

Blue pencil



Defining and Developing Style Guides

By Meg Papa

We are all aware of those burning questions that keep us up late at night when we should be sleeping. Questions such as “Do I use a comma before the ‘and’ in a series?” and “Is it ‘website,’ ‘web site,’ or ‘Web site’?” When answering these types of questions, we could always default to our personal preferences, but a better solution is to refer to a style guide that delineates how to construct documents according to a standard format. At the December chapter meeting, Roz Tregar talked about examples of style guides, how to create one, and elements that should be addressed in one.

What is a Style Guide?

Roz started off showing a number of standard style guides, including the Chicago Manual of Style, APA Style Guide, “Wired” Style Guide, and the Microsoft Manual of Style. The first two are general, widely-used writing guides, while the last two are for more specific audiences.

Roz defined a style guide as “a group of rules that define your information or document design.” This seemingly straightforward definition comes with some caveats, however. A “group of rules” are really just conventions – they can and will change with time, management change, industry conditions, etc. As technical communicators, we have to beware of these conventions and the factors in our organization that could change them. Going back to the definition, “your” can have various meanings. If you are the only person in your organization who prepares documents, that “your” may very well mean yours person-

ally. However, in most organizations, “your” can refer to different departments (such as marketing or documentation), or to company-mandated directives (legal disclaimers, corporate logos, etc.) The larger the organization is, the more people you will need to consult in order to create a style guide that is useful to all members of the organization.

A well-written, robust style guide is going to take time and resources to create – which is why many organizations never get around to creating one. Highlighting the benefits of having a style guide to management is an important part of the process of creation. Benefits include (1) lower training cost of new employees, (2) higher customer satisfaction (inconsistency within and between documents can cause user confusion), (3) better brand recognition, and (4) fewer service calls.

Elements of a Style Guide

The thought of creating a comprehensive style guide from nothing is daunting, so Roz suggested focusing on the most important elements first, and gradually adding new items a few at a time. What is ‘most important’ will depend on your organization, but she listed some elements that many style guides address. They included:

- Product names
- Cautions and warnings
- HR policy matters (sexist language, international issues)
- Usage of common terms
- Hyphenation
- Abbreviations

- Acronyms (when they are used, how they are defined)
- Common punctuation issues (the serial comma, for example)
- Verb tenses (present versus future, especially an issue in user manuals)
- Good writing practices
- Jargon (what can be used, how it is defined the first time)
- Accessibility
- Measurement units
- Design elements
 - Lists & tables
 - Front & back matter
 - Indices
 - Heading styles
 - Numbering
 - Use of bold and italics

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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

By Nancy Ott, President, STC Pittsburgh

Goodbye 2003 and welcome 2004! Let's hope that this year is better than the last couple, especially for job seekers. While 2002 and the first half of 2003 were rather bleak for out-of-work technical communicators, things seemed to be perking up late in 2003. My completely informal and wholly unscientific survey of friends and colleagues who are looking for work has turned up some action in the local job market. Quite a few members of WorkQuest™ — the chapter's job-searching SIG and support group — have been finding employment lately. Freelancers, many of whom suffered through a veritable nuclear winter during 2002-2003, have been more in demand lately, too. While the Pittsburgh job scene isn't as healthy as it was during the tech boom, it seems to be on the mend. I'm hoping that the trend continues into 2004.

On the other hand, I know several people who have been looking for work for more than a year without success. While the economy is looking better these days, job growth still lags. The stock market rise is cold comfort to those whose unemployment

is running out. Moreover, the exodus of tech jobs overseas has had an impact on employment in our field (as it has in most technical and computer-related fields). Technical communicators are needed when companies develop all sorts of new products; less development activity in the United States equals less need for our expertise. While firms have run into predictable problems when moving their operations overseas (many of which center on poor communication), this trend is not going away any time soon.

If the recovery continues, economic growth will eventually generate enough new jobs to meet demand for them. I'm hoping that these new opportunities will percolate into our area in the upcoming year. We technical communicators will need to reinvent ourselves over and over to take advantage of the constant changes in technology and the business scene.

To all job seekers who have found employment in the past year, congratulations! And to those of you who are still looking, I wish you the very best of luck.

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.

Use RoboHelp to Single-Source Help and Manuals

By Robert P. Mohr

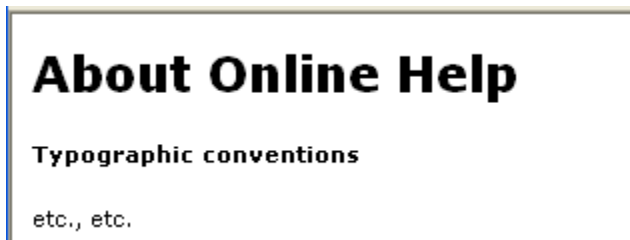
If you find yourself in a situation where you have to produce online help and a user manual for the same software application, RoboHelp just may be the answer. For years, RoboHelp has had the ability to generate Word (.doc) files directly from help topics, but the output wasn't very good and many hours of formatting time were needed to tweak the output into something that looked like a real manual. Lucky for us RoboHelp has undergone a change for the better. Starting with versions X4.0 and later, RoboHelp's ability to generate a well-formatted Word document is quite good.

I know what you're thinking: "But you can't just take online content, push it out to a Word document and expect it to be a satisfactory manual. Online help and paper manuals aren't written in the same way." I agree. That's why I employ another feature of RoboHelp's called Conditional Build Tags. These are very similar to FrameMaker's conditional text tags. By default, RoboHelp X4.0 starts you off with two conditional build tags: Print and Online. So, all you do to control what you want to see—or not see, and print—or not print, is apply the right conditional build tag to whatever content that you feel is necessary for the online version and the printed version of your content.

Following is a very simple example of a typical "about" topic that shows build tags applied to parts of the title text that will accommodate an online version and a printed version of the same topic:



The light colored hash marks represent the Online tag and the darker hash marks the Print tag. When viewed online with the Print tag excluded, the topic looks like this:



The Printed version, with the Online tag excluded, like this (except it will be on paper):



Conditional build tags can be applied to text, graphics, and tables within a help topic. They can also be applied to topics themselves so as to prevent them from appearing in the help system's table of contents. You can also apply more than one tag to the same item, and you can create as many conditional build tags as you want. When it's time to generate the output, you simply tell RoboHelp which build tags to exclude from the output.

The types of output are defined with RoboHelp's Single Source Layouts function. It is here that you determine the properties of the online and printed versions that are output. One of those properties is which build tag(s) to exclude. Here's an example of a dialog box that shows the Print tag is to be excluded from WebHelp (HTML) output:



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Membership at a Glance (as of November 30)

National
Total Members: 20,300
Total Chapters: 150
Pittsburgh Chapter
Total Members: 162
New Members:
Jason C. Butina
Glenn Christy
Phillip E. Miller
(reinstated)

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 Fax: 703-522-2075

Notes from the National Office

Upcoming Telephone/Web Seminars

Wednesday, January 14

Effective Web Sites: Structure,
 Navigation and Graphics – Jean-Luc
 Doumont (telephone and web)

Wednesday, January 28

Demonstrating the Value of Technical
 Communication Products and Services
 – Saul Carliner (telephone only)

All telephone/web 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. Telephone: U.S. sites: \$145; Canadian sites: \$160. Telephone and web: U.S. sites: \$160; Canadian sites: \$175.

Upcoming Society Events

February 27-28, 2004

The Atlanta Chapter STC will hold its annual regional conference, **Currents**, at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia. Topic stems include learning new skills and tools, contracting, satisfying users, education/professional development, and management. For more information, please contact:

Cheri Crider
 ccrider@optiosoftware.com
 www.stcatlanta.org

March 26, 2004

The Rochester Chapter STC will hold **Spectrum 2004** at the RIT Inn and Conference Center in Rochester, New York. The conference theme, “Back to the Future,” reflects the tension between basic technical communication skills and the knowledge needed for future opportunities. For more information, please contact:

Denise D. Pieratti
 (585) 615-1654
pieratti@rochester.rr.com
www.stcrochester.org

April 17, 2004

The Pittsburgh Chapter STC (**that's us!**) will hold a Mini-Conference with the theme “Writers Without Borders: Trends in Technical Communication.”

Technical communicators today do the traditional - write books, online help, white papers and requirements and specifications documents - as well as the untraditional - serve as usability experts, user interface designers, marketing support and internal consultants. They also explore, embrace and implement new technologies to improve their product deliverables as well as their efficiency. This one-day mini conference explores some “out of the box” roles that technical communicators perform today, looks at the latest technology trends and examines aspects of technical communication you may want to consider in the future. For more information, please see <http://www.stcpg.org/calendar/index.htm#417>

May 9-12, 2004

STC's 51st Annual Conference will be held in Baltimore, Maryland. For more information, please visit www.stc.org/conferences.asp.

July 25-27, 2004

The Sacramento Chapter STC will host the STC Region 8 Conference at the University of California, Davis. The conference will feature seminars, a regional leadership summit, and a trade show and career expo. For more information, please contact:

Eric Butow
ceo@butow.net
www.stcregion8conference.org

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

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Notes from the National Office

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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 December 2003 Tieline (www.stc.org/tieline/issues/2003_12.pdf)

Guidelines for Distinguished Chapter Service Awards

New guidelines for the distinguished chapter service award (DCSA) have been posted on the STC Web site at www.stc.org/admin_docs.asp. The guidelines contain two important changes: Members may not receive the award more than once from the same chapter, and student members are not eligible for the award.

STC 51st Annual Conference

STC's 51st Annual Conference will be held at the Baltimore Convention Center in Bal-

timore, 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/2003_11.pdf).

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!

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.

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Adding Value as a Technical Writer, part 2

By Meg Papa

As promised, here is the second installment of the summary of the November 10 chapter meeting, which was led by John Clark. Last month's write-up addressed useful mental models for technical writers as well as the definition of "value" of a technical communicator. Here, we want to examine ways we can measure and increase our value.

Any employee is only as valuable as he or she is perceived, usually by a supervisor, so we need to increase our perceived value to others. How to do that? The most obvious way is to tell them all that we do, but this alone is not always enough. What we really want is feedback from the customers/end users of our product. John talked about four levels of feedback.

The most basic level is reaction – did someone like what we produced. This is usually an easy response to get, but it is primarily anecdotal. The second level of feedback is learning – did the customer learn how to do something because of our product. This type of change can be measured via user testing.

The third level of feedback is behavior – did the customers/users actually change their procedures or behavior because of our product. The final, most convincing level of feedback is results – did the customer's change of behavior influence the bottom line (client satisfaction, more money, etc.). These last two levels of feedback are much more complicated to measure and track, but they are the most convincing.

Currently, there are four ways that we can typically measure the value of a product: outcome measures (# of support calls), customer satisfaction (surveys), estimates of value added or costs

avoided, and general perceptions. Some of these methods provide concrete yet simplistic numbers, while others can be vague or too touch-feely. To really measure value, it would be better to conduct before and after user testing (with control groups) and field studies.

Barring the full-blown clinical trial, there are other ways we can increase our perceived value. In general, the closer you are to the customer, the more highly you are valued. Even if you cannot get physically or organizationally closer to your customers, you can shift people's perception of you by couching your opinions in terms of user needs. If you have some data to back up your claims, that's even better.

John closed the meeting with some additional ways to increase your value (complete with visual reminders):

-  Do good work
-  Learn tools
-  Embrace change
-  Learn the language of money
-  Play nice in the sandbox
-  Blow your own horn
-  Think about how you can add value

Use RoboHelp to Single-Source Help and Manuals

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As for the printed output, there are several more options available than just build tags:

- You can generate separate Word document files (subdocuments linked to a Master), or you can generate a single document file.
- You can embed all graphics within the document files or create links to them, in which case all graphics are collected into a subfolder under the document folder.
- You can start each topic on a new page.
- You can include all topics using the same structure as the help's table of

contents and maintain the HTML heading levels, or you can change the order of the topics as well as exclude topics entirely.

- You can "map" (character and paragraph) styles from the style sheet used in the help project to styles in RoboHelp's default Word template, or you can map to the styles you've created in a custom Word template of your choice.

By default, RoboHelp's document output includes a title page, table of contents, header and footer, and pages that are set up for double-sided printing. If your help

system includes an index and glossary, they will also be included in the document.

So there you have it. With RoboHelp's Conditional Build Tags and flexible Single Source Layouts, you really can have your single-source cake and eat it too.

*Robert 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.*

Defining and Developing Style Guides

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Tips for Good Writing

Roz gave some general suggestions that could mean the difference between good and poor writing. These can also act as a starting point for a style guide. They included:

- Avoid redundancy and wordiness.
- Use active voice whenever possible.
- Watch for misplaced modifiers.
- Use strong verbs (minimize 'to be' verbs).
- Beware of noun strings (especially problematic in government documents).
- Simplify phrases.

Style Guides for the Web

The advent of the World Wide Web meant a new medium of information transmission, and it comes with unique style issues. Style guides for web pages address design elements much more than traditional style guides for print media. Carnegie Mellon's web style guide, for example, contains

guidelines for fonts, html colors, and navigation, as well as templates that users can download.

Tips for Web Pages

Roz also gave some brief guidelines for creating usable web pages, which could be a starting point for a web style guide. They included:

- Use text (not graphics) for headers. This practice decreases the load time of the page and will ensure that users who have opted not to load graphics will be able to read the page.
- Keep text blocks short. Studies have shown that readers prefer shorter passages of text on screen than in print.
- Watch legibility.
- Use graphics efficiently.

Suggestions and Warnings

Finally, Roz gave some helpful ideas of what to do – and avoid doing – in order to suc-

cessfully develop a style guide. These ideas included:

- Involve the stakeholders in the decision processes concerning what will be covered in the guide and what rules will be set. Developing a style guide no one wants to use will be a waste of your time and your organization's resources.
- Use a general style guide, such as the Chicago Manual of Style, as a starting point.
- Define the project scope.
- Set a realistic work schedule.
- Talk to code implementers. They may have some valid restrictions that will impact, or be impacted by, a style guide.
- Don't make it too complex at the start.
- Recognize your limitations, which can include everything from your own available time to firmly entrenched corporate SOPs.
- Follow your own rules! Your style guide should be an example of an ideal document.
- Have a sense of humor.

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Grammar Game: Recommended Reading Material

By Meg Papa, Blue Pencil Managing Editor

For Christmas this year, my best friend gave me a book that has been on my wish list for some time: *Anguished English*, by Richard Lederer. Little did she know it would be the inspiration for a column. This small paperback contains over 1,000 examples of grammar gaffes, word substitutions, strange sentence structures, and mixed metaphors that appeared in student essays, accident reports, billboards, newspaper headlines, and other documents. Each example in the book serve up both sidesplitting laughter and a cautionary tale. Here a few choice bits, to wet your appetite:

- From the section *Two-Headed Headlines*: “Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers” and “Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case”
- From the section *Modern Day Malapropisms*: “We can’t be a pancreas to the whole world’s problems” and “The monks sang gregarious chants in honor of the Lord’s annotated” (two goofs for the price of one)
- From the section *Accidental Bloopers*: “One wheel went into the ditch. My foot jumped from brake to accelerator, leaped across the road to the other side, and jumped into the trunk of a tree,”

and “I was on my way to the doctor with rear end trouble when my universal joint gave way, causing me to have an accident.”

Are you laughing yet? Or, perhaps you are cringing.

This book, along with Darrell Huff, who wrote the 1954 gem *How to Lie with Statistics*, are must-reads for anyone who communicates information. Lederer’s book, meant to be humorous, also happens to be instructional. Huff’s book, meant to be instructional, is also a scream to read.

There are four intentional errors in the above piece (they do not include the errors in the quoted entries from Lederer’s book). 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. Please send your corrections to me at mv0t@andrew.cmu.edu by Friday, January 16. Happy hunting!

Answers for December column: Practice Makes Perfect

No one responded to me with corrections to last month’s column, so no one gets a prize this month. Here are the corrections to that column, with the errors struck out and the proper construction in brackets.

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 headlines, commercials, and advertisements which ~~contains~~ [contain] assaults on all that is good and decent about the structure of the English language. Anyone with me?

So, when thinking about a new feature for the Blue Pencil, I considered writing a grammar 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~~ [let’s] 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~~ [fewer]. While some of the errors will be obvious, others will be more ~~subtle~~ [subtle]. The columns ~~not only will contain~~ [will contain not only] grammar errors, but also spelling, punctuation, and word choice mistakes.

New Year, New Approach to the Employment Process

Start the New Year off right by attending the chapter's annual employment meeting. One of our most popular meetings is back just in time to get you while your resolutions are fresh and your motivation is strong.

Join us Monday, January 12, 2004 at 5:30 p.m. at Duranti's restaurant in Oakland for round table discussions on various issues in the employment arena. This year's meeting will feature different presenters from all aspects of the job search process including networking, interviewing, résumés, portfolios, recruiting and management.

The following is a list of the table leaders and topics to give you a better idea of what to expect:

Rox Vanguard and **Marlene Miller** will discuss **résumés**. Everyone who attends the meeting is encouraged to bring a copy of his or her résumé. Marlene will review your résumé and provide you with feedback on ways to improve it, while Rox will lead a table discussion on how to create a new résumé for the new economy. He will discuss some of the important elements of a résumé, what employers are looking for and how to put together a résumé that will get you results.

Dennis McCarthy will lead a discussion on **interviewing**. He will discuss ways to make an interview successful, what to expect during an interview, the types of questions you should ask and how to prepare for an interview.

John Gilmore will lead a discussion on **networking**. There is a lot to talk about when it comes to networking - how to do it right and how to reap the benefits of having good networking skills. John will explain each of these areas and teach you how to make the most of your networking experiences.

Gary Naranjo from AC Coy will talk about the **role of the recruiter** in the job search. Recruiting and agencies seem to be main sources for companies to get employee prospects and more job seekers seem to be using the resources of a recruiter in their search. Gary will shed some light on how to use recruiters in the job search, what their role is for the company and the job seeker, and what to look for in finding one.

Nancy Ott will discuss **portfolios** and the various types of portfolios that you can put together and how to use your portfolio to showcase the diversity of your work and experience.

Marcy Rob from ANSYS, Inc., will lead a discussion on **managing remote writers**. If you plan to telecommute, or already telecommute, learn what is expected of you from someone who deals with a group of remote writers and find out how to make the most of your situation.

Ray Janicko will lead a discussion on what management is looking for in the hiring process and how to **sell yourself to management**. As a manager himself, Ray can provide you with an inside look on what is happening from the management standpoint in the job search process.

Start the new year off right and take a fresh approach to the job search process by attending the meeting to get some new insight on the standard issues in employment.

A buffet style dinner will be served from 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. The cost is \$16 per person. The round table discussions will be from 6:30 p.m. – 8:00 p.m. Duranti's is located at 128 North Craig Street in Oakland.

Please RSVP to Darlene Mullenix at dmullenix@federatedinv.com or call 412-288-8676 by Thursday, January 8. Please remember that you are expected to pay if you RSVP and do not attend.

Editorial Calendar

Meeting Date	Blue Pencil Publication Date (Monday)	Article Submission Deadline (Monday)
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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