Blue Pencil

Changes to the Blue Pencil, and a Challenge to Its Readers

Meg Papa, Blue Pencil Managing Editor, meg@alumni.cmu.edu

The Blue Pencil will be undergoing some changes in the coming months. Look for a redesign of the newsletter for the next issue. We are also going to change the content to better suit the needs of you - the readers. We are going to focus more on providing you with practical tips and resources on software tools, design and writing ideas, career advancement, and other topics. Articles will be shorter, easier to scan for salient points, and more applicable right now. You can see some of these changes already implemented in this issue (for example, look for items labeled "Quick Tips").

With these changes also comes a challenge for all of you. We want to include your practical tips, your hints, the useful things you have learned from experience. The collective wisdom of many makes for a better newsletter. Everyone in this chapter has something to offer that can benefit someone else. And we want to hear from you.

The chapter board and I challenge every member of this chapter to write just two or three paragraphs about something you know well that can help someone else be a better professional. I bet it would only take you 10-15 minutes to do! Below is a list of just a few possibilities, but don't be limited by the list - be inspired by it!

- Managing a doc team
- Creating style guides
- Tools for an online medium
- Desktop Publishing (DTP) tools
- Creativity in technical communication
- GUI design
- Information design/architecture
- Technical training/trainers
- Graphics and illustrations
- Telecommuting
- Technical Communication in academics/education
- Plain English

Whatever you choose to write about, keep these guidelines in mind:

- Be brief - a few paragraphs is fine
- Be practical - give information others can use in their work
- Be plainspoken - use simple language, and define unusual terms

You can send your contributions to me at any time at the email address above. Together, we can make the Blue Pencil a more valuable resource for every chapter member.

Free Graphics Tools for Windows, pt. 1

By Bill Lawrence

First off, this article doesn't cover free tools for Linux simply because practically everything in Linux is free. It also doesn't cover free tools for the Mac because I don't use Mac's and that's up to someone else. Given that most of us toiling away on manuals, online help, and other forms of "user assistance" use Microsoft Windows as our day-to-day operating system, I'll stick to Windows for this discussion. As Windows users, you're used to having your companies pay big bucks for software. If you're free-lancing, than you're in the unenviable position of having to buy these tools for yourselves.

Actually, paying for graphics software isn't really necessary as it's currently possible to outfit yourself with powerful, capable, and free graphics tools. These include high-end vector graphic

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Message from the President

I am writing this column in the wake of the flood that has already taken its place in Pennsylvania history. For days I have been watching the news, reading the paper and listening to others recount the events of the September 17, 2004. Before the remnants of Hurricane Ivan made its way to Pittsburgh, I watched and read about the terrible destruction the hurricane left in its wake throughout the South.

So where do these people - from the Bahamas to Ohio - go from here? What happens next in the lives of millions of people who have been left in the wake of major destruction from this natural disaster? How can these people get help in returning to their livelihood? A short answer to these questions is volunteering.

People from all over the country, even the world, have volunteered their time, talents and in some cases their treasure to help these victims regain some pieces of their life, some sense of normalcy.

It's amazing to think how much power volunteering holds and how it can help someone else. Everyone has a gift: something that they do very well. Volunteering is a chance to give that gift to others, to show off a little. Think about how often someone volunteered something or some time for you - maybe it was at church, your child's school, your business. If you think of just one opportunity when volunteerism benefited you, think about how it made the situation easier, how grateful you were that someone took the time to help you.

My original goal when writing this column this month was to write about the benefits of volunteering for the chapter. I wanted to expand on Meg's challenge to write articles. I wanted to go on about how volunteering can be good for you because its looks good on your resume. I wanted to talk about how volunteering is a chance for your voice and opinions to be heard in the chapter. However, once I thought about how volunteers make a difference in all parts of life, I simply decided to just urge you to volunteer for anything where you think you can make a difference.

Volunteering a very powerful thing and it is your opportunity to make a huge difference somewhere for someone.

Quick Tips for … Using Color Effectively in Presentation Material

by Meg Papa

Think about How the Material May Be Displayed
The primary use of your material may be a computer-projected presentation at a conference, but how else will it be used? Will it be put on the web? Printed in hard copy (color or black & white)? Reduced or enlarged? Before you finalize a look, take some time to transform, print, and view your materials in different ways.

Use Vivid Colors for Text
There was one professor I used to deal with who loved to use lime green and light orange for his text and diagram colors. Don't do this! It may look pretty on paper, but it is very hard to see when projected on a screen in a meeting room. Light-colored text is especially hard to read. Stick to high contrast between your text and your background (typically dark colors on a white or light background).

Remember that Good Color does not Equal Good Black & White
If there is a possibility that your fancy color materials will be printed or otherwise viewed in black & white or grayscale, make sure you check to see what they look like. A terrific-looking pie chart with a 25% dark green wedge next to a 25% navy wedge will have a 50% black wedge when printed in grayscale. A line graph where two of the lines print black is useless to the viewer. Alternating patterns (preferably subtle ones) and solids can help for pie and bar charts, and using different line patterns in addition to different colors can make line graphs useful regardless of how they are viewed.

Free Graphics Tools for Windows, pt. 1
(continued from page 1)

editors (think Adobe Illustrator), powerful bitmap graphics tools (think Adobe Photoshop) and drag-and-drop diagramming tools (think Microsoft Visio). Moreover, you may find that you get better support than you would if you had purchased similar software.

First a little background on free tools in general. Free tools come in two varieties: open source and those produced entirely by either a company or organization that keeps the source proprietary. Open-source programs are, for the most part, built by volunteers, and the code is open to all. These programs tend to be extremely well supported by email forums and sometimes have extensive documentation. You will probably get an answer to a question posed on a forum within minutes. Free programs that aren't from open-source consortiums often have little or no support or documentation. They are offered as-is and therefore you're pretty much on your own. Rarely, such as in the case of XnView, they also include sufficient documentation and a user forum.

With that in mind, let's take a look at a few of the applications that are available:
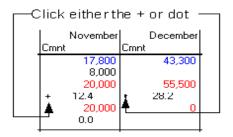
Vector Editors
These are primarily technical illustration tools, with little or no bitmapped editing capabilities. If screen shots are about all you do, they can be used to add call-outs to your bitmapped images.

Open Office Draw is quite similar to Adobe Illustrator. It can, for example, create transparent objects, such as circles, rectangles, and the like, which is a very handy capability for highlighting features in a screen snapshot. Open Office Draw has such drawing features as Bezier curves, fountain fills, grouped objects, text boxes, and everything else you'd come to expect in an expensive, high-end drawing tool. It can also save drawings in a variety of formats, including the web-centric ones such as .png, .jpg, .gif, as well as vector formats such as EPS, CGM, and SVG.

Open Office Draw is well supported by forums and there are even a few commercially available books. The internal help system is fairly complete and can provide answers to most questions. You can find the Open Office Suite, including Draw, at www.openoffice.org. You'll have to download the entire suite of tools, but then Open Office Writer is a more stable writing tool than Word anyway.

In comparison to Adobe Illustrator, Open Office Draw has about 90% of the features. It lacks the color separation capabilities for print production as well as a few of the more esoteric functions.

Open Office Draw call-outs added to a screen shot.

Expression 3 is rapidly becoming my favorite drawing editor and is currently freely available from Microsoft. You can download it from www.microsoft.com/products/expression/. The web page says that this is a free upgrade for current Expression owners, but in fact all that you need to download this is a Microsoft Passport, which you can also get when attempting to download the application.

It seems that Microsoft isn't quite sure what to do with Expression, and is (at least for now) giving it away to see how popular it might become. They acquired the application from a Japanese company, who apparently couldn't find a big enough market. That's a shame, because it's unique in the world of graphics programs. Expression,

People News

Membership at a Glance

(as of August 31)

National

Total Members: 17,680

Total chapters: 147

Pittsburgh Chapter

Total Members: 148

New Members:

Frank Micle

Richard Sbuscio

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 Society Events
Wednesday, October 6, 2004

Telephone/Web Seminar
Communicating with Older Adults - Amy Lee & Dana Chisnell
1:00-2:30 PM ET

Have you experienced the rite of passage of receiving your AARP membership card—because you are age fifty or older? Know someone who has? How many people in your audiences are fifty or older? As the Web-using population ages, more people in your audiences may be older than you realize. Take part in this seminar to hear about research on how older people use the Web and the issues they have with language, information architecture, visual design and formatting, and content.

Wednesday, October 20, 2004

Telephone/Web Seminar
A Brief, Comprehensive Indexing Primer - Seth Maislin
1:00-2:30 PM ET
Cost: $99 (STC Members), $149 (nonmembers). See www.stc.org/seminars.asp for more information.

October 21-24

The Intermountain Chapter STC will host the 2004 STC Region 5 Conference at the Wyndham Hotel in Salt Lake City, Utah. The conference theme is "Ascending the Summit: A Technical Communication Expedition." For more information, please contact: Marj Hermansen-Eldard at: (650) 842-9486, (801) 362-8955, (801) 225-4463, meldard@legato.com, www.intermountain-stc.org

Web Site: Intercom Online

A new Intercom section of the STC Web site featuring full-text search of archived articles is available at www.stc.org/intercom. Through the new site, STC members enjoy early access to PDFs of the current issue, including the Society Pages, letters to the editor, and Intercom departments such as Witful Thinking and Off Hours. Members also have access to PDFs of all articles from October 1999 to the present. Additionally, selected articles from the current issue are available to nonmembers, free of charge, to introduce them to the magazine and STC.

Working from Home - The Emotional and Practical Issues of Transitioning to a Home Office

By David Hiebert

"Work from home" the plastic sign says. It's tacked to the telephone pole right near your home, so you see it all the time. It includes a link to some web page, like debt2income.com or workfromhome.com. Partly because you are curious, partly because you need the money and have some time, you type in the web link. The web address you typed disappears and you are directed to a new page that asks you to purchase unspecified lists of clients or training so you can access the "real treasury". Overall, you feel it is a scam. Disappointed, you close the page.

It seems that work-from-home plans are shady or of questionable value. Some people you know have worked long and hard painting trinkets and earned acceptable wages in the process. But professionals? What is the experience of professionals who set up a home office and go to work?

I am one of the people in southwestern PA who had a professional job. I worked as an editor of a magazine for a non-profit, religious publisher. However, they emphasized the "non-profit" part too much. There were not enough resources to keep the business in operation.

I received an offer as part of my transition out: do the same job from my home until the magazine ceased publication. I took this freelance editing assignment, knowing that it would reduce my severance pay significantly and affect my unemployment compensation. At the time, we felt it was a good way to make a switch. But there were tensions and transition points along the way.

Transitioning from Office to Home

I had scores of hurt, scary feelings upon hearing that my employer of over 25 years did not what me working in the office. What would happen to my family's household income? How would we keep living with our ongoing expenses? What would I do with all my time? Those were some of my bothersome thoughts.

I quickly discovered that I had immediate needs and short-term requirements that drew my focus away from those longer-term feelings of insecurity. The first need - determining how will I make the move, get my office set up and still meet the deadlines. Subscribers, I knew, would still "need" the publication on the same schedule.

The publisher's maintenance people helped with the physical move to my new office, so I had familiar computer equipment and furniture around. One of the requirements for this freelance contract was "high-speed" internet access for transferring the graphic files to the publisher's system. Because the computer system I had used at work was on the edge of usability, getting that high-speed connection set up required more emotional energy than I wanted to invest. In one phone call to the technical support people, I was very emphatic: "I'm losing $100 a day for every day this connection isn't working. I want it going as soon as possible." They responded with a technician the next day.

Learning to Communicate

Setting up the formal communication processes was the second big hurdle. The person making the decisions did not necessarily have the best technical skills, so some of the things that we tried did not work too well. Even though we had the expensive, high-speed internet connection, after a couple issues we found that copying the material to a CD worked best for transferring the publication's large graphics files.

Sharing information and decisions with the administrator responsible for my contract was difficult. Downsizing is rough business and administrators were caught doing distasteful things that they had never done

Grammar Game - No no no no no no no no no no…

by Meg Papa, Blue Pencil Managing Editor

No, the title of this month's column is not the result of a stuck keyboard, nor am I trying to put a song in your head (but I bet I did!). This month's column was inspired by a newspaper article - but more on that later. I want to talk about the use - and abuse - of the double negative.

You probably remember the simple rules you learned in grammar school. The first one says that two negatives equal a positive. For example: "I didn't not think about him," means that the gentleman in question was indeed considered.

In principle this rule is true, but, alas, people don't usually use double negatives correctly. Let's look at an example from popular culture - the famous line from the Rolling Stones: "I can't get no satisfaction." If we apply our famous rule, Sir Mick must be saying that he does indeed get some satisfaction. In the context of the song, however, clearly that is NOT what he is saying. Generally, when we see or hear a double negative in print or speech, it is usually used improperly, and violates rule one.

The second simple rule for double negatives follows from the first: Since two negatives equal a positive, just reword your statement with positive phrasing.

This is, in general, a good idea. Substituting a positive phrasing for two negatives usually cleans up your sentence and clarifies its meaning. Taking my simple example above, we can instead say, "I did think about him." It is a shorter sentence, and requires less mental processing by the reader.

But, let's admit that there is a place for the double negative. If used wisely, it can lend emphasis to an idea, or refocus emphasis in a place where it would not be otherwise. For example, contrast the meanings of the following two sentences, the second of which applies rule number two:

* After considering her boss's attitude, Jenni wasn't surprised that she didn't get a promotion.

* After considering her boss's attitude, Jenni was surprised that she got a promotion.

Clearly, these two sentences do not have the same meaning. Different things happened to Jenni in these sentences. The use of the double negative in the first sentence is appropriate and cannot easily be swapped for a positive phrasing.

The appropriateness of use of the double negative is also determined by what has come before - what ideas, what actions, have been emphasized. The unusual structure of double negatives draws attention to whatever they focus on, and so they are effective transitions.

Now, back to the newspaper article I mentioned earlier. The following sentences are part of a quote from a Russian official about the two plane crashes that happened in Russia back in August. Can you figure out what he is saying? The context, and the remaining portion of the quote, will be in next month's column.

"It's hard not to believe it's not a terrorist act. Why would the authorities not say that?"

Free Graphics Tools for Windows, pt. 1

like Adobe Illustrator, is a vector-based editor. However, that's where the similarity ends. Expression was designed to produce output that looks like it was created through traditional artistic media such as watercolors, pastels, oil paints, etc. For example, you can select a brush tip and determine how worn the brush might be.

As you might have guessed, Expression shines in creating images that can be saved as bitmaps in much less time than native bitmap editors such as PhotoShop or Paint Shop Pro. Moreover, those images are easy to edit because they are composed of vector objects instead of pixels. If you want to create a distinctive look for your technical illustrations or marketing graphics, Expression might be the ideal program for you.

Editor's Note: This is part one of a two-part article. The second part, which will be published in November's Blue Pencil, covers bitmapped editors and diagramming tools.

Working from Home - The Emotional and Practical Issues of Transitioning to a Home Office

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before. All this contributed to some problems with specific projects. Though there had been virtually no communication via email regarding my dismissal, the flow of messages bloomed in the days after setting up my home office. In the first three months, I had had over 300 email messages from my contract holder.

Even though there was a cornucopia of email, the dearth of person-to-person communication made work difficult. Communication issues seem to influence others also when they set up a home office. One person comments, "The toughest part is the isolation—no one to talk with about 'work stuff' or 'sports stuff' or anything," said Richard Dupree, whom I met at a WorkQuest group, about the communication problem. "I even [knew] another guy working from his home and we did 'virtual coffee breaks' at pre-set times." Richard had set up a home office when a new

employer's nearest office was an hour-and-a-half commute away.

Considering the Positives

Some of the advantages of working from home are obvious: you can productively use space in your home; your employer will save money by not adding to office space and maintenance; you can be more flexible using your time.

The accounting issues may have been easier for me than average, since I had a photography business in-home. But my tax filing software had provisions for the office-in-home expense and that part seemed easy.

Planning for the Future

A major problem came up however, when I successfully worked myself through my one major contract. I had not done much to sell my services, so I needed a major infusion of income-producing work.

As I work now, the tension is between finding a long-term working arrangement and doing business from my home-based office. When I'm busy selling my services, I don't have the energy and time for the extensive networking that is needed to a long-term position.

Could you do it? I'd say it has many attractive features. If you have some spare space and a major contract to get you started, you are on your way.

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David Hiebert is a member of STC WorkQuest(TM), a support group for people looking for work sponsored by the Pittsburgh Chapter of STC. Please see the WorkQuest website for information and meeting schedules — www.STCWorkQuest.org.

Quick Tips for... Successful Career Advancement

By Janis Ramey

Put on your game face

To find a job, get that promotion, or be assigned to the next great project, you should be enthusiastic, eager, and ready to go. Every time you leave your home or office, put on your game face. Make sure your step is lively, your handshake is vigorous, and your expression is bright. You can't predict who you'll meet and what opportunities are out there.

Don't delay making that contact

In today's business climate, clients, bosses, and potential employers expect quick response. Let's say a friend suggests you call someone about a project or job opportunity or perhaps you see a notice about an opportunity on an email distribution list. You should move quickly. Make the contact immediately - today, right now! If you hear of an opportunity in the morning, your phone or email contact should occur that morning. The afternoon may be too late and the next day displays lackadaisical interest in the opportunity at best.

Janis Ramey founded and continues to lead STC WorkQuest(TM), a support group for people looking for work sponsored by the Pittsburgh Chapter of STC. For more information about the group, see www.STCWorkQuest.org.

October Chapter Meeting Addresses Information Design

Date: Monday, Oct. 11, 2004

Time: Meetings start at 6:30 p.m. with 1/2 hour for networking/ dinner. The program runs from 7:00 - 8:00 p.m.

Topic: Shaping Experience through Information Design

Speaker: Karen Schriver

This talk will characterize how we can better integrate word and image, and investigate some common problems of information design. A longer abstract and a speaker bio can be found at the STC Pittsburgh website: http:// www.stcpgh.org.

Cost: $5 for members; $3 for students & unemployed

Location: Pittsburgh Technology Council building, 2000 Technology Drive, Pittsburgh, PA. Directions @ http://www.tc-p.com/aboutus/ directions.asp

RSVP: Please contact Darlene Mullenix by October 6 at 412-288-8676 or email to dmullenix@federatedinv.com.

Editorial Calendar

Below is the editorial calendar for anyone who will be writing an article for the Blue Pencil. Articles are due to me, Meg Papa, three weeks before the monthly meeting. Publication of the Blue Pencil will occur ten days later, or roughly ten days before the monthly meeting.

Article Submission Deadline (Monday)	Blue Pencil Publication Date (Thursday)	Meeting Date (Monday)
October 18	October 28	November 8
November 22	December 2	December 13
December 13	December 23	January 10
January 17	January 27	February 7
February 21	March 3	March 14
March 21	March 31	April 11
May 2	May 12	May 24 (Tuesday)

Meg Papa contact information

Email: meg@alumni.cmu.edu
Home phone: 412-243-3026
Cell phone: 412-298-0606

There's Still Time to Enter the 2004/2005 Technical Publications Competition

Have you or your company produced technical online communications, printed publications, or art that you think are worthy of awards? Would you like your work to be recognized by your peers? Consider entering it in one of STC Pittsburgh's competi-

tions. Our chapter is holding the following competitions this year:

• Online Communications
• Technical Art
• Technical Publications

The submission entry deadline is Friday, October 15, 2004. See the chapter website at www.stcpgh.org/compete/index.htm for more information and entry forms.