

BLUE PENCIL

PITTSBURGH CHAPTER, STC

[HTTP://WWW.STCPGH.ORG](http://www.stcpgh.org)

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Pick of the Issue



I don't know about you, but I find several things to get excited about in this issue of the Blue Pencil. First, we get to hear William Sabin speak at our awards banquet (see the cover story). I'm not worthy! But also check out Laurel Patterson's article on staying physically active as a writer (page 5), and Janis Ramey's great tip on how to play well with others when it comes to text and graphics (page 8). Finally — Spring is here! Yay!

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Annual Dinner and Awards Banquet to Be Held May 22

Guest Speaker: William A. Sabin, author of The Gregg Reference Manual

Date: Monday, May 22, 2006

Time: 6:00 p.m.

Come join us for a very special evening at the chapter's annual awards banquet, where our guest speaker will be William A. Sabin, author of The Gregg Reference Manual, now in its tenth edition. This manual, with its detailed guidance on matters of grammar, usage, and style, is the resource most frequently referred to in offices throughout the United States. At the STC Pittsburgh Annual Dinner and Awards Banquet, Bill will present a two-part "shirtsleeve workshop" session on language problems we all have to deal with.

In the first part of his session, he will demonstrate how to make decisions when reference manuals and other resources offer alternatives or contradictory advice. For example, is it one space or two after the end of a sentence? Is it E-mail, e-mail, or email? Web site or website? Which form is better: 2d or 2nd? And what is the proper way to style phone numbers? When you're forming plurals of proper names, is it the Jenningses or the Jennings? Is it the Kennedys or the Kennedies? And when you're forming possessives, is it my boss' promotion or my boss's promotion? Should an answer be written in less than 200 words or fewer than 200 words? And is it okay to end a sentence with a preposition?

In the second part of his presentation, he will invite members of the audience to raise questions about the problems they find most troublesome. He will solicit questions in advance so that he can be sure to focus on the problems our audience is interested in.

Throughout his presentation Bill will emphasize the difference between doing what is correct and doing what is right. The first strategy can lead to a rigid application of rules that sometimes produces awkward or even ludicrous results. The second strategy, doing what is right, means doing what is appropriate for the occasion. It calls for a more thoughtful, more nuanced approach to dealing with those problems that our language continually puts in our way.

His ultimate goal is to leave members of the audience with a stronger sense of confidence in their ability to make informed decisions about the language problems they encounter.

Banquet, cont. on page 4



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

President's Column - by Nicky Bleiel

The programming year may be winding down, but things aren't slowing down a bit. I just returned from WritersUA (where a number of important industry announcements were made), our Chapter is preparing for its big finale, and the STC Annual Conference is coming up in few weeks.



Here's a quick summary of everything:

News from WritersUA

- Microsoft announced they would not be releasing the Windows Vista help engine, and that WinHelp would no longer be supported in Vista.
- Adobe announced that development would continue on RoboHelp. They also noted that they plan to initiate synergies in the future between RoboHelp, FrameMaker, and Captivate.
- MadCap Software announced that version 2.0 of Flare would feature FrameMaker support, and that they would be releasing two new tools—Mimic, a software simulation tool and Capture, a screen capture tool.

STC Pittsburgh in Las Vegas

Are you planning to attend the STC Annual Conference in Las Vegas this May? If so, please let me know by emailing nbleiel@matrixplus.com. I'm hoping we can all meet for breakfast on Monday 5/8. It'll be a great way to kick off the week. For more information about the conference, see <http://www.stc.org/53rdConf/>.

Early registration ends April 21.

Chapter News and Announcements

- The STC Pittsburgh Annual Dinner and Awards Banquet will be held May 22. William Sabin, author of the Gregg Reference Manual, will be our guest speaker. Please join us as we celebrate a successful year. (FYI—The list of award winners can be found at <http://www.stcpgh.org/benefit/bnawrd.html>.) See page 1 for event details.
- Volunteers are needed for 2006-2007 to handle membership and publicity. Both jobs require a small time commitment, but provide an opportunity to gain valuable skills and help the Chapter. Contact Beverly Spagnolo at bspagnolo@klauscherarchitects.com for more details.
- Nancy Carpenter, STC Pittsburgh Secretary and Production Editor of the Blue Pencil has been awarded the Distinguished Chapter Service Award for "dedicated, distinctive, and conscientious service to the Pittsburgh Chapter." Please congratulate Nancy on this honor.

Summer Slam Five

Whether you are a devout Java programmer, a developer committed to Microsoft's .NET framework, a DBA working with Oracle or an IT professional dedicated to SQL Server - set aside your differences for a day as PITTSBURGH USER GROUPS UNITE!

For the fifth year the summer socials for many of Pittsburgh's user groups, including PittJUG, Pgh.NET, PghOUG, STC, and PSSUG have been combined for a unique night of networking and fun. Attendees will learn about the benefits and challenges of each technology through informal conversations with your peers. Appetizers and a cash bar will be provided, and great raffle prizes will be available.

Date: Thursday, July 20

Time: 5:00-8:00 p.m.

Location: Station Square - Margarita Mama's (1 East Carson Street)

Price: Free

RSVP: 412-918-4229 or events@pghtech.org

Society for Technical Communication

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Membership at a Glance

(as of April 3, 2006)

National

Total members: 18,412
Total chapters: 138

Pittsburgh

Total members: 140

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Notes from the National Office

Upcoming Telephone/Web Seminars

Cost: \$99 (STC Members), \$149 (non-members). See stc.webex.com for more information and to register.

May 24, 2006

Life After RoboHelp - How We Got
Here and Where To Next

1:00-2:30 PM ET

Instructor: Neil Perlin

The apparent sunseting of RoboHelp and the spread of XML into online documentation have added turmoil and uncertainty to what had been a stable profession. But while turmoil and uncertainty are unsettling, they aren't entirely bad. They offer the opportunity to add new and better ways to work, to correct bad practices, and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. The goal of this presentation is to add structure and context to a very messy situation.

Upcoming STC Events**May 7-10, 2006**

STC's 53rd Annual Conference will be held at Bally's Las Vegas Hotel and Paris Las Vegas Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. On-line registration is now open. Also, hotel reservations must be made by April 10 in order to take advantage of reduced room rates. For more information, please visit www.stc.org/53rdConf/.

Results of STC Election

The ballots have been counted and the vote officially recorded. Please note that the results do not become final until the

official public announcement of elected candidates at the annual business meeting on Monday, May 8, 2006,

- President: Paula Berger
- First Vice President: Linda Oestreich
- Second Vice President: Mark Clifford
- Secretary: Char James-Tanny
- Director: Mike Murray, Jeff Staples
- Nominating Committee: Constance Kiernan, Betsy Maaks

\$10,000 Research Grants

The Society offers an annual award of up to \$10,000 for research proposals on practical basic and applied research topics that are of concern to the Society's mainstream membership. The selection of the award recipient involves a three-stage process.

1st Stage: Query

The deadline to submit a proposal is midnight, Friday, June 30, 2006. Researchers should submit an electronic copy of a cover page and a five-page query sent as a single e-mail attachment in a message addressed to Rachel Spilka, manager, STC research grants committee (spilka@uwm.edu).

On the cover page, include the project title and researchers' names and institutional affiliations. The query should include the following:

- Problem statement, research questions, and project description

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National Notes, cont. from page 3

- Explanation (with a brief literature review) of how the project promises to contribute to the field of technical communication and benefit the Society
- Description of the project design and methodology
- Description of researcher qualifications
- Citations list

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2nd Stage: Selection of Two Finalists

From the queries received, the research grants committee will select two finalists, who will be notified in September 2006. The finalists will receive detailed feedback on their queries and on the viability of their research ideas to help them develop a full proposal, which will be due December 1, 2006. Finalists also may be asked for additional information and materials to help the committee in its review and deliberation.

3rd Stage: Final Selection

The research grants committee will recommend one of the two projects to the STC board of directors for funding, and the awardee will be notified by January 30, 2007.

Please contact Rachel Spilka at spilka@uwm.edu if you have questions.

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Banquet, cont. from page 1

Cost: \$29 for members, \$34 non-members, \$24 students and unemployed

RSVP: by Wed, May 17 to Beverly Spagnolo; 412-766-7200 bspagnolo@klauscherarchitects.com

Location: Radisson Hotel Green Tree (North Ballroom)

Bill Sabin is the author of The Gregg Reference Manual. He has been wrestling with weighty stylistic issues (such as the hyphenation of the compound adjective) for forty years.

Bill worked for McGraw-Hill for thirty years until his retirement in 1990. For the first eighteen years he worked in the Gregg Division, where he ultimately served as the publisher of business and office education. For the remaining twelve years he served as the publisher of business books in the Professional and Reference Division.

Since his retirement Bill has continued to stay in touch with the problems and concerns of the professional and the educational communities. He also spends a good deal of time on the phone and on the computer, responding to callers and writers with their challenging questions. Bill welcomes these questions because they help him see what needs to be added or changed in the next edition of the manual.

Bill has a B.A. and an M.A. in English literature from Yale. He has been cheerfully married to his first wife for nearly forty-eight years. He is also the father of five children, which should explain any peculiarities in his appearance, his speech, and his overall behavior.

Improve Your Writing — Move Your Butt - by Laurel Patterson

Imagine performing your writing job and enjoying a day where your mind is alert and clicking. Ideas are flowing. Organization is smooth. Typing is easy. What's even more inviting is the fact that after you've finished this productive day, you still have plenty of energy. You go home and enjoy some excellent time with your family. And when you finally go to bed, you sleep soundly and restfully throughout the night.

If this sounds like something you want to experience more often, consider increasing your physical activity. Writers often live sedentary lives. Whether we want it that way or not, it just sort of happens. Our brains are active, our hands are busy writing or typing, but our butts seldom move except to get from one seat to another.

An immediate reward for ditching the sedentary lifestyle may be increased clarity of thought.

We've all heard it more than we care to hear. Exercise is important to longevity and health. Even though we know this, and we know our work is sedentary, for some reason we just continue to sit and write and write and sit. And when we're done writing, we're too tired to bother moving our bodies or working up a sweat. It seems too hard to exercise when we spend 8, 10 or 12 hours behind the desk.

But consider...“Preliminary findings from a WHO study on risk factors suggest that sedentary lifestyle is one of the ten leading causes of death and disability in the world. Physical inactivity increases all causes mortality, doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, and obesity. It also increases the risks of colon and breast cancer, high blood pressure, lipid disorders, osteoporosis, depression and anxiety.” (http://www.who.int/docstore/world-health-day/2002/fact_sheet4.en.shtml)

Don't wait until the effects of a sedentary lifestyle appear. By the time they get to the point where we think, “if only,” it is much harder to develop a more active lifestyle. Instead, take preventive action now by moving that butt. Increase your

activity now while it is still relatively easy to get going. “The more you use your body, the healthier it gets.” “Physical activity gets everything moving in your body—the blood, the oxygen, the nutrients, the cellular respiration, the nervous system, and so on.” “Studies also show that it doesn't take an enormous amount of physical exercise to achieve health-enhancing results. A mere 30 minutes a day of walking, swimming, jogging, cycling or other cardiovascular exercise can have astounding positive health effects.” (<http://www.newstarget.com/001547.html>)

An immediate reward for ditching the sedentary lifestyle may be increased clarity of thought. Many writers experience an epiphany while walking. Blood circulation improves brain function, and a relaxing walk can reduce stress, allowing ideas to flow from our subconscious.

The rewards may be better than you imagine. Picture it--you're 80, active and feisty, thinking clearly and doing your best writing yet. Instead of saying “if only,” you'll be able to say, “I'm so glad I made time to take care of my body.”

Consider adopting one or more of these goals to counteract the sedentary job:

- Revive activities you used to love—run, swim, or skate.
- Start or increase your gardening.
- Go for a walk regularly.
- Use a pedometer—some people enjoy the challenge of beating their previous day's mileage.

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Storytelling in Organizations by Charles Lanigan

Organizations invest huge amounts of money in information technology. As technical writers and professional communicators, we analyze and document processes and often explain how the tools of information technology work.

Management, vendors and IT personnel tend to focus exclusively on the technical aspects of information and its exchange. Communicators and writers themselves often become preoccupied with the tools they use, rather than the meaning and purpose of the information conveyed. Words or illustrations become just so much more content to be put online or in printed documents and digested. The phrase "technical communication" suggests straightforward one-way presentation of facts or procedures, without the necessity for questions or interpretation.

Amidst all the emphasis on technology, what's important to remember is how much information is shared within organizations and among individuals through storytelling and narrative. Quaint though it sounds, this is a major means of knowledge-transfer and exchange. Storytelling happens formally in meetings or informally when individuals interact. Though it is facilitated through technology such as e-mail, on-line chat, web logs, and discussion forums, it occurs often through face-to-face conversation. Much of this discourse goes unnoticed officially. It may even be limited or frowned upon by managers as a waste of time. Subject to certain constraints, however, storytelling and narrative are

part of how organizations work and get things done.

Professional communicators are in a unique position to notice the stories being told and the way they are told in organizations. People talk about issues in ways that reveal what they think about themselves, or desire to think. The stories they tell may range from the official to the surreptitious. They may support or contradict the way an organization presents itself to the world and to its own employees. They may be tacitly accepted or open to question and discussion, and thus reveal the working environment and sources of influence that control the flow of information. An organization may say it's a "learning organization" in its mission statement. What does this mean? Does it mean they merely wish to be seen as such, or that they are actually taking steps to do so. If so, how, and how successfully?

We tell stories differently under different circumstances. We make a presentation to management on the prospects for a project differently than how we talk about it among fellow members of the project team. We employ certain official codes and phrases such as *buy-in* and *stakeholders* and *target dates*. The particular terms vary by organization or professional subculture. When employees talk among themselves about their work, about how to actually get tasks done, they complain, ask questions, and share tips and experience. Their discourse contains a mixture of technical information and personal anecdotes. The stories they tell serve not only to convey information, but as transactions to define and maintain their relationships and roles.

People tell stories using technical terms and jargon to identify themselves as part of a specialized group and demonstrate their expertise. Stereotypical examples include doctors, lawyers, IT staff, and (in Pittsburgh especially) sports fans. They may do so unconsciously because they don't know how to convey concepts in simpler language, which is where technical writers come in. They may also do so deliberately to exclude non-specialists from the discussion and reinforce their own value and authority.

If you are a contractor, consultant, or newly-hired employee in an organization, it's useful to employ or at least be aware of a phenomenon called code-switching. This simply means adopting the language used within a particular group or subculture as a way of facilitating communication and establishing credibility. It may involve learning enough technical or

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- Increase metabolism with 30 minutes moderate intensity exercise, preferably in the morning. (Check out the book **MAKE THE CONNECTION: 10 STEPS TO A BETTER BODY—AND A BETTER LIFE**, by Bob Greene and Oprah Winfrey.)
- Let little strategies add up—get off the bus a couple of blocks early, park the car farther away, take the stairs at least part way.

Rather than allowing your sedentary writing career to create health problems, take charge now and add some

activity to your day. Work toward an ideal day that includes good circulation, balanced hormones, higher metabolism, improved health, which in turn results in fresh ideas, a good mood, and an invigoration that lasts all day.

Don't just sit there writing. Move your butt!

Laurel Patterson of Patterson Presentations is a WorkQuestor who does writing, editing and speaking contract work.

First Look at MadCap's Flare - *by Robert P. Mohr*

I installed MadCap's Flare several weeks ago and tinkered with it off and on over the next few days. (In case you don't know, the brain trust at Flare was formerly the same brain trust behind RoboHelp.) To test Flare, I started by importing an existing RoboHelp project containing approximately 230 help topics.

The RoboHelp project imported fine except for the topic templates. I had to recreate those, but all of the topics based on the templates appeared fine. The conditional build tags were also maintained correctly. The Map IDs also imported correctly.

My overall impression is that Flare's environment is MUCH different from good ole' RoboHelp's environment. The adjustment to the new look and feel took some time. The new file format for all topics is XML, not HTML. But since there is still an integrated topic editor, you barely notice the difference and it's still possible to get at the actual tags if you need to (as with RoboHelp's TrueCode tab). Also, Flare's underlying code is based on Microsoft's .Net platform. This, coupled with the new XML file format, may be a good thing for product longevity going forward.

Unfortunately, I determined the product to be in its infancy, and Release 1 has a few shortcomings:

- WebHelp skin is not as customizable as in RoboHelp.
- There is no one-to-one mapping of styles between Word templates and Flare output to Word documents.

- There is no direct PDF support as of 2-15-06. (The workaround is to produce Word docs then convert them to PDF.)
- Topic templates are not as easy to create as they are in RoboHelp.
- No internal reports on project status info; ex.: unused/unreferenced topics, images, unused index entries, map IDs, duplicate map IDs, etc. Reports in Flare refer to compilation errors only.
- Output to Word document is limited to EXACTLY what's in the help topics: no cover page, no headers/footers. Output to Word requires more reformatting than currently.
- It's not easy to navigate Flare's user interface using the keyboard.

Flare's Release 1 also has many good new features:

- It's easy to import/convert existing RoboHelp projects.
- There's a simple, "clean" interface, but it's not intuitive. It may be difficult for beginners to learn.
- It has multiple tables of contents.
- Table creation is slightly better: you can use custom layouts.
- It has reusable text "snippets" and variables.
- Languages available in Release 1 include Danish, Dutch, English, Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Portuguese (Brazil), Spanish, and Swedish.

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Quick Tip...Preparing Text and Graphics for Someone Else to Import - by Janis Ramey, Associate Fellow

Many times we have to create text and graphics that will be used in someone else's final document. Most often that other person is a designer using a completely different set of software tools and probably a different platform, such as Macintosh. Sometimes the final user wants to create a master document, web pages, on-line help, or PowerPoint shows from your word-processed text. Any of these final users will appreciate receiving problem-free material.

- If both of you are using the same software (for example, MS Word or FrameMaker), use the same template as the final user (if possible). This will give you margins, heading styles, etc., of the final document and make the importing process much easier.
- Choose standard fonts (Arial, Times New Roman, etc.).
- Use standard styles for headings (Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.) and be consistent. NO MANUAL FORMATTING!!
- Be careful of things that might get garbled in a conversion process (from font to font, from PC to Macintosh, from text file to graphics program). Typical problems --
 - o Dingbats, Wingdings, and similar fonts. Bullets are often made with these fonts and they frequently flip to something else during conversions.
 - o Curly quotes (safest to use straight quotes).
 - o Tab settings, particularly if used to create tables. It's usually best to use the table function and let the designer convert to text.
 - o Check with the final user before inserting hyperlinks, cross-references, footnotes, and tables of contents. Maybe the automatic functions will work, maybe they won't.
- Create graphics (such as simple line drawings) in a drawing program, not directly onto the text page. MSWord 2003 has a function called "Insert/New

Drawing", which opens a drawing package window. This will keep all the parts together and properly aligned when imported into the final layout.

- Create tables using the table function, not tabs.
- Make graphics, tables, equations, etc., fit into the margins or column width of the final document.
- For graphics, photos, etc., that will be inserted later, use a placeholder numbering system. Provide a sketch or draft with the placeholder number on it.
- Always provide the highest possible quality of photos and graphics files -- Full resolution files (not a file that has been reduced for website, for example)
- Use paragraph breaks between paragraphs, not line breaks. And use only one.
- Use only one space between sentences.
- Use only one tab for indenting. Set the tab position rather than adding extra tab characters. And NEVER use spaces to indent or line things up -- they will cause havoc on the final layout.
- If you want to indent the first line of paragraphs, set the indent in the style function for your normal or body text. If you insert a tab before the beginning of every paragraph, the final user may have to manually remove them.
- Do not add "hard" hyphens to adjust line lengths. Hard hyphens will remain in the new layout and have to be manually removed. Ditto for using condensed or expanded character spacing to adjust line lengths.
- Be sure to run your spell checker and do as many "final" edits as possible before sending the text to the final user.

Janis Ramey is a long-time member of the Pittsburgh Chapter. She's an independent technical writer and teacher of technical writing.

Website: www.technical-writing.net

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medical terminology to ask intelligent questions when talking with IT staff or physicians. Or it may mean knowing that Crosby went 4 for 5 in the last Penguins hockey game against the New York Islanders.

Amidst the constantly-changing landscape of tools and technologies we use to communicate and share information, remember that storytelling is as old as information itself. It's the glue that helps hold organizations together.

Chuck Lanigan works as a knowledge management consultant for PNC. He is a past Pittsburgh STC chapter president and current president of the STC WorkQuest board, and is currently working on a book about communication and collaboration in the workplace. Visit his website at <http://waysofknowing.home.comcast.net>.

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- Online Flare Forum & Knowledge Base exists for sharing info, asking questions, and getting advice from product support. (I participated in the forum and found the other participants quite knowledgeable. I also found the product support folks to be very helpful.)

Most of the hard-core, "gotta have" features that were in RoboHelp were kept in Flare:

- Index entries
- Hyperlinks
- Pop-ups
- Style sheets
- Topic templates
- Batch generation of multiple outputs
- Multiple outputs: Word, .chm, web help, and .Net help (new!)

- Map IDs
- Conditional build tags
- Internal documentation (Flare's own online help is very good)
- Browse sequences
- Customizable skins

To sum up, I liked Flare, overall. Flare's XML-based topic format and tie-in to Microsoft's .Net platform are both solid technologies. I'm sure it will only get better with each release. RoboHelp was once the leader among help authoring tools. I'm sure the MadCap executives will do all they can to regain the title.

Visit the MadCap website (madcapsoftware.com) and download a 30-day evaluation copy of the product. Kick the tires and see if it will work for your projects.

2005-2006**STC Pittsburgh Officers**

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