methods for presenting information but also important language and usage guidelines, Roz will review some basic techniques for effective writing. This will be very helpful to all members because our roles as technical writers and editors are changing, and it is important to remember what made us so effective at our jobs to begin with – the basics. She will also suggest some useful resources that will aid in keeping our writing skills fresh and assist in developing style guides.

Join us Monday, December 8 from 6 - 8 p.m. at the Technology Council 2000 Technology Drive, off of Second Avenue, for an evening of great ideas and discussion. Also, bring your own questions, ideas and solutions for answering some of these important style and usage questions.

The cost of the meeting is $5 for members, $2 for students and the unemployed. Pizza, snacks, pop and desert will be served, plus all those in attendance will be eligible to win the door prize raffle drawing.

Please RSVP to Darlene Mullenix at dmullenix@federatedinv.com or call 412-288-8676 by Thursday, December 4. Please remember that you are expected to pay if you RSVP and do not attend.

Directions to the Technology Council can be found at (http://www.pghtech.org/contact/directions.html).

Editorial Calendar

Meeting Date	Blue Pencil Publication Date (Monday)	Article Submission Deadline (Monday)
Week of January 12	December 29	December 15
Week of February 9	January 26	January 12
Week of March 8	February 23	February 9
Week of April 12	March 29	March 15
Week of May 10	April 26	April 12

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