



SOCIETY FOR
TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION

Forward

The Newsletter of the UK Chapter of the STC

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President's message



Our Chapter President, Liz Hale, writes:

Hello fellow STC members,

I hope this issue finds you all healthy and wise (we won't say too much about the wealthy perhaps, as everyone knows that Technical Authors are severely underpaid!).

November was a busy month for the UK Chapter. The judging for the 2001 competition took place on November 17th and our Annual Awards Dinner was held on November 24th. We were particularly pleased to welcome Kitty Aughey as our guest speaker at the Awards Dinner. Kitty was visiting the UK as part of her duties as Director-Sponsor for Region 2.

You can read a more detailed report on the Chapter competition results on page 6.

As you may know, from January 2002 the STC UK Chapter will be joining Region 2 (along with all the

other European Chapters). So from January we will have a new Director-Sponsor, Chris Benz.

You can read a welcome message from Chris on page 3.

This edition of the Newsletter also includes articles by two first-time contributors. Tina Hoffman has written an extensive report on the recent Online Help Conference in Denmark, and Annie Drynan has written about the "Secret Life of Maps".

The editors and I hope that we will be seeing *your* name on our list of contributors in the near future!

Liz Hale
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Forward is the official newsletter of the UK Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

It is published six times each year: January, March, May, July, September and November.

Please send articles, letters, comments, and other items for inclusion in the newsletter to the editors by the beginning of a publication month.

Looking at maps

In this article, UK Chapter member **Annie Drynan** reflects on the “Secret Life of Maps” exhibition at the British Library in London.

The other week I went round a fascinating exhibition at the British Library. “The Lie of the Land - the secret life of maps” has over 100 items on display, and asks the question “Can you always believe what you see on a map? Is a map always a true reflection of the ground beneath our feet?”. The exhibition challenges visitors to take a close look at each map and think: who commissioned it, who was the intended audience, what information is it conveying, and, in some cases, what is it hiding?

As Mark Monmonier says, “A good map tells a multitude of little white lies; it suppresses truth to help the user see what needs to be seen”. Maybe the greatest example of this is Harry Beck's magnificent map of the London Underground (not in the exhibition) which is excellent at showing how to navigate the tube system, but gives totally misleading information about the actual distance between stations. With these thoughts in mind, I made my way round the exhibition.

Some of the maps on show reflect wishful thinking (the proposed land boundary drawn up before the peace treaty is signed). Others have a sinister purpose (a 1941 map identifying groups of Jews and gypsies, among other groups, presumably used to assist the Nazi authorities in planning deportations, and a 1940s zone map of Dresden showing where the Allied bombing raids would do most damage). Some are charming (a number show rather unusual places as “the centre of the world”) and some are beautiful works of art. Some lie - a forged map of “Roman Britain”, and some leave out information they would rather the user didn't know about.

This made me think about the people who produced these maps: people just doing what they were told, others producing a base map which someone else changed, some mapping the world as they saw it, and some setting out to tell a deliberate lie.

As I looked at the exhibition I wondered what the implications might be for technical communicators. We know the declared benefits of presenting information graphically: for example; it can explain more concisely than words; add interest; and make it easier to remember the message we want to convey. But is our audience always ready for this? I believe that our education system still leaves many people unused to understanding and interpreting information that is presented visually: we are taught how to critique and interpret the written

word, but I do not think we are taught how to interpret information that is presented as graphics.

This means that if we use graphics to get our message across to our audience, it is vital that we do everything we can to make sure we are clear what message we want to get across, how graphics can help, and how our readers will respond. How can we do this? Here are some suggestions:

1. Are you sure what you want your map, graph, diagram, or other sort of illustration to achieve? For example, are you showing an organised arrangement of facts or data, such as a timetable, from which readers are free to extract only the information they need for a given purpose? Or are you presenting information as a way of understanding a situation or process, such as a guide book or a step-by-step description of how to get a machine to operate, where the reader is likely to need to take in all the information?
2. Next, if you are unsure about how to go about presenting the information, do some reading. I have included some of my favourite books below. These are not necessary “how to” books but, particularly in the case of the Tufte books, they are inspirational, and may sharpen the way you approach presenting information as graphics.
3. The final stage is, of course, to test what you do. Ask someone who is as representative as possible of your target audience what the graphic is telling them. Is it clear? Do they take from it what you were trying to say? And if your work fails this usability test, refine it and try again until you get it right.

Further Reading:

- www.bl.uk/exhibitions/lieland/ The British Library Lie of the Land exhibition site
- Stephen M Kosslyn: *Elements of Graph Design*. W H Freeman and Company 1994
- Peter Wildur and Michael Burke: *Information Graphics*. Thames and Hudson 1998
- Edward Tufte: *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, Envisioning Information, and Visual Explanations* Graphics Press 1983, 1990 and 1997

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Officers

The following members are officers of the UK Chapter of the STC for 2001-2002

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UK Chapter Web site

http://www.stc-europe.org/uk/

stcukhome.htm

UK Chapter Discussion List

stcuk-discuss@chiark.greenend.org.uk

Adding hidden value

From time to time someone wants to measure what it is that a technical writer actually does. It's relatively commonplace to measure the work of a software developer by counting the number of lines of code they have written, and then to judge quality by counting the number of bugs for each thousand lines.

Why then should the work of a technical writer not be measured in terms of words and pages and spelling mistakes?

I believe that this mechanistic approach risks missing the added value that technical writers can bring to a project. Often this added value is hidden, because a project or a product may often be better because something has been taken away, rather than added.

A little anecdote from my own recent experience illustrates this point very well.

I work for a small software company. Shortly before our most recent software release, I was checking to make sure that everything that the users could see was properly described in the documentation. I checked all the tool bar buttons, all the dialogs, all the menu commands, and everything was covered, except... "View Log File".

There, on the "View" menu, was a command I hadn't documented. I rushed up to our lead developer, and begged him for a quick explanation, so that I could add something to the manual.

"What command?" he asked. "It's "View Log File" on the "View" menu", I repeated.

"But that's not supposed to be there," he almost shouted at me. "It was for internal testing, it's not supposed to be in the finished product at all! Thanks for spotting that!"

Sure enough, the command was gone by the next day.

I hadn't written a single word (although I had wanted to) but all the same I had added significant value to our product. Word-count accountants, take note!

David Farbey

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Welcome to Region 2!

Chris Benz, Region 2 Director-Sponsor

On 1 January 2002, STC's UK chapter-along with Belgium, France, Israel, The Netherlands, Sweden, and Transalpine-will become part of STC's Region 2.

Personally, I am very excited about having you all within one STC region. Europe is operating more and more as a single economic and geographic force, and with all the European chapters working together, the opportunities are ours to create.

What does this change mean to you? In the short term, not much. You'll start seeing articles by me instead of Kitty Aughey, and I'll be assuming Kitty's role as your official advocate on the STC Board of Directors. In the longer term, expect to see closer cooperation among STC's European chapters, and maybe even the first ever STC regional conference in Europe.

You'll be hearing much more from me in 2002, but for now, welcome to Region 2. Cheers!

You can contact Chris by e-mail at *cjbenez@unforgettable.com*

Membership News



Mick Robinson, Chapter Membership Officer, reports:

Our membership grows steadily. At the end of October we had 117 members, comfortably above the 105 at the same time last year.

With two months still to go we could be heading for our highest ever membership.

Swelling the ranks this time it's a warm welcome to new members:

- Ludwig Haskins of Sutton
- Judy Hourihan of Wincanton
- Gillian Shimmin of Orpington

Rejoining us are:

- Sharyn Hole of Rheinfelden, Switzerland
- Aidan Wellington of Edinburgh

And transferring into our chapter is:

- Jean Prince of Heydon

All are very welcome.

A reminder that membership runs from January to December and members should be receiving renewals in the next few weeks. The membership of those whose joined after October 1st is for 2001/2002 so they won't receive a renewal.

Renewal is direct to STC in the US as we're not geared up to handle dollar transfers or sterling to dollar transactions.

Congratulations to Darren Barefoot, a member of our Chapter, whose article "Writing for the Celtic Tiger" was published in the November 2001 edition of Intercom.

Darren works for Cape Clear software Inc., in Dublin, Ireland.

Congratulations to three new Senior Members in the UK Chapter: Mick Robinson, Ian Pollitt, and David Farbey.

Renew your STC Membership Online!

By now you should have received your renewal notice from the STC head office. You can renew your membership through the post by US dollar cheque or by credit card.

If you want to pay by credit card you can also renew your membership online, by visiting the special renewals site at <http://www.stc.org/renew.html>

You will need to know your membership number and your post code to renew on line.

You must renew your membership before the end of February 2002. But the earlier you renew the better - early renewal means you can be an early participant in next years STC elections.

Wonderful, wonderful, Copenhagen!

Tina Hoffman

Technical Author, Pathrace Engineering Systems

Unfortunately, I did not get to see much of the Danish capital when I went to this year's European Online Help Conference. This was the first time the conference ventured into mainland Europe, which resulted in a big increase in the number of continental delegates compared to previous years (when the conference was held in London). For me, one of the best aspects of attending this conference was to meet technical authors from all over the world. As a German living and working in the UK, it was very interesting to talk to a Spanish writer creating English language manuals for a German company in Munich!

The conference was spread over four days, comprising two seminar days and two main conference days.

The main conference started off with a fascinating keynote presentation by William Horton (Fellow of the STC and author of *Designing and Writing Online Documentation*). He explored how we can use technology to support the way we communicate and learn. Horton offered a boost to the self-esteem of the technical writing community by stating that, "within today's knowledge economy, the continuing education of adults is the single most important business". In other words, we are important!

In addition to a Starter Track Programme (new for this year), the conference featured countless seminars on all aspects of online user assistance. The sessions addressed issues as varied as the nationalities of the audience, ranging from server-based help, usability issues, HTML Help Design Techniques, JavaScript, localisation, indexing, to cross-browser DHTML and help for wireless applications.... The list is endless. The emphasis was on helping authors to enhance the user experience, and to address the challenges presented by new developments in technology.

And, just to make life more interesting, Microsoft's Help 2.0 standard was the featured technology at the conference. This new help format introduces the biggest change in Windows Help authoring since the introduction of HTML help.

In addition to the various conference sessions, there was the Peer Review Showcase (including a wonderful example piece by Digitext, the online help for a Lego game), and the Digitext Authoring Tools Survey 2001 (see separate article in this newsletter). Plus, an evening drinks reception and a networking lunch during which we were able to socialise and discuss our approaches and techniques, and a range of presentations from tools vendors (lots of freebies to take away). You can see why I never got to see the sights of wonderful Copenhagen.

Copenhagen (cont.)

This was my third year at the conference, and I have definitely enjoyed it. As a sole author working for a small software house, this conference does not only give me an opportunity to learn about new developments and technologies, but also the chance to talk to other technical authors.

The European Online Help Conference is organised by Digitext (in conjunction with WinWriters). Next year's conference will be held in London again (date to be confirmed).

Detailed reviews of all sessions can be found on the Digitext Web site at www.digitext.com.

What's the Elephant's Favourite Authoring Tool?

Tina Hoffman

Technical Author, Pathrace Engineering Systems

This is not a joke, you will find out the answer later. Earlier this year, Digitext carried out a Help Authoring Tools Survey. Nearly 400 respondents from different sizes of companies and a variety of industry sectors all over Europe (and beyond) took part. On the second day of the European Online Help conference, the results of the survey were announced. They both confirmed some widely held views and provided some surprises.

In the help authoring tool category, RoboHelp HTML Edition was still the most widely used tool, accounting for nearly 1 in 3 responses. Microsoft HTML Help was the most popular output with WinHelp a close second. Nearly 30% of respondents are still producing WinHelp as their primary output, and RoboHelp Classic was nominated as the second most popular tool. AuthorIT, a relative newcomer, was rated first as the most powerful help tool.

The Order of the Elephant (Denmark's highest order) was given to ForeHelp, which was rated most liked by its users.

In the FrameMaker market there was also a new player: Quadralay's WebWorks was voted the second most popular help authoring tool for users of FrameMaker, following closely in the footsteps of RoboHelp HTML Edition.

Quadralay WebWorks also came out top as the most powerful but also the hardest to use of the major tools.

FrontPage (29%) and Dreamweaver (34%) were the most popular web tools, with Dreamweaver being considered more powerful by its users. Third place was taken by Allaire Homesite (13%), which was considered almost as powerful as Dreamweaver but also far and away the easiest tool to use.

Just two tools dominated the word processing and page layout category: Microsoft Word and Adobe Framemaker (surprise, surprise). Framemaker was perceived to be by far the more powerful tool, whereas Word scored on ease of use.

90% of all respondents use image tools to create or edit graphics. PaintShop Pro was the most popular tool (51%). It appears users do not need the extra power of, or are not willing to pay for, or are unprepared for the greater difficulty in use of PhotoShop or Fireworks.

A more detailed report of the findings can be found on the Digitext Web site at www.digitext.com.

For those of you interested in a tool comparison, Char James-Tanny (author of SAMS Teach Yourself RoboHelp 2000 and the WebHelp Resource Guide) has compiled a tool comparison chart for a conference presentation she gave in September at the New Zealand Technical Writers Association Conference. This chart is available at <http://www.helpstuff.com/downloads/tools.pdf>.

STC Telephone Seminars

Two STC telephone seminars will be held in January 2002.

On Wednesday, January 16, Basil White will host **Building a Product, Manual, and Web Site Using Customer-Focused Design**.

On Wednesday, January 30, Sandra Harner and Tom Zimmerman will present **Developing a Strategic Framework for Technical Marketing Communication**.

Members can register online and view announcements for both seminars at www.stc.org/seminars.html.

Because you pay only for the connection, not the number of people participating, telephone seminars are a cost-effective way to train groups of technical communicators.

Costs per site are detailed below.

US sites: \$125.00

Canadian sites: \$140.00

Sites outside North America: Please contact the STC office

An additional \$10.00 will be charged for registrations received less than five days before the seminar.

UK Chapter Technical Writing Competition, 2001 *The Results!*

Liz Hale (in her capacity as Chapter Competition Manager) writes:

The following entries gained awards as follows in the STC UK Chapter's 2001 competition:

Entry Title	Contributors	Category	Award Level
Gem Template Reference Guide	Jacquelyn Archibald-Hope, Computas AS	7 - Online	Merit
LineSpeed 100 User and Reference Manual	Julianna Rhodes, Carmel Drudy and Pdraig O'Grady, Asita Technologies (Galway, Ireland)	2 - User Guides	Merit
Audatex NewGraphics Tour	Nick Creasy and Carolyn Hughes, Kudos Information Ltd.	7 - Online	Merit

A few words about each of the Merit Award winners:

Gem Template Reference Guide: This entry covered a very large subject by dividing the topics into logical sections. The judges were impressed by the way this entry made use of graphics to explain the concepts in the product they were describing. However the judges drew attention to a number of minor flaws.

LineSpeed 100 User and Reference Manual: The judges were impressed by the use of typography, writing style, illustrations and tables in this entry. They also recognised that a lot of hard work must have gone into producing this manual. Had it not been for some annoying inconsistencies (which should have been eliminated by more careful editing) it might have gained an Excellence Award.

Audatex NewGraphics Tour: The judges felt this entry demonstrated a highly imaginative use of the potentials of HTML presentation and scripting language programming. However the judges did feel the entry had a number of minor flaws that could have been improved.

There is no "Best of Show" this year and the UK Chapter will not be putting any entries forward to STC's International Competitions in Spring 2002.

The judges' written feedback was given to entrants who attended the Awards Dinner on Saturday 24th November, and will be sent by post (together with Award Certificates where appropriate) to those entrants who were unable to attend. If you do not hear anything from me by 7th December, please contact me as your feedback should have reached you safely by then.

Congratulations if you won award in the STC UK Chapter's Competition 2001! And if you did not, please don't give up... I am sure you can do better next time!

Liz Hale l.hale@kudos-idd.com

Make a note in your diaries...

The STC's 49th Annual Conference will be held from 5th to 8th May 2002, at the Opryland Hotel, Nashville Tennessee, in the United States.

The conference Preliminary Program will be sent out with the February 2002 issue of Intercom. The Program contains information about conference activities and technical sessions, as well as registration forms and materials to help plan your trip to Nashville.

Much of this information will be placed on the Society Web site at www.stc.org/conferences.html.

Effective Listening Pays Big Dividends!

by J. Suzanna Laurent, Director-Sponsor Region 5

A really good listener is a rare and priceless commodity! That's because effective listening skills do not come naturally. Few of us have ever been taught the value or the process of active listening, and those who have are the ones getting the results they want. They make it to the top of their professions, enjoy rich and fulfilling personal relationships, and suffer less from stress and worry.

The good news is that anyone can become a good listener. All it takes is the desire to learn the techniques that work. Listening is one thing that most people wish they could improve. Yet many people overlook the simple and obvious ways they can instantly improve their listening skills. Here are five guidelines that should help you improve your listening skills.

Use your Mind Being a good listener requires a conscious effort. You must listen with your mind completely engaged. Try listening for accuracy and inaccuracy-it helps keep your mind alert. Listen as if you are hearing the information for the first time.

Listen for the Whole Message Many people tune in only to the words of a speaker, not the body language or tone of voice, so they do not listen to the whole message. In understanding a message, both the verbal and nonverbal part of the message is important. The purpose of good listening is to get the best understanding. You cannot do that if you only listen to part of the message.

Control Your Environment Distractions can destroy listening ability. We are surrounded by noise in the office and at home. We can be distracted by physical barriers, such as the placement of a desk or a seating arrangement in a group meeting, or internal distractions. You can be a much more effective listener if you can control both your external and internal environments. If you can't control the environment, reschedule or move to another environment.

Take the Initiative In order to make better listening a way of life, you have to learn new skills and rid yourself of "bad" listening habits. This takes time and practice. You can become a better listener just by learning and practicing one new listening skill every week.

Use Active and Reflective Listening Both active and reflective listening use the same principles, but their purposes are different. In active listening, the listener responds to the speaker based on the listener's understanding of the message that was communicated. This person is part of an ongoing conversation, a give and take of ideas. Active listening is used in group problem-solving situations.

In reflective listening, the listener is primarily a sounding board for the speaker. The listener helps the speaker come to grips with the problem being communicated. Reflective listening is used primarily in one-on-one conversations when the speaker needs a listener, not advice.

These five guidelines for improving your listening can give you quick and immediate results. There are dozens of good books about becoming a better listener. By putting these guidelines to use and learning more about how to become an effective listener, you will be able to "listen up" and hear what's really being said.

You can contact Suzanna Laurent at slaurent@prodigy.net

Scholarships for Technical Communication

The STC is now offering scholarships for the 2002-2003 academic year, and once again we are looking for qualified applicants. Please think about whether you might be eligible for a scholarship or whether you know someone who should be encouraged to apply for one.

The STC awards scholarships to students who are enrolled full-time in undergraduate or graduate technical communication programs and studying for an academic or industrial career in technical communication.

For the 2002-2003 academic year, the STC will award fourteen scholarships, seven to undergraduates and seven to graduate students, who are enrolled in a full-time technical communication program. All scholarships are for the same amount (\$2,000), which is paid directly to the school.

Students will be evaluated on their potential for contributing to the technical communication profession, on their accomplishments as technical communicators, on

their academic records, on the content of their application letters, and on recommendations of faculty members. Individual financial need is considered when applicants are judged comparable in the preceding areas.

To apply, students must submit a completed application package, including a description of their accomplishments and goals. Students can obtain application information from the STC Web site (www.stc.org/grants_loans.html), or they can contact Lenore S. Ridgway, Manager, STC Scholarship Committee, at the address given below.

The application package must be received by February 15, 2002.

Lenore S. Ridgway
19 Johnston Avenue
Kingston, NY 12401
(845) 339-4927 (voice and fax)
leerichard@compuserve.com

UK Chapter One-day Conference

In response to requests by members, we are planning to organise a one-day conference in central London next June (date and venue to be confirmed).

The conference theme is "Technical Writing in the New Millennium - where is the writing gone?"

New technologies seem to enter the field of technical writing virtually every year. In the last ten years alone, WinHelp, HTML Help and Web-based help have revolutionised help design and distribution, shifting the focus toward tools and technology. Our work has been transformed by both software and hardware developments.

While these tools allow us to communicate more effectively, there are also downsides to consider. It is easy to be seduced by the powerful design, editing, and illustrating capabilities of these tools, but they all have limitations. None of these tools produce professional

documentation unless used by a knowledgeable and skilled writer.

By examining past developments and looking ahead into the future, the conference will address the challenges presented by these new developments in technology. Our challenge as technical authors is to ensure that we are driving the technology, and that we are not driven by it.

We are trying to put together a program that we hope you will enjoy. The conference will provide an opportunity for the exchange of information and ideas, as well as a meeting place for technical authors from all over the UK.

A call for conference proposals will be mailed to STC members in the New Year.

For more information about the conference, please contact Tina Hoffman at thoffman@pathtrace.com.

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