Responding to Accusations of Corporate Wrongdoing: How Technical Communicators Can Help

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An organization’s response to product recalls, government and legal action, and accusations of wrongdoing from any corner of society is typically a multi-pronged, all-hands-on-deck effort through multiple communication channels. The authors show in this article how technical communicators can contribute their diverse skill sets when their employers are in damage control mode.

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Imagine walking into work to discover that your company is in the middle of a crisis. Perhaps a product is being blamed for injuring a customer or some employees have been caught on video misbehaving. Your company’s name is printed in bold black-and-white headlines atop newspapers and floats to the top of the blogosphere as the negative story spirals out of control.

What should you do in this situation? Contact your public relations or communications department and offer your services because they’re going to need your help—even if they don’t realize it yet.

Why Should You Get Involved?

In today’s challenging economic times, technical communicators need to find new ways to demonstrate their value to their companies (see Hannah Kirk’s article in the July/August 2009 Intercom). More importantly, internal departments need your services in handling accusations in today’s online environment.

Traditionally, corporate responses to accusations of wrongdoing have been relegated to the fields of communication under the title of “crisis management” or the ancient Greek term *apologia* (which is defined as a defense or justification of one’s actions). That’s because when companies, politicians, or celebrities faced accusations in the past, they either made a speech, gave an interview to the media, or printed an ad to defend themselves or apologize.

Unfortunately, that mentality has stuck with us today. In looking at 91 academic articles printed over the past 40 years, the types of apologia that have been studied aren’t exactly surprising. More than 80 percent fell into the categories of speech or traditional media. Those categories naturally lend themselves to speech communication and mass communications—as opposed to fields like technical communication. This is a problem for two reasons: 1. It needlessly limits the number of professionals who are exposed to this type of communication. A PR professional is probably well versed in crisis management and apologia (or image restoration) strategies, while a technical communicator has likely received little to no training or education in this area. 2. The importance of new media, as well
as business and technical documents, is often overlooked. New media is already a crucial channel of delivery, and a growing number of technical communicators are being asked to contribute their skills to assist their employers’ responses to accusations.

Let’s look at a couple of recent examples to better understand what we’re talking about.

**Mattel: When Toys Become Hazardous**

In 2007, Mattel, the largest manufacturer of children’s toys, issued a voluntary recall of several toy lines due to small digestible magnets and indications of lead-based paint. Although the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission issues official recall notices, Mattel went several steps beyond what was required:

1. The company posted product images and other important recall information on its corporate website.
2. The company immediately implemented a new “three-stage safety check” that was described in detail to consumers online.
3. The company posted a video on its website featuring chairman and CEO Robert Eckert describing the problem to consumers, offering an apology, and discussing the company’s corrective action.

**Domino’s Pizza: When Employees Behave Badly**

Domino’s Pizza offers a more recent example of today’s interactive apology. By now, most of the hype has died down regarding the public apology on YouTube by Domino’s USA President Patrick Doyle. The apology was posted after two former employees posted a video on YouTube showing themselves “appearing inappropriately” with food. What many people—even in the areas of crisis management and new media—may not realize is the extent of this social media apology.

1. Not only was the president’s apology posted on YouTube, but it was also posted on a company webpage with the heading “Domino’s Customer Care.”
2. Domino’s used its Facebook page to link to the video and issue bolstering statements such as, “We care about our customers” and, “Domino’s Pizza does great things for your community.”
3. The company set up a Twitter account to connect with customers, fans, and interested parties. As one of the first posts explained, “Dominos Pizza just launched @dpzinfo as the Official Corporate Info page. We r answering the call by listening 2 our customers.” In the days that followed, the Twitter account was used to address concerns with statements such as, “This was one time at one store in the U.S. We have thousands around the world who want you to know it won’t happen where you are” and, “This was an isolated incident at one store and we’re taking it VERY serious. We’re doing all we can to regain your trust.”

After the initial negative publicity, the video’s buzz faded and customer comments began sounding positive again. In an interview, Tim McIntyre (Domino’s vice president of communications) attributed the quick turnaround and positive reaction to the company’s direct use of social networks. “Are we on the mend? It’s too early to tell,” McIntyre said. “Would we do it again? Yes. It
helped us get the word out. While it did expose more people to the issue, it also said Domino’s Pizza is taking this very seriously and that the thing we hold dearest is our customer’s trust.”

**Unfortunate Events, Fortunate Opportunities**

Both cases exemplify a transformation in the way companies respond to accusations of wrongdoing. Whether it’s a product recall or malicious behavior by employees, companies are launching multi-pronged responses that use the skills and training that technical communicators exemplify. In both cases, we see:

- **skills** such as information architecture, HTML design, Flash and JavaScript coding, video production, technical writing, and new media interactivity.
- **delivery methods** that mirror the media technical communicators already use to communicate product information—including corporate or product websites, downloadable PDFs, online videos, and chat features or discussion threads.

These examples demonstrate the crucial roles that information architects, web designers, and technical writers play in producing, as well as delivering, corporate responses to accusations of wrongdoing. From a technical standpoint, they demonstrate the inclusion of safety information and technical descriptions of product specifications, safety procedures, and corrective actions. Such aspects are within the expertise of technical communicators, regardless of the delivery channel. Unfortunately, there is little information or training available to these professionals regarding apologia. But, as is often the case, the lack of information actually creates an opportunity for proactive technical communicators to take initiative, understand the subject matter, assemble a plan, and position themselves and their department as a valuable resource to the company.

The following sections provide some information to help you respond to accusations. We begin with a brief overview—breaking the subject into three areas that technical communicators already understand: *what to say, how to say it, and how to deliver it.*

**What to Say**

During a crisis, there are any number of things you can say. But knowing what you *should* say is entirely different. Scholars have identified a variety of strategies that people and corporations use when facing allegations of wrongdoing. While those theories are helpful in examining a situation in hindsight, most aren’t helpful in determining what you should say when you’re in the middle of an unfolding controversy. In fact, there are only a few theories that are predictive in nature, and one of the best is W. Timothy Coombs’s book, *Ongoing Crisis Communication.*

Coombs outlines a continuum for evaluating the specific situation you face and then selecting the appropriate response. Here’s the gist of it: Say your company faces rumors of wrongdoing. According to Coombs, your level of responsibility is low, since rumors constitute unfounded statements or gossip. In that case, the continuum indicates that the appropriate response would be to attack the accuser, calling his or her information and motives into question.

This is just one example, but it demonstrates how technical communicators can get up to speed on the available major communication strategies and when they should be used. In the end, your company’s strategy will likely be decided by the communications or PR department with input from the executive team. But by having a general understanding of the options under discussion, you can participate in the conversation and position yourself as a knowledgeable resource.

**How to Deliver It**

This is the area where technical communicators can offer the most value and immediate impact. Almost daily, a new situation arises in which a company is forced to acknowledge, justify, or apologize for some element of wrongdoing. Sometimes they’re prominent cases that flood the headlines with stories of malicious wrongdoing. But other times, these cases involve oversights or mistakes. Product recalls are the perfect example.

Between the Food and Drug Administration and the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a number of product recalls are released each week. Many of those involve minor safety issues that are easily addressed. But even then, corporations invest resources into delivering the recall information, educating consumers on how to address the problem, and, in many cases, weaving in subtle apologia...
statements that help maintain a positive corporate image. That means technical communicators may be asked to help produce apologia-related web text, product safety releases, and online videos instructing how to address a safety issue.

Here are just a few examples of the positions that may be impacted and how the employees can contribute.

**Writers.** Whether your company is putting together product recall information, an FAQ webpage, or information to be delivered through social networking sites, technical writers are natural team members to assist—especially if you work in a high-tech industry or there is important safety information that needs to be communicated clearly.

**Information Designers.** Who knows better how to manage the flow of information? When you throw in the multi-pronged approach and the multiple stakeholders that will need to be addressed, it’s hard to imagine a corporate apologia strategy not including an information designer.

**Web Programmers.** Just about everything a company does today involves electronic communications. And apologia is no different. In many cases, the overall response will be more complex than updating a static webpage or entering a few paragraphs into a content management system. Programmers need to design and build complex webpages and emails that weave together downloadable items, videos, Flash presentations, interactive pages, and so on. Equally important will be the need for speed. The minute the story breaks, your PR department must begin responding. There’s no time to train someone on the software or coding, so programmers can expect to be pulled in early and asked to produce projects immediately.

**Video Production.** Video is becoming increasingly popular in apologia. Sometimes it takes the form of a CEO apologizing for the incident. In other cases, it takes a subtler role, such as a video showing consumers how to find out if their product is included in a recall and how to submit the proper documentation to take part. Regardless of what strategy your company uses, be prepared to chip in. And if you’re not explicitly recruited, offer your services anyway; someone may not have thought about how video can be used as part of the overall strategy.

**Customer Service.** This is a crucial area for communicating what happened and how your company is responding. If you already have discussion forums, toll-free numbers, or FAQ pages on your website, consumers will flood those resources first. Be proactive and immediately make a plan to integrate the corporate message into your current customer service resources. You may even want to consider launching additional valuable services, such as a blog or a Twitter account.

**Simple Steps to Start Preparing**

Regardless of the title or job description, technical communicators need to be up to speed on *what to say, how to say it, and how to deliver it*. And, they need to know it before they need to employ it.

Technical communicators can start by brushing up on crisis communication and apologia theory. The two books described earlier are good starting points, as is William Benoit’s *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image Restoration Strategies*. Pay close attention to news that involves corporate wrongdoing. When you see situations in which companies are facing accusations, analyze their responses. What do their websites look like and say? Is there a page devoted to the issue or is it buried somewhere? How are they using social media? Use the information in previous sections to analyze the language used and take notes for future reference.

Additionally, evaluate your skills as an individual or the skill set of your department to determine how and where you can help. As Diana Ost described in her May 2009 *Intercom* article, “Mining for Career Gold,” technical communicators already have many of the skills and expertise that other departments need. Now’s the time to put those skills and experiences on paper and begin the discussion of how you can help. You should also evaluate what lines of communication you use for product information—including your corporate website, call centers, social media, and so on. These resources may become crucial lines of communication in a crisis.

Once you’ve evaluated your own skills and resources, make connections. Create a rough plan of how you can help address potential accusations of wrongdoing in the future. Your PR department has an initial plan of attack; meet with them to discuss your ideas and the resources you can offer to their overall plan.

Also consider networking with academics who study apologia or crisis management. Exchange emails about recent conversations, share ideas that you’re pursuing, participate in discussions in organizations like STC, discuss opportunities to present best practices at a conference, or write white papers. Make a name for yourself outside of your company to help increase your value internally.

Finally, we all need to educate the next generation of technical communicators in crisis communications, beginning with academics and industry professionals who can include case studies in textbooks and course work. For example, professors of technical communication can integrate real product recall situations or accusations of wrongdoing into the classroom and assign student groups to discuss and analyze the problems and solutions examined in this article.

By positioning real-world scenarios in such a way, professors can help lead discussions not only about tools, software, and delivery methods that can be used, but also about the rhetorical goals behind such responses.

After all, technical communicators of today and tomorrow never know what challenges or accusations their companies will face when they walk into work each morning.

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Heidi L. Everett (heverett@csbsju.edu) is the executive director of communications for the College of Saint Benedict in Minnesota. She has nearly 20 years of public relations, communications, and marketing experience.
The office was all set up. We’d spent $60 on refurbished desks from our local prison industry surplus store, $30 for two file cabinets from an auction, and $1,800 on cushy, ergonomic chairs (you need a good chair if you plan to make your living sitting in it most of the time). We had QuickBooks, Adobe Creative Suite, and Microsoft Office running on the most powerful computers we could afford. We were ready for business!

Not by a long shot.

Transitioning from a captive employee to a business owner is a shock. No matter what your previous role was, as a business owner you are the master of your domain: the CEO, CFO, CIO, COO, and any other C (insert letter here) O that exists in the corporate lexicon. The business’s success depends on you and your ability to manage administrative details, finances, technology, operational functions, and...oh yeah...the work your client hired you to do. Plenty of resources exist for helping you make the sale, manage the project, and understand what the bottom line really means. But few resources (in fact, I couldn’t find any) will mention the five lessons I’ve learned as the owner of a technical communication consulting company.

Don’t Hire Your Friends, Their Relatives, or Your Relatives

Once you’ve started your business and word begins to travel, you’ll start getting calls and emails from former coworkers, friends, acquaintances, and relatives. Social gatherings may leave you feeling like you’re interviewing candidates at a job fair. To be blunt: Your business is not a social services agency, a temporary stopgap for someone until he finds a permanent position, or a training ground for your husband’s friend’s cousin’s sister who wants to make a career change.

This lesson took two tries and cost thousands of dollars before I figured it out. Now, this is not to say that you can’t help friends or relatives in other ways. Offer to provide reference letters (if you’re comfortable doing so), review cover letters, help with a résumé, and provide networking contacts. Just don’t hire them. The awkwardness you experience when you say “no” up front is nothing compared to the goodwill and friendship it may cost if you have to release your friend from a job. However, if you do hire a friend or relative, be prepared for that relationship to change (for better or worse), or even to be completely destroyed.

A few words about business partnerships: Make sure one of you has a controlling interest. Your attorney will likely advise you on this. Don’t ignore it.
You Can Fire Clients
On the 1990s sitcom *Newhart*, brothers Larry, Darryl, and Darryl would do “anything for a buck.” You don’t have to do anything for a buck, and you certainly don’t have to put up with a client’s bad behavior for a buck, either. A former client was verbally abusive to one of my contractors and refused to recognize boundaries (the client called the contractor at 2:20 AM on a Wednesday). When the abuse reached a fever pitch, the contractor finally told me. I immediately exercised the termination clause (you should always have an escape clause) in the client’s contract. Yes, I lost money—a lot of it. But I don’t need business at the expense of decency, professionalism, my business reputation, and the goodwill of others who work with me. And neither do you.

You Have to Make Unpopular Decisions
If you have any supervisory or management experience, having to make unpopular decisions is not a revelation. But these issues take on a different significance when they impact your business.

For example, a prospect approached me about developing a presentation for 50 people on how to write emails and letters more effectively. She didn’t have a budget in mind, and experienced some sticker shock with the estimate. Then she came up with a budget. In “Larry, Darryl, and Darryl” economics, she didn’t want me to do the work for a buck, she wanted me to do it for fifty cents. I told her what I could do for her budget, but she insisted that I could do the work for what she was willing to pay. And I could have, but if I had any more work from her in the future, I would have been stuck working for fifty cents when there are other clients willing to pay me a buck. I walked away from the project. Don’t bargain away your professionalism. Your doctor doesn’t.

Another unpopular decision was to change my business model. I no longer have employees. Anyone who works with me now is an IRS 1099 contractor. Other business owners will tell you that, as you build your business, it’s often feast or famine, and it’s true. During times of famine, the business finances were strained considerably by having to make payroll and benefit payments. It made more sense to pay a higher wage for work on an as-needed basis. An unintended benefit was that it reduced some of the pressure to make high-dollar sales and allowed me to focus more on my niche market. Now I can more effectively match client needs with our services.

Know Your Limits
Recognize your strengths and weaknesses, and find someone who is strong where your skills are weak.

Their Business Is Not Your Business, and Vice Versa
In other words, be professional. In the course of working with other people, it’s hard not to establish some form of personal relationships by talking about the Big Game, your kid’s band concert, his flooded basement, or her 16-year-old accidentally running over the mailbox with a car. But recognize the boundaries that professionalism establishes: stay away from office politics, your own business operations, and the intimate details of anyone’s personal life. Just stay out of it, especially if you want to work with a client again.

At the end of my fourth year of business, I have a different business model, spend my time and energy working with fun people on fun projects, and no longer have a business partner. It didn’t come easily or cheaply. But even with the ups and downs, starting and running your business will be one of the most rewarding experiences of your professional career.

Suggested Reading


Suzanne Guess (suzanne@210comm.net) is manager of the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG, a member of the Nominating Committee, and past president of the Central Iowa Chapter. She taught English for 16 years before opening 210 Communications in 2005.
Making Lemonade From a Layoff

Lemons taste best in lemonade, so it’s better to turn life’s lemons into lemonade. I was handed such a lemon in November 2008, when I was laid off during a company-wide restructuring.

Because of my previous experiences, I knew that I needed to do several things to stay sane. I could already see that jobs were starting to disappear in my area, so I knew it might take a while.

Put Things in Perspective with Self-Therapy

When I was laid off, I had no idea that I’d be still looking for a job 14 months later. Prior to this layoff, I had survived two periods of unemployment after contract jobs had ended but had gotten a job within two to five months each time.

I think that was the hardest part of the layoff experience for me. In a corporate setting, I’d survived four rounds of layoffs at a previous employer, and a first round of layoffs in 2008 at my last employer. I’d invested myself in that company and was ready to stick around for the long haul. After contracting for almost three years, I chose that company when I returned to “captive employment”—and now they didn’t want me any more.

Network, Network, Network

I discovered that a good portion of my coworkers were not on LinkedIn. They had been with the company for five years or more, and they felt no urgency to be networking. Before I left the building, I passed out several sticky notes with the LinkedIn URL. Within an hour of getting home, I had set up a “former employees of” group so we could all gather in one place.

These days, when I see a job that is perfect for one of my former coworkers, I can easily send a message with their profile URL. While we didn’t often use the Discussions section of the LinkedIn group, we did post questions and information about dealing with the Oregon Employment Department, health insurance, and 401K rollovers. We also exchanged email addresses and have continued to meet for meals occasionally.

One of the people I met with regularly was my former manager (STC Fellow Garret Romaine), who was also laid off at the same time. We met monthly at a convenient, low-cost restaurant and commiserated over our efforts to get contract or regular employment. We often invited other unemployed STC members to our lunches. This made it easy to gather intelligence on what local companies were interested in, as not all of us would make it to interview rounds after résumé submissions.

I was shameless in letting everyone know that I was unemployed and available for work. You never know who has a friend who has a requisition at their company. You can’t stand on pride when it comes to employment. I got my year-long temporary job at Columbia Sportswear because the husband of a friend of a friend had a technical writer opening, and he mentioned it to his wife, who said, “Rachel is a technical writer. Give her a call and see if her skills match up.” I ended up with that job within 24 hours of the first call.
Over the years, I talked and worked with several recruiters. I sent email messages to all the recruiters I knew and made sure my résumé was updated in their databases. I also met at least one in person and asked questions about the state of the industry and what job skills were in demand.

**Set Up a Schedule**

I knew that if I didn’t set up a daily Monday–Friday schedule, I could easily slip into the pattern of sleeping until late morning and not going to bed until late at night. I immediately sent an email to an ex-coworker at a different company and arranged to walk with her three days a week during her lunch time. The other two days, I walked with ex-coworkers who survived the layoff round in which I’d lost my job. I’d been walking five days a week at lunch time while I was employed; it was an opportunity to ensure I got out of the house every day, with some exercise in the bargain.

I have to admit, when walking with the still-employed former coworkers, I felt almost a sense of relief. I could visit and listen to them vent as they dealt with the fallout, but I was able to walk away afterward.

**Look into Educational Opportunities**

Working 40 hours a week, it was challenging for me to pursue any external training, except for STC’s annual conference. Now was my chance to investigate new technologies and training opportunities. I also looked at current job openings to see if I had any missing skills or software knowledge. That way I could target any deficiencies before they became a problem when I submitted résumés.

Before my layoff, my company had just received the Adobe Technical Communication Suite 1.0, and I was starting to learn Captivate and refresh my RoboHelp skills. I had previously purchased *Adobe Captivate 3: The Definitive Guide*, and I downloaded the trial version of both programs. I also follow several Adobe personnel on Twitter, who would send messages about upcoming free web seminars and share tutorial links about how to do a particular task.

I used Adobe Creative Suite products in the course of my job, so I investigated online training opportunities. I’m a member of the National Association of Photoshop Professionals (NAPP), and the organization that owns NAPP also owns an online training site that does training for Creative Suite products. While it may seem expensive, I invested in a year’s subscription to keep my skills fresh. Just like my STC membership, I decided the investment was worth the potential returns.

**Research Local Companies**

The Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area is part of the Silicon Forest, which stretches to the Bellevue/Redmond area of Washington state. There is a major concentration of high-tech jobs and employers in this area. I started with the city I live in first. The city has a page on their website that lists the area’s major employers, their websites, and their approximate company size. I went to each employer’s website, searched for their careers area (sometimes this section is very well hidden), and looked at the company’s mission and current opportunities.

I also asked my LinkedIn connections from the local area about their companies and about other companies that they might be able to connect me to.

**Request Recommendations and References**

It seems to be a common trend that local employment agencies request at least three references when they submit you to a job. Given the speed with which some companies review résumés, making sure you have your reference information available (reference name, email address, and phone number) is key to making sure your résumé gets submitted before the submission window closes. I have at least four references and their contact information handy in a text file, and I submit the appropriate reference when asked.

My references include:
- a former manager
- a fellow STC member I’ve worked with on chapter leadership
- a former software engineer coworker who has worked with me in providing information for documentation
- a quality assurance manager who can talk about my editing and writing skills and my skills at generating useful defect reports about the graphical user interface

I also requested recommendations on LinkedIn from the managers and senior-level executives at my former company with whom I had interacted in the course of my job. It’s best to do this within 48 hours of leaving your employer because your accomplishments will still be fresh in their minds.

**Update Your Résumé**

I took a close look at my résumé, and had others review it as well. While I usually update my résumé on a regular basis, even while working, sometimes I can forget accomplishments. I almost always try to keep my résumé to two pages, and that is the guideline I follow when I decide to remove or add something. A couple months after my layoff, I found out that the user’s guide I submitted for my former company won an excellence award in the local chapter’s technical publications competition. Once I received that news, I included my award on my résumé. I also referenced it when including a cover letter with my résumé and when sending required writing samples to a potential employer.

I’m currently working on a short-term contract for my former manager, which will end when I leave to attend the STC conference in Dallas, Texas, in early May. Keeping in touch with him, and making sure he had my contact information, made it easy for him to pull me in to finish a project when one of his current writers unexpectedly left the company with no notice.

Rachel Houghton (rjhoughton@gmail.com) is an STC senior member. She can be seen snapping away at STC conferences as an unofficial photographer. Rachel has been a member of the Willamette Valley Chapter since 1998. She is the program chair for the 2010 STC Technical Communication Summit and has worked with the program committee since 2007.
Writing in Type: The Art of Choosing Typefaces that Work

By Michael Opspeegh, Senior Member
Why should technical communicators care about typography when our jobs revolve around transforming technical data into readable and usable information for a specific audience? Because typography actually has dramatic effects on readability. You can create perfect copy and supporting charts, graphs, and illustrations, and yet the reader will not be able to use your carefully crafted information if the type is inappropriate, inaccessible, or uninviting.

The concept of making information inviting has been around for ages. One of Aristotle’s five canons of rhetoric was delivery. Aristotle’s concept of delivery referred to the speaker’s facial expressions, gestures, and vocal intonations. To technical communicators, delivery, as a rhetorical device, refers to document design, including the format of tables and figures, indentation, and typography.

Technical communicators must, therefore, possess a basic knowledge of type design to help master the delivery of their documents. For example, you may already subscribe to the principle that sans serif typefaces are easier to read on screen while serif typefaces are easier to read on paper. This basic tenet is a great starting point but should not be the extent of your knowledge of typography.

Importance of Type

Except for certain situations within graphic design, type’s main purpose is balancing the readability and legibility of your message. Your type should always be appealing and inviting to the reader. Text consisting of decorative fonts or clashing typefaces turns your reader off. Your use of typography can directly affect whether a potential reader even bothers to look at your document.

Looks aside, bad typography can obscure the meaning or tone of your message. When the message of your résumé, for example, is “hire me,” you want your message to be as clear as possible. By the same token, stunning typography won’t land you a job if the content of your résumé doesn’t adequately match your skills to the employer’s desired qualifications or if your résumé is poorly laid out.

You should devote some time to finessing the type in your manuals, interactive help, web pages, annual reports, proposals, white papers, and whatever else you may be writing. All your documents and projects should be pleasant to look at and innovative enough to attract and hold your readers’ attention. After all, type is all around us on billboards, signs, web pages, cell phones, and television, and your documents are competing against all of these media for your readers’ eyes.

Key concepts that are specific to typography include x-height, leading, and kerning.

X-height

The x-height of a typeface is the measurement from the baseline to the median (the height of a lowercase x). You may have noticed that the x-height varies from font to font. If you haven’t noticed, don’t worry, we’ll examine some examples later. Fonts with larger x-heights require more line spacing.

Leading

Leading is the space between lines of type. Technically, leading is measured from baseline to baseline. The default leading is approximately 120 percent of the point size of the type. For example, 12-point type would be set with a leading of 14.4 points (written as 12/14.4). The default isn’t always appropriate because, in addition to type size, you must also consider x-height and line length. I can’t offer a formula for determining the amount of line spacing required for comfortable reading; it’s a matter of aesthetics. As you consider the proper line spacing, take the following factors into account:

• Font Size. Normal text of 10 to 12 points is generally set with one to two points of line spacing. Smaller fonts require more line spacing to be legible. Likewise, large heading or display type will likely require less leading in proportion to the text size.

• X-height. X-height is the distance between the baseline and median of
lowercase letters. The larger the x-height, the more leading is required because the reader needs more space to recognize the word shapes.

• **Line Length.** Longer lines of text require more line space to prevent the eye from reading the same line twice. Lines of 75 characters or more should be double-spaced. Keep your body text between 35 and 70 characters for easy reading.

### Kerning

Kerning is the space between two characters. Depending on the shapes of the characters, if they look like puzzle pieces that fit together, they may need to be “scooched” closer together to create a more even text color. By text color, I mean the gray that body text creates on the page when glanced at from afar. Glaring white spaces between characters can distract the reader. Kerning reduces those white spaces. Proper kerning is a tedious task, so you may want to focus any manual adjustments on heading or key text.

### Readability and Legibility

Readability and legibility are very similar terms and are often confused because they seem to mean the same thing. The two terms, however, are related only as much as a sprint is related to a marathon: they both involve running. Readability and legibility both involve the appropriateness and the effectiveness of type.

**Readability** refers to the type’s ability to attract and hold the reader’s attention. Readability is what makes us take notice of text and want to read more. The more interesting the type, however, the more you risk sacrificing legibility.

**Legibility** refers to the ease with which type can be read and the capacity for word shapes to be easily recognized. Legible type must not interrupt the reader or cause his or her eyes to stray.

It’s important to understand the differences between readable type and legible type when designing your documents. Your heading type should be highly readable. It must grab the reader’s attention and make the structure of your document immediately apparent and familiar. The reader isn’t going to spend much time reading heading text, so it’s acceptable to sacrifice some measure of legibility. Once the reader is hooked and knee-deep in your body text, the type should be highly legible, easy to read, and provide no barrier to communication.

### Type Styles

There are, perhaps, hundreds of thousands of computerized typefaces to choose from. All of these typefaces can be a bit overwhelming, especially to the untrained eye. Fortunately, you can categorize most typefaces into one of seven groups; granted, some typefaces will never easily fit into one category or another.

Like fashion, type styles have changed over time. Most type styles are derived from the time or place in which they were developed and gained popularity. Having said that, many typefaces that fit within a certain style may have been created outside of the time or place of origin typically associated with that type style. You can categorize most typefaces in one of the following seven type styles:

- **Old Style**
- **Transitional**
- **Modern**
- **Slab Serif**
- **Sans Serif**
- **Script**
- **Decorative**

### Type size and leading

The point size of type is measured from roughly the bottom of the descenders to the top of the ascenders. The leading is the amount of space between lines of type and is measured from baseline to baseline. The example below is 12-point type set on 15-point leading (or 12/15). The typeface used is High Tower.

### Kerning

Kerning is the adjustment of space between two letters. Kerning is intended to make the space between letters even. In the example above, the first instance in not kerned while the second is. Notice the T and the Y fit more closely together in the kerned type. The typeface used is Adobe Caslon.
Typeface styles are evocative. They’re reminiscent of the time and place in which they were created because they embody the art and architecture of the time and place of origin. Choose typefaces based on their associated mood and tone and find the ones that suit the tone of your document.

About Fonts

A font is the entire collection of characters, punctuation, numerals, and glyphs of a typeface. Traditionally, a font was the collection of characters of a single size of one typeface. With computers, fonts aren’t size-dependent, and the term is often used to refer to the file that holds the collection of characters.

Many of the software packages that we install on our computers contain collections of fonts that are perfectly suitable for our documents. Operating systems like Microsoft Windows and Apple Mac OS, and software suites like Microsoft Office and Adobe Creative Suite, contain dozens of fonts. Check out the fonts you already have installed on your computer.

Don’t steal fonts. A font file is the culmination of a lot of hard work by a type designer. Fonts are intellectual property, so don’t borrow or steal them.

Be careful when downloading free fonts. Although there are many cool-looking freebie fonts available online, many of them contain only the basic character sets and may not contain all the measurements required for proper kerning. Additionally, installing a corrupt font file can cause your software applications or operating system to crash. If you’re running Mac OS X, you can use the Font Book utility to verify that your font files are not corrupt. If you’re running Windows, there are several commercial font-management utilities you can buy.

If you can, use OpenType fonts. OpenType is the latest standard developed by Adobe and Microsoft. OpenType fonts are cross-platform (meaning a single font file will work on all major operating systems), contain vastly expanded character sets, and contain such advanced typographic features as old-style numbering, real fractions, real small caps, and additional ligatures. If you can’t find an OpenType font that suits you, use a TrueType font instead.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Myriad Pro. Myriad Pro Bold, Regular, and Condensed are included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Gill Sans MT. Gill Sans MT Bold, Regular, and Condensed are included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Helvetica Neue.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Rockwell and Chaparral Pro.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Bodini and Calibri.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Constantia and Verdana. Constantia Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008. Verdana Regular is included with Microsoft Windows 7 and Apple Mac OS X 10.6.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Copperplate Gothic and Georgia. Copperplate Gothic Bold is included with Microsoft Office 2007. Georgia Regular is included with Microsoft Windows 7 and Apple Mac OS X 10.6.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Futura and Adobe Garamond Pro.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Bell Gothic and Bell MT. Bell Gothic Std Black is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4. Bell MT Regular is included with Microsoft Office 2007.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Franklin Gothic.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Franklin Gothic Heavy, Book, and Medium Condensed are included with Microsoft Office 2007 and Office Mac 2008. Adobe Garamond Pro Regular is included with Adobe Creative Suite 4.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

- Myriad Pro and Adobe Caslon Pro.

---

**Headings**

Body type

Captions

Choosing Type Combinations

Selecting the perfect typeface for the occasion can be a tedious task. Selecting a combination of two or three typefaces that suit the occasion and work well together can be downright frustrating.

There are several type families that are diverse enough that you could use one family and still have enough contrast to make your documents stand out. Three reliable standbys include Gill Sans, Helvetica, and Myriad; I know I can always use them when I am in a pinch. The best part about sticking to one type family is that the x-heights and the length of ascenders and descenders will match nicely.

Let’s say that you want to make your document “pop” with a wider variety than one type family can offer. You’ll need to find an appropriate combination of typefaces. There’s no science to this, so you’ll need to learn to trust your eyes. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Choose typefaces that have similar x-heights and similar lengths of ascenders and descenders. Typefaces with higher x-heights look denser on the page than typefaces with small x-heights. Similarly, typefaces with shorter ascenders and descenders will look squatty next to a typeface with taller ascenders and descenders.

- Choose typefaces that provide enough contrast to each other to provide the reader with visual cues with which to navigate your document. This is not a complete contradiction of the first tip. Your typefaces should be similar enough that they look like they belong in the same document but provide enough contrast that the reader can easily spot headings. If your two typefaces look too similar, their slight differences may look like you chose the wrong font by mistake. Often, writers use a serif/sans serif combination to provide sufficient contrast.

- Choose a typeface for the body text first. Since this is the text with which the reader has the most interaction, this type should be the most legible. Don’t choose a body type with diminished legibility because it fits well with your heading type.

- Ensure that the typeface that provides the greatest contrast to the paper or background is the typeface that you use for key pieces of information. The reader’s eye will drift to the part of the page with the greatest contrast, so use that typeface for the most vital information.

These guidelines can be more readily summed up in three words: concordance, contrast, and conflict.

Concordance, Contrast, and Conflict

You can achieve a concordant look by using one type family throughout your document. The concordant look doesn’t generally provide a lot of contrast since it relies only on the different weights (e.g., Roman, bold, and italic) to differentiate between the headings and body type. Some type families, however, have wide varieties of weights from thin to semibold, to black or ultrabold. Within these type families, you can present your documents with sufficient contrast without risking glaring conflict in your type.

Contrast is probably the most widely used type combination in technical communication. Contrast is where typefaces from drastically different families are used (e.g., a sans serif heading with a serif body type). When combining typefaces, choose two typefaces that are sufficiently different. The easiest way to do this is to choose two different styles of type.

Conflict between typefaces occurs when two typefaces of the same style are used—this needs to be avoided. For example, you would never use two Old Style typefaces together because they are not sufficiently different to provide contrast, nor are they similar enough for a concordant look. Your readers’ eyes will stop dead in their tracks, and they will scratch their heads as they try to figure out if you accidentally selected the wrong font.

Outside of that general advice, I can suggest a few typeface combinations using fonts from such readily available resources as Microsoft Office, Microsoft Windows, Adobe Creative Suite, and Mac OS X. Refer to the figures on page 15 for suggested combinations. Have some fun and learn to trust your eyes when you’re designing your documents.

Conclusion

Great typography and document design will not make up for lousy content. Ensure that your document is structured and well written.

After your content is up to snuff, invest some time planning which typefaces will suit the tone of your documents (e.g., your résumé and cover letter are sales pieces first and foremost). Use the same typefaces and similar design elements throughout your documents. Choose typefaces that represent your company’s identity and use typography to build your brand. Using typefaces across all communications you have with your readers will show that you have a conscientious eye for detail and a well-developed design acumen.

Michael Opsteegh (octechwriter@yahoo.com) has been an STC member for seven years and served as the newsletter editor for Orange County STC’s TechniScribe from 2007 to 2009. He has written policies and procedures in the financial services industry and currently writes software documentation for Eyefinity/OfficeMate in Irvine, California.
World’s Largest Meeting of Technical Communicators

This May in Dallas, TX, STC will host the largest gathering of technical communicators, as it has done annually 56 times before. More than 80 education sessions will be presented from Sunday evening to Wednesday afternoon, 2–5 May. Top practitioners, academe, consultants, and researchers in the field of technical communication will present new material on cutting-edge technology, trends, and issues, mixed with the staples of solid communication techniques and topic areas.

Attendees have long struggled with choosing which one of the concurrent sessions presented in the Final Program to attend. With eight or more sessions offered at one time, choosing the most relevant one has been a perennial problem—but no more. STC will capture the content (audio and visuals) of almost every session and make it available to attendees at no additional cost.

After the conference, STC will sync the audio with the presentations and make them available (by passcode) on the Marian Norby Live Learning Center website for attendees. The resulting product is called SUMMIT@aClick and allows attendees to reap the benefits of almost every session at their convenience. STC’s Summit is the only meeting in the technical communication field that offers this added bonus.

“The ability to ‘attend’ the sessions you missed is invaluable,” states Lloyd Tucker, STC’s Deputy Executive Director. “While we are thinking now of just the upcoming conference, this capture program will continue to be more valuable to both practitioners and academics as we add successive years of conference programs.” So not only will participants be able to “attend” sessions after the fact, Tucker explains, but they also can use their SUMMIT@aClick access for research and “just in time” training. The captured material will be a significant addition to STC’s Body of Knowledge as well.

STC’s conference website allows members to directly access information about the education sessions from a database that is updated almost daily. Education sessions cover a wide variety of topics and are organized into nine tracks: Communication and Interpersonal Skills; Design, Architecture, and Publishing; Education and Training; Emerging Technologies; Managing People, Projects, and Business; Professional Development; Usability and Accessibility; Web Technologies; and Writing and Editing. The database also contains details on the content of preconference workshops and tutorials, and preconference certificate sessions.

The Summit also offers Institutes, which are conferences-within-the-conference designed by experts in the field and featuring invited speakers with extensive and unique knowledge of their areas. Each Institute consists of conference sessions, runs concurrently with other sessions during the Summit, and is included in the conference registration fee. Institutes include:

- **Usability**
  Presenters: Scott Butler, Rich Gunther, Jim Jarrett, and Brian Sullivan

- **Content Strategy**
  Presenters: Rahel Bailie, Rachel Lovinger, Ann Rockley, and Julian Murfitt

- **Information Design**
  Presenters: Phylise Banner, Don Moyer, and Karen Schriver

- **Localization**
  Presenters: Jean-Luc Mazet, Lisa Pietrangeli, and Kent Taylor

All of these education sessions and the SUMMIT@aClick bring greater value to conference attendees. STC has worked even harder to keep attendees’ costs down. The Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower, where all conference sessions and events are planned, has a room rate of $169 USD (plus tax), which is $10 USD less than the last time the Summit was in Dallas, in 2003. And the Advance rate for conference registration for members is $200 USD less than nonmembers (which is almost as much as the cost of your Basic membership dues). Finally, STC has lined up extra discounts on airfare, car rental, and shuttle bus service.

Members looking for work will find a fertile field at the 2010 Technical Communication Summit, too! With myriad resources, education sessions, and the advantages of networking among the top technical communicators in the world, the annual conference is the best place for job hunters to be. There are job postings onsite, numerous opportunities for networking, updates on industry trends, new software announcements, and everything needed to stay ahead of the game. And the Consultants’ Corner returns to the exhibit hall this year, allowing consultants to purchase their own space on the floor and network with attendees. See the “Exhibit” tab on http://conference.stc.org.

The EXPO Hall offers a lot as well. Over two dozen exhibitors will be present to showcase the latest and greatest in the technical communication field. Savvy technical communicators know that STC is their professional home and that the annual conference is the best resource to advance their career. Register for the 2010 Technical Communication Summit online at http://conference.stc.org/ and reap all the benefits.
### 2010 Technical Communication Summit Conference-at-a-Glance

2–5 May 2010
Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower, Dallas, TX

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### Conference-at-a-Glance

- **8:00–5:00**: STC Board of Directors Meeting
- **10:30–15:15**: EXPO Hall Open
- **13:00–15:30**: SIG Managers Meeting
- **6:30–7:30**: STC Annual Meeting

### Event Highlights

- **Opening General Session**: 6:45–8:00
- **Keynote General Session**: 10:30–11:30
- **Leadership Day**: 8:00 AM–5:00 PM
- **Education Sessions**: 8:00 AM–12:45 PM
- **HONORS BANQUET**: 7:30 Reception, 8:00 Dinner
- **SIG Networking Event**: 7:00–8:00 (Additional Ticket Required)
- **Closing Luncheon**: 12:45–2:00

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Specialized Learning Begins Before the STC Summit

The Technical Communication Summit, STC’s 57th Annual Conference, offers extraordinary opportunities for in-depth exploration of hot topics in technical communication. The certificate programs, held just prior to the Summit, continue to be extremely popular with attendees. Combined with the variety of learning experiences offered by the regular conference education sessions, the certificate programs give technical communicators the knowledge they need to stay on top of trends in a constantly evolving profession.

Workshops and tutorials are other, shorter, preconference learning opportunities, with nine courses to choose from.

Institutes offer additional in-depth learning experiences. Their content is designed for technical communicators with more experience and is presented by experts in selected topic areas.

View more details of the certificate programs and institutes and register online at http://conference.stc.org.

Certificate Programs

Attendees who participate in the preconference certificate programs are exposed to the broad range of thinking and issues within a subject area. Participants who complete a program earn a certificate of attendance.

The certificate programs relate to scheduled Summit education sessions and are meant to be a further examination of aspects of the topic area. Session instructors will also recommend regular conference sessions to complement the certificate sessions (attendance at these sessions is not required for the certificate, but recommended for a more complete understanding of the topic).

STC received an overwhelmingly positive response from participants in past certificate programs:

• “I am so glad I came…. I learned not only [important] information that will help my company, but also things that will help me be a better technical communicator.”
• “You definitely proved that teaching TechComm can be fun…. You reinforced the details involved in this profession. The expectations...give me an edge and up my value. Thanks for the detailed discussion, the real-life examples, and the knowledge you have bestowed.”
• “You gave me the confidence that I am on track and need to stand up for what is the ‘correct’ way/process to produce quality docs!”
• “The certificate program at the Summit...was a resounding success! Your course did wonders for settling my confidence in my choice of career.”
• “The certificate program made the whole trip [to the conference] worthwhile. I enjoyed the certificate program and the conference—learned a lot and established some good networking contacts.”

This year, the certificate programs will be held Saturday, 1 May, and Sunday, 2 May, from 8:30 AM through 4:30 PM. Attendees can choose from the following certificate programs:

• Technical Communication Manager, presented by Saul Carliner

Preconference Workshops and Tutorials

For those desiring an additional, but shorter, preconference learning experience, STC will offer seven half-day and two full-day preconference workshops.

Saturday, 1 May, 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM
• Introduction to Information Mapping for Technical Communicators, presented by Rob Hanna
• Topic-Based Authoring: Getting Your Feet Wet, presented by Linda Urban

Sunday, 2 May, 8:30–11:30 AM
• Career Tactics for Technical Communicators, presented by Brenda Huettner
• Developing and Designing Blogs with Wordpress, presented by Tom Johnson
• Essential UX Skills for Technical Communicators, presented by Will Sansbury, Yina Li, Rachel Peters
• Hands On: Minimalism, DITA, and Content Management Workshop, presented by Bernard Aschwanden

Sunday, 2 May, 1:00–4:30 PM
• A Quick Look at Adobe Captivate, presented by Neil Perlin
• Architecting Content: Content Strategies, presented by Rahel Bailie
• Teamwork and Creativity: Seriously, Let’s Play, presented by Renee Shull

Comprehensive Rates

Registration fees for the two-day certificate program are $1,395 for STC members ($1,795 for nonmembers), and include full registration for the Summit. The preconference workshops and tutorials are $250 each for members and $500 each for nonmembers for half-day sessions. The two full-day workshops are $500 each for members and $1,000 each for nonmembers.

The full conference program can be found at http://conference.stc.org.
Technical Communication Summit Session Descriptions

STC presents the preliminary schedule of sessions for the 2010 Summit, being held 2–5 May at the Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower in Dallas, TX. The sessions are listed below in order of date and time, then alphabetically by session title. They include the session title, track, speakers, and description. This list is as of 1 March; see http://conference.stc.org for any changes or additions. Conference education sessions are included with your registration.

3 May
1:30–2:45 PM
RJ Jacquez, Adobe Technologies and their Application to Technical Communication
Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing
In this session RJ will provide an update on the new Adobe Technologies and how these apply to Technical Communication, including AIR and Flash for Desktops, Mobile devices, smartphones and Tablets.

Jack Molisani, Assessing Your Corporate Value
Track: Professional Development
How much value do you add to your employer? In this session you will learn to perform a Corporate Value Gap Analysis to objectively assess your strengths and weaknesses, compare them to what is needed and wanted by employers, and then build a roadmap for closing the gap.

Lisa Adair, Editing Metrics
Track: Writing and Editing
Learn how Rockwell Automation tracks writing and editing metrics and what we’ve learned because of those metrics.

Moderator Meredith Kinder, Technical Editing SIG Progression: Editing Challenges and Opportunities
Track: Writing and Editing
This progression provides the opportunity to impart knowledge vital to the editing profession, specifically in areas such as simplicity, editorial processes, misused words, time management, consistency, editing PDF files, Section 508 compliance, quality, and standards. These are topics that are of interest to and are presented by our SIG members. With Pat Moell, Meredith Kinder, Angela Eaton, Michelle Corbin, Lillian McNally, Donna Dovert, Andrea Wenger, Linda Wiesner, Jeffrey Japp, Kathleen Mohar, Sue Jackson, Kristine Haugseth, Liz Pohland, Cynthia McPherson.

Whitney Hess, 10 Most Common Misconceptions About User Experience Design
Track: Usability and Accessibility
“User Experience” has been getting a lot of play, but many businesses are confused about what it actually is and how crucial it is to their success. Find out the 10 biggest mistakes people make when defining what UX comprises.

Rahel Bailie, Content Strategies: The Content Lifecycle
Content Strategy Institute
We’re being challenged to serve up, share, and integrate content in new and increasingly innovative ways. This trend is pushing us to collaborate beyond any arbitrary boundaries previously set by technologies, departments, organizations—or ourselves. The challenge to deliver content in better, smarter ways is becoming the next frontier.

Tharon Howard, Alicia Hatter,
Documentation Delivery System Alternatives
Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing
The important role information products play in user experience is often overlooked. Today, users want information more immediately than ever before. Print manuals no longer suffice; clients increasingly expect Web 2.0 delivery systems. In response to this new media landscape, this session evaluates eleven new distribution systems for performance support.

Lisa Dyer, Janet Swisher, Building an Empire from the Grassroots Up
Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business
The information-development process is ubiquitous, democratic, and mission-critical to any business. But it’s harder than it looks and opportunities to do better are everywhere. How can Information Development groups help other teams within an organization realize the business value of content strategy and content management?

Phylise Banner, Universal Design for Instruction
Information Design Institute
Interested in designing and constructing quality learning environments? This session will show you how to establish a new framework for the development of instructional materials by integrating universal design principles into the instructional design process.

3:15–4:30 PM
Moderator Dan Voss, Academic Community Progression: Across the Spectrum
Track: Education and Training
This progression covers a wide range of topics within academe, including curriculum, use of videos in training, bridging academe and industry, international mentoring, ethics, social media, university websites, the state of technical communication in India, and literary engineers. With Dan Voss, David Dayton, Sally Henschel, Tom Moran, Makarand Pandit, Cindy Pao, Ann Jennings, Gyanesh Talwar, Julie Watts.

Michael Hughes, Architecting User Assistance for Reuse
Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing
This presentation examines four common scenarios for reuse and how user assistance architects and information developers can keep their reuse options open in each scenario: * Same document in different media * Same topic in different documents * Same content within many topics * Slightly different content within one topic.

Andrea Wenger, Building Effective Teams
Using the Myers-Briggs Personality Types
Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business
Communication is critical to building effective teams in the workplace. Yet differences in personality types can lead to serious misunderstandings. For instance, Thinking types value directness, while Feeling types value tact. By understanding these differences, we can forge stronger business relationships by considering the needs and expectations of others.

Tom Johnson, Developing a Personal Voice in Audio
Track: Education and Training
You can deliver video tutorials with a friendly, personable voice by implementing several audio techniques common to professional voice talents and sound engineers.
Judith Herr, Scott Josephson, Enlarging our Niche: Revealing the Undiscovered Proposal Writer

**Track: Professional Development**

Technical communicators deliver the right mix of talent, expertise, and skills to contribute to proposal and grant-seeking efforts. However, marketing our value to clients or employers hoping to win contracts requires that we understand proposal processes and speak the lingo. This session includes tactics for harnessing existing skills and being a multi-faceted technical contributor and proposal manager.

Karen Baranich, Jeanette Rogers, Jane MacKenzie-Smith, Expert Evaluation of Training

**Track: Education and Training**

Have you ever wondered how your training materials stacked up against the standards of the experts? In this session, you’ll get a chance to learn. Preshunt your materials and schedule a one-on-one with an expert to get feedback.

Robert Levy, Flying Solo: When You’re the Whole Editorial Department

**Track: Writing and Editing**

Many employees now find themselves the sole writer/editor on staff. Your role and responsibilities are increasing along with your workload. This presentation gives real-life tips for keeping your sanity, your head above water, and your career on track while everything is changing.

Julian Murfitt, The Path to Implementing Content Strategy

**Content Strategy Institute**

Where do we start in discovering the elements of a content strategy in your business and what methods can we use to help plan and implement the resulting strategic vision. By drawing on references to many clients Mekon have worked with over several years, Julian will share his ideas and experiences to help you plan and implement a content strategy.

Mahesh Kumar Gupta, Topic Based Documentation

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

Distributed authoring and ability to reuse is driving the need for smaller topic based documentation. With an increased number of documents, there is a key need for effective content aggregation and collaboration.

In this session, we’ll discuss how to author, manage, and publish topic based documentation with FrameMaker 9 in a traditional manner as well as through XML based standards like DITA.

Whitney Quesenbery, Using Stories for More Effective Usability

**Track: Usability and Accessibility**

Stories can help you collect, analyze, and share qualitative information from user research and usability, spark design imagination, and keep in touch with your audience. This presentation will look at how stories can be integrated into your own process to make it more effective.

Karen Baranich, Jeanette Rogers, Jane MacKenzie-Smith, Expert Evaluation of Training

5:00–6:15 PM

Suzanna Laurent, Attitude—The Choice is Yours!

**Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

Attitudes are everywhere in life. You are never without them. Your attitude creates your actions, which produce results. This session shows you how to gain control of your attitudes to gain control of your life. Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference personally and professionally.

Pamela Kostur, Content Management as a Practice

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

Content management isn’t just a system you buy or implement. It is always, however, something you do. Managing content is the goal, regardless of technology or technique. This presentation examines content management as a practice, focusing on: Content, Users, Business requirements, Processes.

Ankur Jain, Develop and Optimize Content Using RoboHelp

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

In this session, we will discuss how to create engaging and interactive eLearning content, Knowledge Bases, and Policies & Procedures using RoboHelp. We will also discuss how you can enhance, manage, track, and optimize your online content using RoboHelp Server.
Whitney Hess, *Evangelizing Yourself*  
**Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills**  
In this session I will help timid and unassertive practitioners come out of their shells and become leaders in the community. The advice I have to impart is based on my own experience taking control of my career and developing an authentic and positive reputation.

Alexandra Piacenza, *Fundamentals of Strategic Planning*  
**Track: Professional Development**  
This session demystifies strategic planning and demonstrates how technical communication and project management skills can be leveraged in this fascinating and lucrative field. Learn how leading organizations worldwide (Cognos, Hilton, TaTa Motors, Unibanco, UPS, U.S. Army, Wells Fargo, dozens more) use the “Balanced Scorecard” to successfully execute their strategies.

Nicky Bleiel, *Getting Your Documentation Project Off the Ground Running*  
**Track: Writing and Editing**  
In this session, you’ll learn how to quickly size-up a software application to develop your project architecture, then use a pre-defined topic structure to create content. These skills and guidelines will substantially reduce your “time to writing,” as well as writing time. Result: your project completed faster, with less rework.

Moderator Traci Nathans-Kelly, *Situated Global Communications: Experts Talk About What Happens*  
**Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills**  
This progression will allow participants to speak to a variety of experts in translation, localization, and related areas of global communication. With Traci Nathans-Kelly, Hans Fenstermacher, Jennifer O Neill.

Jim Jarrett, *Understanding Users Through Ethnography and Modeling*  
**Usability Institute**  
Great product design starts with a deep understanding of the work that users do in the real world. Build your understanding through observation, interviews, surveys, and artifact collection. Share your understanding with KJ analysis, personas, and scenarios. Validate and prioritize your understanding with follow-up surveys.

4 May  
8:00–9:15 AM  
Ryan Williams, Amanda Cross, *Changing the Workflow: Implementing a Documentation Wiki*

**Track: Web Technologies**  
Implementing a wiki-based documentation solution does more than just change a documentation’s department workflow. This case study takes a look at how ExactTarget took on the challenge of a new wiki and used it to change the way documentation needs and products are realized.

Rand McKinney, Jeremy Franklin, *Creating a Wiki-Based Online Help System*  
**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**  
The Second Life Viewer 2.0 includes a context-sensitive online help system with content hosted on a wiki. The system provides for content localization and versioning. Some of the help content is also incorporated into official Knowledge Base articles on the wiki.

Rich Gunther, *Discovering Usability Defects Through Expert Inspections*  
**Usability Institute**  
Your product cannot be great if it is not good. Expert inspection will ensure that your product follows best practices and does not include common mistakes. There are a variety of methods which can be employed to involve usability and design experts early in your development lifecycle to discover potential usability defects. This session will discuss in detail the execution, benefits, and pitfalls of these methods.

Bernard Aschwanden, *DITA: From Zero to DITA ASAP*

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**  
DITA can be part of a fast-paced environment where rapid development is the business norm. DITA speeds-up content creation even as scope and deliverables change. Follow a development process from outline to finished content. Develop taxonomies, concepts, references, and maps; and use each in different ways to deliver the right output.

Kathryn Summers, *Eyetracking of Online Reading Behaviors*  
**Track: Usability and Accessibility**  
Understanding how people read and navigate page content can improve our ability to provide usable content that is accessible for those who don’t read well—an audience that can include the 50 percent of U.S. adults who read at the 8th grade level or below, or older users, or ESL speakers.

Ant Davey, *How Communication Works*  
**Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills**  
To communicate most effectively, you need to understand how communication works. This session will look at basic communication models, what works, what causes it to breakdown, why people are different from you. This is the foundation for understanding communication, on which the Communication and Interpersonal Skills track is built.

Linda Oestreich, Michelle Corbin, *How to Edit Online Like a Pro!*

**Track: Writing and Editing**  
Two expert editors share successes and failures in the online editing world. Get tips on common tools as well as ideas for editing work done by remote teams without increasing their distance!

Elizabeth Bailey, *Improving Organizational Performance*  
**Track: Professional Development**  
Mid-to senior-level trainers attend this session to review Gilbert’s Behavioral Engineering Model and alternatives to his model and bring an example of a challenge you face to discuss with participants to assist you in identifying elements that support and impact behavior in your organization.

9:45–11:00 AM  
Moderator Michael Markley, *Best Practices in Management*  
**Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business**  
This session is intended for anyone who is working in a management role, or aspires to do so. This will be a typical progression session. An outstanding group of technical communication managers will present and discuss topics related to project management, team management, supervision, and career development. With Alyssa Fox, Susan Tacker, Francisco Abedrabbo, Noel Atzmiller, Judy Glick-Smith, Amanda Lewanski, Daniel Voss, Barbara Giannona, Michael Markley, Bernard Aschwanden, Frances Gambino, Annette Reilly, Christine Sigman.

Neil Perlin, *Creating Visual Help and Training Using Adobe Captivate*
Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing
Adobe Captivate lets us easily create screen movies for use for training, marketing, online help, and more, and is quick to learn and inexpensive. This session describes Adobe Captivate’s uses, features, and outputs. It then illustrates some of those features by creating a simple but real movie in real time.

Rebekka Andersen, Elucidating Content Management Technology Diffusion and Adoption Challenges
Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business
This presentation elucidates some of the challenges work groups face when attempting to adopt content management technologies. Based on the results of an extensive case study and research in the field of technology transfer, the presenter describes how work groups and technology developers can better plan for technology diffusion projects.

Bettina Davis, How is Technical Training Different?
Track: Education and Training
New research on technology training across diverse industries across a diversity of industries reveals 24 differentiators that distinguish technical training from other types of training. These key differentiators will be discussed along with the implications for development of technical training.

Scott Butler, Improving Product Design Through Usability Evaluation
Usability Institute
Good products become great products through continuous user feedback. Usability evaluations yield maximum benefits if they are methodologically correct and implemented in a timely manner given the constraints of your product development schedule. In this session you will learn the basics of usability evaluation planning, test design, moderating/facilitating, and reporting.

Thea Teich, Richard Shrout, Indexing Technical Documents: Approaches
Track: Writing and Editing
A good index to a technical document reduces costs and saves the time and energy of your customers, users, and clients. Learn guidelines on how to approach an unfamiliar process, the indexing of technical documents. Traditional indexing methods as well as alternative strategies will be explained.

Renee Shull, Motivating Without Authority (LEGO SERIOUS PLAY)
Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills
It’s not just what you say, it’s how you say it. Unless you are lucky, you have to be careful about “telling it like it is.” Using three-dimensional thinking, you will construct metaphors out of LEGO bricks describing real situations facing you, and leading you to discover options. Possible solutions can be implemented immediately without entrapment in theoretical roundabouts.

Anne Gentle, Strategies for the Social Web for Documentation
Track: Web Technologies
The social web can be perceived as intimidating, life-saving, risky, or a black hole of productivity loss. Learn how to take a strategic approach to integrating social media to accomplish your overall documentation goals.

Thomas Aldous, TechComm Suite 2, XML, and Language Translation Handling

Mercer University School of Engineering

www.mercer.edu/mstco
+1 478 301 2299

Students may begin the program in August, January, or May.

Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing
Learn to use FrameMaker 9 in structured mode to edit and publish DITA-XML content in multiple languages. Using FrameMaker 9’s read/write rules, EDD, XSL stylesheet, master pages, and mapping table, to name a few facilities, you can create a multilingual template to auto-translate tonum text and font, as well as other paragraph/character formatting attributes. If you ever wondered how Structured FrameMaker roundtrips XML and what magic you can do to transform your content, this session is for you.

11:30 AM–12:45 PM
Moderator Ed Marshall, Consultants & Independent Contractors SIG Progression
Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business
This session features topics of interests to self-employed technical communicators and those who are interested in being self-employed. With Louellen Coker, Thea Teich, Cheryl Landes, Richard Shrout, Ed Marshall, Darrin Devereaux, Linda Gallagher, Monique Semp.
Kent Taylor, *Globalization/Localization: Quality and Efficiency Start at the Source*

**Localization Institute**

Formal Quality Management practices have produced impressive improvements in quality, accompanied by substantially reduced costs in many environments. Learn how to achieve similar results across your information creation-development-localization supply chain.

Vanessa Wilburn, Barrie Byron, *Information Overload: Users Lost Before They Start?*

**Track: Writing and Editing**

Before users get started with enterprise applications, the planning and installation documents overwhelm them with multiple content types. A combination of editing, architecture, and leadership can tame a scattered, inconsistent document set. Learn how to find a simple solution to a difficult retrievability problem.

Linda Mikkelsen, Connie Kiernan, Sally Spahn, *Information Product Evaluation Workshop*

**Track: Writing and Editing**

Receive a 30-minute analysis of your information product by an expert. Your product will be evaluated for organization, style, layout, and use of graphics. Bring your product and supply your own laptop if your product is in an online format. Attendees must sign up in advance for this session.

Barbara Giammona, *Inside the Technical Communicators Studio*

**Track: Professional Development**

Join us as we sit down one-on-one with luminaries of our profession to learn how they became leaders in our field. Complete with the blue cards and the famous 10 questions, these conversations will give you a chance to learn more about the professional lives of STC’s biggest celebrities.

Larry Kunz, *Managing Documentation Projects in a Collaborative World*

**Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business**

Two trends, community-based authoring and Agile, are revamping the way we manage documentation projects. Fortunately, these trends share much in common. Content strategy emerges as an important new discipline.

Karen Schriver, *Information Design Research: A Global Perspective*

**Information Design Institute**

Information design is now a global phenomenon and there are signs of research springing up in many countries. Come hear about information design research that’s been happening in different parts of the world. Gain perspective on how the context shapes research directions and the problems researchers are tackling.

Colleen Jones, Kevin O’Connor, *Testing Content Strategy: What Works, What Doesn’t*

**Track: Usability and Accessibility**

Content strategy is an emerging field of practice that helps get your content under control. Where does testing with users fit in? This presentation answers that question and more by presenting a practical process and illustrating it with mini case studies from Centers for Disease Control and Philips.

Moderator: Alan Porter, *Web Technologies and Dynamic User Assistance Panel Discussion*

**Track: Web Technologies**

This session uses a question/answer discussion format to review how web technologies, such as RSS Feeds, Feedburner (and other scrapers), mashups, and YouTube/video content, are making user assistance more dynamic and less static. The panelists will share their experiences with these technologies and how they see user assistance delivery changing. With Alan Porter, Anne Gentle, Molly Holzschlag, Stewart Mader.

Mahesh Kumar Gupta, *Working with DITA*

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

DITA is a powerful way to modularize content which can be reused and repurposed easily. FrameMaker 9 provides complete support for working with DITA based documentation and the powerful rich media features can also be leveraged in the DITA based documents. In addition to pristine PDFs, content can also be published to multiple formats through the sophisticated integration features of Technical Communication Suite 2.

2:15–3:30 PM

Rich Maggiani, *The Art of Questioning*

**Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills**

Questions are the foundation of excellent research and interviews. Learn the power of questions, what they can engender, and how to write them; as well as 10 types of questions and how to sequence them to obtain the information you need.

Moderator Rahel Bailie, *Content Strategy SIG Progression*

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

Complement of topics relating to the emerging practice area of content strategy. With Alyson Riley, Rahel Bailie, Colleen Jones, Anne Gentle, Lisa Dyer, Janet Swisher, Brenda Huettner, Mollye Barrett, C. C. Holland, Rachel Lovingier, Gina Fevrier.

Steven Lungren, Richard Lowe, Peter Dykstra, *Flower Power: Daisy Wiki-based Content and Translation Management*

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

Case studies demonstrate how two groups use Daisy, an open source Content Management and publishing platform, to publish structured Help for two web products with very different business requirements. Both systems were rolled out with short lead times and have reduced costs by supporting re-use, re-purposing, and translation management.

Lisa Pietrangeli, *Internationalizing Your Content: Authoring with Localization in Mind*

**Localization Institute**

Internationalization is the process of planning, designing, and implementing a culturally and technically neutral product, which can easily be localized. Internationalization helps decrease translation cost and speeds up time-to-market by addressing crucial technical, aesthetic, cultural, and linguistic issues at project start-up. This presentation will explain how writing with localization in mind saves time and money while improving overall quality.

Jane MacKenzie-Smith, *Managing e-Learning Projects: Avoiding the Pitfalls*

**Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business**

Project Managers often do not realize how complex an e-Learning project is. In this interactive presentation, participants will learn about the e-Learning development process, especially the prototype stage, and the pitfalls at each stage. Participants will have an opportunity to determine stages in which specific project problems could be avoided.

Tristan Bishop, *Our Future Role: Knowledge Integration*
Track: Professional Development

The past decade has seen us transition from Information Developers. With the proliferation of user-generated content, our future role increasingly will be as the Knowledge Integrators. In addition to creating user assistance, we will also become the official resource for collecting, verifying, and redistributing input from our users.

Scott Prentice, Using Adobe AIR for Online Help

Track: Web Technologies

Adobe AIR is an exciting new development option for creating cross-platform applications that leverage web-based technologies. One interesting use for AIR is online Help. This presentation will explain the benefits of using AIR and will show examples of commercially available options as well as custom AIR Help samples.

Janice Critchlow, Judy Hall, Using Wikis to Enhance Training Development and Delivery

Track: Education and Training

This session describes a case study in which we used wikis both as a way to speed up the development of instructor-led training and as a tool for use during the instructor-led classes.

Janice (Ginny) Redish, Randolph Bias, Writing and Testing for Universal Usability

Track: Usability and Accessibility

Much of our work has to be usable across many different audiences. Researchers often focus on audiences as specific groups (low-literacy, high-literacy, second-language, elderly). Are their needs really so different? See how plain language and clear design can work for all.

4:00–5:15 PM

Don Moyer, Building Visual Explanations: Practical Advice for Writers

Information Design Institute

TBD.

Jean-Luc Mazet, Quality, Price, Schedule: Choosing the Right Localization Service

Localization Institute

Quality, price, and schedule are three key areas companies consider when choosing Localization Service Providers. In this presentation, Jean-Luc will share his perspective on the challenges of evaluating LSPs, and how you can ensure that you have to right tools and knowledge to choose what’s best for you.

Robert Anderson, <nearly/> Hands Free DITA Publishing

Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing

Sure, the DITA Open Toolkit is free, but only programmers can use it, right? On the contrary! Come learn how you can publish your DITA content without touching code. We’ll also cover ways to spice up your output without even needing to know what XSLT or Ant are.

Moderator Jeanette Rogers, Instructional Design and Learning Progression

Track: Education and Training

The Instructional Design and Learning SIG brings the experiences of its members to you by providing this progression on the latest topics around creating and using innovative instructional design. With Jackie Damrau, Jeanette Rogers, Cheryl Landes, Jane Maduke, Jamye Sagan, Gloria A. Reece, Marguerite Krupp.

Sarah O’Keefe, Managing in an XML Environment

Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business

Working in an XML-based environment requires different skillsets from the traditional desktop publishing environments. In addition to new tools and technologies, contributors must also change how they look at the content creation process. Learn what you need to lead an XML-based group.

Bernard Aschwanden, Solid Techniques Provide Solid Templates in FrameMaker 9.0

Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing

This session explores key ideas related to building a better template with Adobe FrameMaker 9.0. You may already know FrameMaker and now need to build a template. Maybe you have attended training, or worked with the software for years, but want to know more to create content that can be reused for years to come. Learn tips and tricks that make good templates great. During this session we demonstrate the solid techniques used to build professional templates in both structured and unstructured workflows.

STC Body of Knowledge Update

Track: Professional Development

The STC Technical Communication Body of Knowledge (TCBoK) Task Force is developing a web portal for people interested in learning about technical communication. The TCBoK is a repository of (and a way to navigate and access) the huge amount of knowledge in the technical communication profession. Attend this session to learn the story of the TCBoK and find out how you can contribute.

Linda Roberts, Web 2.0 and Accessibility

Track: Usability and Accessibility

This session will discuss the accessibility of various Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis, social networking sites, and bookmarking sites.

5 May

8:00–9:15 AM

Neil Perlin, Beyond the Bleeding Edge

Track: Emerging Technologies

As tech comm becomes increasingly technical, it’s vital to know what’s coming. Bleeding Edge speakers will help by introducing new trends, tools, or technologies that might affect STC members. Topics won’t be selected until March in order to be as timely as possible.

RJ Jacquez, Beyond Tri-pane Help with Adobe AIR

Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing

In today's world of social media, rich internet applications, end-user generated content and Search, Adobe AIR is well positioned to revolutionize how we deploy Help and how end-users consume it. In this session we will discuss the benefits AIR-based Help brings to technical communication and how it enables the industry to align itself to Web 2.0 user expectations.

Moderator: Char James-Tanny, Collaboration Technologies and User Assistance Panel

Discussion

Track: Emerging Technologies

This session uses a question/answer discussion format to review how collaborative technologies, such as Google Wave, Wikis, Blogs, and Forums, are affecting user assistance. The panelists will share their experiences with these technologies and how they see user assistance delivery changing over time. With Char James-Tanny, Alan Porter, Greg Koch, Sarah O’Keefe.

Pam Swanwick, Measuring Productivity

Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business

society pages
Every manager struggles to balance writer workload and project capacity. A simple system can objectively evaluate assigned tasks, task time and complexity, special projects, and even writer experience levels to more accurately assess individual workload and capacity. The result is a simple, but useful, representational graph.

Angela Eaton, Liz Pohland, Cynthia McPherson, Results of Interviewing Editors: Best Practices, Challenges, Insights

Track: Writing and Editing

This presentation provides the results of twenty interviews of editors, who vary in experience, industry, and location. The data includes editorial best practices, including advice for editors, authors, and managers.

Usability Institute

Brian Sullivan, Sketching User Experiences with the Design Studio Method

The Sketching User Experiences session provides an in-depth review of new UX method known as a Design Studio. The Design Studio Method is a systematic approach for saturating the design space with sketched ideas. Participants will learn the method, how to apply it, and when to use it.

Tim Horsch, 3D Communication: How Can It Help You?

Track: Emerging Technologies

3D visualization and collaboration tools have been around for some time, but mostly used by engineering departments. This presentation will discuss how non-technical users can leverage existing engineering data to create compelling and informative interactive 3D communications.

Leigh White, Mollye Barrett, The Trip to DITA

Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing

Learn about the trip one small documentation team took from unstructured FrameMaker to structured FrameMaker using the DITA content model. Two writers, two consultants and what happened along the way.

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Information Design & Communication Graduate Program
Will Sansbury, Yina Li, Rachel Peters, 
*Essential UX Skills for Technical Communicators*

**Track: Usability and Accessibility**

Many of the skills required to be a user experience designer can help you improve your technical documentation. This workshop teaches foundational information architecture skills—including heuristic evaluation, card sorting, and usability testing—to empower you to improve your technical communication and provide increased value to other parts of your organization.

Caroline Jarrett, *Label Placement and Other Time-Consuming Forms Controversies* 

**Track: Usability and Accessibility**

Ever been caught in one of those arguments about whether labels should go above the fields on forms? Or how to indicate required fields? Or whether to put colons on the end of labels? This talk will give you insight and ammunition—and save you time in design meetings.

Deborah Lewis Baxley Doyle, *The Magic Three: Better Writing with Topic Types* 

**Track: Writing and Editing**

Let’s focus on how to improve the way we create meaningful content for our customers. The fanciest toaster will not improve the quality of the bread, and the coolest tool will not make bad writing into good... Learn how to rejuvenate your writing process in this mini-workshop!

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**Advance Rate for Summit Registration Expires 20 April**

Two discounted rates have already expired, with only one more to go. The Advance rate of $995 USD for members is available until 20 April. The Advance rate is $200 USD less than the Walk-in rate that runs from 21 April through the start of the Summit. Conference room rates at the Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower are also affordable, at $169 USD for single or double accommodations. That’s less than last year’s rates, and even less than the last time the Summit was held in Dallas in 2003!

The Summit is comprised of more than 80 education sessions organized into nine tracks: Communication and Interpersonal Skills; Design, Architecture, and Publishing; Education and Training; Emerging Technologies; Managing People, Projects, and Business; Professional Development; Usability and Accessibility; Web Technologies; and Writing and Editing.

Top practitioners, academe, consultants, and researchers in the field of technical communication will present new material on cutting-edge technology, trends, and issues, mixed with the staples of solid communication techniques and topic areas.

A Schedule-at-a-Glance is available on page 18 and will be kept up to date on the STC website in PDF form. The preliminary schedule by day is available starting on page 20. There is also a live database online of titles, speakers, and descriptions for all sessions being presented at the 2010 Summit.

Complete details about the conference schedule, registration rates, hotel information, and registration can be found on the conference website at [http://conference.stc.org](http://conference.stc.org).

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**Summit Website Has More Info This Year**

STC has made a concerted effort to provide more information about the 2010 Technical Communication Summit earlier and in a convenient, online location. Located at [http://conference.stc.org](http://conference.stc.org), members can find:

- Preliminary Program with session titles, descriptions, and speakers
- An at-a-glance overview of activities happening per day
- Information about the Honorary Fellow and Keynote Speaker
- Exhibitor information and a map of the EXPO Hall
- Details on networking events
- The article, “Help in Convincing Your Boss to Send You to the Conference,” to aid in loosening the corporate purse strings
- Registration form and rates
- Affordable room rates
- Discounts on airfare, car rental, and shuttle bus service
- Travel/tourist information on the Dallas–Fort Worth area

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Table 1. Conference Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advance Rates (by 20 April)</th>
<th>Walk-in Rates (after 20 April)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Member</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Ben Colborn, Patrick Quinlan, Nate Jackson, *Single Sourcing Sans a CMS* 

**Track: Education and Training**

In this session, content developers from Citrix Education will demonstrate the tools and techniques they use to create multi-modal, multi-language training without a CMS.

Sumeer Goyal, *Think Outside the Frame* 

**Track: Design, Architecture, and Publishing**

Everyone knows that FrameMaker and technical documentation go hand in hand. But the potential of Frame is way beyond user help and technical manuals. This session explores some lesser known areas where Frame can play on its strengths. Irrespective of whether or not you use Frame you will enjoy exploring new domains and scenarios.
with us and get your creative juices flowing.

Kathryn Poe, Thriving in an Agile Environment
Track: Professional Development
What is Agile? Scrum? XP? Learn how these development methodologies provide opportunities for you to improve your corporate and team value. Learn how to get and stay involved in a project from beginning to end. Gain the interest, respect, and involvement from your team and across the corporate enterprise.

11:30 AM–12:45 PM
Daniel Nackovski, Business Intelligence meets Language Technology
Track: Emerging Technologies
New technological developments have brought concepts from data mining, linguistic analysis, and business intelligence into the server-based, enterprise-scale linguistic asset management arena. This presentation will discuss why content is an asset and how data mining, computerized linguistic analysis, and business intelligence can be applied via technology to manage those assets.

Tharon Howard, Creating Social Networks and Online Communities that Last
Track: Managing People, Projects, and Business
What can you do when designing an online community to maximize user experience? This presentation, based on two decades of managing successful online communities, will teach participants how to design sustainable online communities that attract and retain a devoted membership by providing them with contexts for effective decision-making.

Barrie Byron, Enhance Your Writing Career with Improved Speaking Skills
Track: Communication and Interpersonal Skills
Learn how to make effective verbal communication a part of your technical communication career success plan. As our work environments change, we need to develop and use verbal skills to add visibility and credibility to our writing roles. Enhance your professional reputation by polishing your public speaking skills.

Steve Jong, Status of Certification for Technical Communicators
Track: Professional Development
The Certification Task Force reports on its progress over the past year and offers a model certification program for discussion and comment.

Roger Grice, Tech-Mediated Communication—Report of an STC Funded Project
Track: Usability and Accessibility
This session will examine the set of heuristics a research team developed to look at usability in a tech-mediated world and the TMC Toolkit developed to help both researchers and practitioners assess various aspects of usability. Cases applying the heuristics and the TMC Toolkit will explore the usability of several sample pieces of communication.

Rachel Lovinger, There’s No Semantic Web without Content and Data
Content Strategy Institute
This presentation will explain, in non-technical terms, the underlying concepts of the Semantic Web. We’ll explore how these concepts are being used on the web today, and where they’re going in the near future. Finally, we’ll discuss what all this means for people practicing content strategy.

Moderator Dawnell Claessen, Topics in Policies and Procedures
Track: Writing and Editing
The P & P SIG has organized a lineup of Speakers who will present a variety of topics directly related to P&P Practice, Process Improvement, and Tools and Technology. Conference attendees will learn about career development, workflow and process improvement, specialized P&P Methodologies and productivity tools. With Dawnell Claessen, Audrey Bezner, Sharon Lynn, Annette Reilly, David Shenton, Ann Lette.

Nicole St. Germaine, Using Focus Groups for Discovering Localization Preferences
Track: Writing and Editing
This presentation addresses the value of using focus groups for localizing information. Information regarding a particular culture’s preferences for format, graphics, or style may be difficult to find without obtaining this input from the audience itself. This presentation will explain how to maximize the effectiveness of your focus group.
Editor’s Note: This directory includes committed exhibitors as of 25 February. For updated information, visit http://conference.stc.org/exhibitors/exhibit.asp and click on “Exhibitors.”

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300 Baker Ave.
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3DVIA Composer technology enables users to create interactive product documentation, animation, technical illustrations, and more. By reusing 3D CAD data, 3DVIA Composer revolutionizes the product documentation process. With easy-to-use, desktop content-creation, 3DVIA Composer quickly and easily automates processes that are crucial for marketplace success, reducing costs and improving quality.

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Social media has transformed the way we communicate. This column discusses the intricacies and ramifications that social media has on our everyday personal and professional lives. Suggestions for topics are welcome. Email me at rich.maggiani@solari.net.

Why Social Media Is So Wonderful

BY RICH MAGGIANI, Fellow

What is it about social media that is so intriguing? Is it the possibility of communicating with someone halfway around the world, befriending someone you have never met, discovering people you might never have known, sharing intimate details of your life and learning the same about others, conversing with a large number of people all at once, all of whom share a common interest? Or is it simply being enlightened about new thoughts and ideas, discovering new horizons, and boldly going where you could never have gone before?

As it turns out, it’s all of these reasons and much more. I’m just enthralled with social media, as are many of you. In fact, I asked a number of colleagues to share their thoughts on social media. Some are from New England where I live, a few others scattered across the United States and Canada, and a couple from around the world; some older, some younger. They had a lot to tell me.

So here, for your edification, enlightenment, and enjoyment, I present a treatise on social media and its role in communication.

Is Social Media Preferable to Face-to-Face Communication?

Social media enables you to broadcast your messages to a larger audience, not just a single person, in an electronically social manner. You can:

• easily start a dialogue or a group discussion
• use services like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook
• use blogs, wikis, and other collaboration tools
• post photos, audio files, and video files

Social media allows you to interact with thousands of people who share similar interests regardless of time, distance, schedule, language, position, or experience—people you do not know and would never know. This is simply not possible with face-to-face communication.

Social media is especially well suited for one-to-many communication, something that is more difficult in face-to-face communication even when such a situation is scheduled ahead of time. Social media allows you to send your message to a select group of people, either a group that you invite or a public group that any interested party can join. You can also monitor the messages of these groups or other groups simply because you find them interesting. You can participate or just listen and learn. In this way, social media is a powerful method of communication.

“Online interactions offer the potential for asynchronous conversations that transcend both time and location,” notes Tom Johnson (www.idratherbewriting.com).

Social media is asynchronous: when you are ready to send out your message, you do it. Those receiving your message can listen to it—or not—when it is convenient for them. Face-to-face, on the other hand, is synchronous; you can only send out your message when those receiving it are physically present.

Through social media, you focus more on the person—what they say, who they are—than on physical indicators of looks, dress, nationality, and other factors that tend to create judgments and perceptions. That’s a good thing. Unfortunately, you cannot focus on some extremely valid communication indicators such as body language, tone of voice, and inflections. That tends to mislead sometimes.

In addition, social media offers an archival, historical, searchable record, something that face-to-face communication cannot provide. For some, face-to-face interaction is more efficient; for others, social media is preferable. While I prefer face-to-face, real-life interactions, that is not always possible. In fact, it is rarely possible since many of the people I communicate with do not live anywhere near me. In fact, I have no idea where some of them live.

With social media, that physicality is not necessary. You send out your message and people respond if and when they want.

Social media is immediate communication without borders. Social media is exponential and viral, allowing people to pass along messages to an ever-growing circle. Telephones and email didn’t replace face-to-face communication, so social media will not either. Social media isn’t
Social media presents an incredible communication opportunity in which the world is your audience.

necessarily preferable to face-to-face interactions, it’s just another method of communication (albeit one that alters the landscape considerably).

Some People Prefer Social Media

Social media allows you to keep in touch between those times when you can actually meet. And during that time, you can build a more solid relationship with strong and constant communication; then there isn’t so much catching up to do when you do meet. You can even build relationships with people you have never met, and probably never will. I meet a number of people every year at the STC annual conference. I then see many of them a year later at the next conference. In between, social media allows us to keep in touch.

You can carry on conversations using social media, just as you might while sitting around a table. Indeed, you can enrich a conversation with social media. There is no constraint of time and space—you can contribute at any time, from anywhere.

Some people use social media to communicate with colleagues who sit just down the hall at work. Why? It’s concise and succinct, and eliminates the need for small talk. I, on the other hand, enjoy small talk, as it gives me the opportunity to widen the conversation to more engaging and revealing topics. Besides, I get to watch body language and facial expressions, gauge gestures, make eye contact, listen to intonations, and feel someone’s presence. All of this is missing in social media.

Some people are simply better at communicating in writing, photographs, video, or audio. For them (introverts, I’m calling your name), communicating through this media feels effortless. As such, social media levels the playing field for introverts. “I would rather a sharp stick stuck in my eye than make small talk at a public event, but I can be very gregarious in social media,” says Rahel Bailie (www.stc-es.org).

“There’s a certain ‘push’ to the technology,” states John Hedtke (www.hedtke.com). You wouldn’t call someone at 11 in the evening, but you can certainly contact them through social media. And if they happen to be online, you can have a synchronous conversation.

Finally, people prefer social media because they can control the level of intimacy and reaction time. As Sherry Michaels (www.docntrain.com) notes, “I know people who text instead of calling because it allows the arm’s length to think through issues before responding.” You don’t need to be spontaneous; social media allows you the time to be thoughtful.

How People Act in Social Media Settings

Social media has opened a rich electronic communication experience, so people are much more open. “By integrating text, photos, and video to a targeted audience, I see a tendency to share more information in richer formats than would ordinarily be shared with that same social set,” opines Lori Fisher.

“‘Social weather’ is more difficult to discern in social media settings than it is in the real world,” says Anne Gentle (www.justwriteclick.com). For example, consider a five-star restaurant replete with white table cloths and a live harpist playing softly. With some rudimentary auditory and visual observations, you would know how to act. When you enter a forum or other social media setting, the process isn’t as obvious. You must observe for a while and read quite a bit before accurately interpreting the social weather for that particular forum. Then, you can participate at a level that everyone else expects.

Understanding that there is another person reading your message is sometimes forgotten. That happens when people are too bold or cutting with their messages, or simply not careful with how their message is crafted. Tone is inferred when none was intended. As a result, people are insulted and offended, rightly or not. Repair can oftentimes appear disingenuous.

Anonymity can also be a problem, with people hiding behind an alias rather than their true identity. Age, gender, and true intentions are easily masked. This contributes to a release of pent-up hostility and becomes exacerbated on blog commentaries and forums. Social media becomes a tricky medium under these highly emotive circumstances. Even something written in jest can easily be misinterpreted. While there is great opportunity in social media, there is also great danger in miscommunication.

As Char James-Tanny (www.helpstuff.com) points out, “The world is listening, even to your ‘private’ conversations.” Social media messages and conversations are permanent. Everything that you post is stored on a server somewhere on the planet and is easily retrieved through search engines.

Social media presents an incredible communication opportunity in which the world is your audience. You can meet all sorts of people from all walks of life who share a common interest. What you write can quickly traverse the planet. You expand your horizons and gain a global viewpoint.
The Goal Is to Get It Right, Not to Be Right

BY ELIZABETH (BETTE) FRICK, ASSOCIATE FELLOW

My accountant told me a funny story recently: Her toddler thinks that if he closes his eyes when playing “Hide and Seek,” he becomes invisible. I immediately identified my own tendency toward ignoring or even denying when I’ve made a mistake or have failed at something.

Later that same day, I read an article in The Economist on “Womenomics” that quoted Dong Mingzhu, the boss of Gree Electric Appliances, an air-conditioning giant: “I never miss. I never admit mistakes and I am always correct.” Well, her company may have boosted shareholder returns by nearly 500 percent, but I don’t want to be known for boasting of my own perfection.

That’s why I reflect on my mistakes and failures. Webster tells us that a mistake is “a wrong action or statement proceeding from faulty judgment, inadequate knowledge, or inattention.” That means I did not meet pre-established goals or standards (e.g., deadlines, test scores, or performance appraisals): I recently failed an editing test by a few percentage points. (Note to self: Study more math and statistics for the next test.)

As business owners, you could add to the list, I’m sure. You might also consider dividing professional mistakes and failures into two categories: those that affect others (e.g., clients, students, other independents) and those that affect your business practice (e.g., spending too much on cell phone service or not updating your technical skills).

Here’s what 20 years in business has taught me about my mistakes and failures:

1. I immediately admit to others what my part was and offer amends: “How can I make this right?” Then I complete the amends promptly and cheerfully (I don’t apologize forever).

2. To become aware of mistakes that affect my business, I perform regular audits on operations, marketing, and education. One such audit led to switching to a pay-per-minute cell plan that (ironically) delivers better service for $30 less per month.

3. I used to have an innate fear of criticism, which I have tempered with a membership in Toastmasters. In the past five years, I have given more than 60 speeches and benefited from immediate evaluations to the point that I no longer cringe at criticism. Now, I even ask my clients for a “retrospective” after every project: What worked well, what didn’t, how could I improve? Then I leverage the feedback into better performance.

4. I’m trying to stop blaming others. I am conscious when I’m projecting blame onto “the test,” for example, or the designer on the project. I know that whenever I point my finger at someone or something else, there are three fingers pointing back at me.

5. When I can’t figure out my pattern of mistakes or failures, I need to ask for help from fellow independents, friends, family, or therapists. (Sometimes my pattern is caused by deeply rooted emotional issues.)

6. I’ve learned that I can’t do the same thing over and over again and expect different results. I’m responsible for “getting it right, not being right.” I seek progress, not perfection.

And, finally, I thank all the 12-step recovery meetings that have taught me everything I know about mistakes, failures, amends, and progress (not perfection).

Elizabeth (Bette) Frick, the Text Doctor (efrick@textdoctor.com), teaches technical and business writing in companies and organizations nationally and edits medical documents. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Minnesota.
Mistakes from the Edge

BY NEIL PERLIN, ASSOCIATE FELLOW

Mistakes provide many great learning opportunities. This column outlines the three most significant ones that I’ve seen technical communicators make (including one I made) and what to learn from them. These mistakes can affect our careers, our ability to operate on the bleeding edge, and, for consultants, our core business operations.

These two apply to anyone in technical communication:

• Becoming known as a devotee of a specific tool, rather than as someone who can operate within a broader market or technology context. For example, getting a reputation as a “RoboHelp developer” rather than an “online help developer (who uses RoboHelp).”

Devotion to one tool, or being perceived that way, puts us at risk of being out of work if the tool dies. Conversely, being able to work within the broader market or technology keeps us flexible and marketable—if we work with tools A and B and A dies, we can shift our job search or business to B. But this flexibility takes a lot of work and dedication since it requires spending time keeping up with tools and technologies that may seem peripheral to our work today. It also requires an ability to adapt, often quickly, to industry changes.

• Failing to, or refusing to, keep up with change. For example, sticking with dead or dying technologies or tools like Windows Help or ForeHelp because “they do the job,” or resisting concepts like user-generated content.

Resistance won’t stop these changes; we’ll just be sidelined out of participating in their implementation, in the new work they create, and in how they extend our jobs and careers. Like the first point, this requires the willingness to change and put in the effort to keep up.

This point applies to people who set their own operating direction, usually consultants or contractors, and to people who help define their documentation group’s direction:

• Giving too much credence to the hype for “the next big thing” and doing too little planning for its possible failure. For example, today’s popularity of the iPhone is fueling enthusiastic predictions about explosive growth in the smart phone market and how we’d better jump in now.

Unfortunately, such enthusiastic predictions have appeared regularly since the late 1990s and history suggests that they be viewed skeptically. If you’ve been in tech comm for a while, you’ll recall similar enthusiastic predictions, with often painful consequences, for:

• OS/2, IBM’s long-gone competitor to Windows.
• Lotus Development made a major push toward OS/2 rather than Windows, was outsourced by Microsoft, and went from being an independent company to a subsidiary of IBM.
• Palmtop PCs, mobile devices driven by Windows CE. A late-1990s form of netbook, but without enough features to warrant significant adoption.
• Blackbird, Microsoft’s eCommerce platform for Windows 95 that was killed about a year after its introduction.
• Pointcast, a screen saver that could download news items and other types of information, but that overloaded the networks of the day (1996) and that was banned within many companies.

I myself caught palmtop PC fever and bought palmtops and created Windows CE programming courses, only to see the market disappear. Fortunately, I didn’t shift my business wholesale to the palmtop market; I maintained my main markets and waited to see how the palmtop market would do. But I have known companies that over-committed and that either struggled to recover or closed outright. Take risks, but be prepared for their failure.

Summary

The only way to avoid mistakes is to not try anything new—not an option given the pace of change in tech comm. But some mistakes, for example these three, should just never be made at all.

Neil Perlin (nperlin@concentric.net) is president of Hyper/Word Services (www.hyperword.com) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 31 years’ experience in technical writing, with 25 in training, consulting, and developing for online formats and tools including WinHelp, HTML Help, JavaHelp, CE Help, RoboHelp, Flare, and some now exhibited in museums. Neil is a member of the Boston Chapter and the founder and manager of the Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem at the STC annual conference.
This column addresses job hunting and career advancement, focusing on various aspects of career growth from starting your tech comm career to finding a new job to taking your career to the next level. It’s written from the perspective of someone who has been a technical writer, technical communication manager, and recruiter, and who worked as a captive (full-time) employee and an independent contractor before finally starting my own company. If you have questions or suggestions for a future column, email them to jack@prospringstaffing.com with “Career Question” in the subject line.

Résumé Secrets That Might Surprise You

By Jack Molisani, Associate Fellow

For years I’ve resisted speaking about résumés thinking that everything that could possibly be said about writing effective résumés has already been covered. But after seeing candidate after candidate rejected based on what they had—and didn’t have—in their résumés, I realized it’s time for me to share what I’ve observed over the years.

What Is a Résumé?
The Cambridge Dictionary defines a résumé as “a written statement of your education and work experience, used especially when you are trying to get a new job.” That definition is wrong.

So if your résumé is not a summary of what you have done, and not a summary of what you can do, then what is it?

A résumé is a vehicle that shows you match what the reader is looking for.

And that’s all it is.

A résumé is not a summary of your skills and professional experience. It’s not a capabilities overview. It’s not your life story condensed into a few pages.

1. Understand Your Résumé’s Reader

You may have sent your résumé to someone in response to a job posting or you may have sent it to a company in the hopes of working there with no particular job in mind.

But why you sent someone your résumé doesn’t matter. What does matter? Why someone is reading it.

And why are they reading it? To see whether you have what they are looking for!

It doesn’t matter why you sent someone your résumé. What matters is why someone is reading it.

2. The Common Beliefs About Résumés Are Incomplete

What’s wrong with the following definition from Webster’s Dictionary?

A résumé is a short account of one’s career and qualifications, prepared typically by an applicant for a position.

It doesn’t take into account that the reader is looking for something, and judging whether you have it. The most commonly held beliefs about résumés are incomplete and do not focus on what you can do to increase your chances at receiving an interview.

So let’s combine my definition with Webster’s definition:

A résumé is a short account of one’s career and qualifications, prepared typically by an applicant for a position, which shows how the applicant matches what the reader is looking for.

That’s a workable definition!

If you know a résumé is a vehicle that shows how you match what the reader is looking for, you can take proactive steps to find out what the reader is looking for, tailor your résumé to show that, and, thus, increase the number of interviews you will receive.

3. No One Will Ever Read Your Résumé

People may scan it, read parts of it, search for keywords in it, but no one is going to read your résumé from beginning to end—they just don’t have the time.

Keep your résumé as short as needed to show how you match what the reader is looking for, and no longer.

4. You Will Never Be Hired Because of Your Résumé

When faced with a stack of résumés (printed or online), managers tend to scan each briefly and separate them into one of two categories: No and Maybe.

Then they take the résumés that weren’t rejected and say, “Okay, let’s start with these three.”

For those people who received an interview, it wasn’t because someone liked their résumé, it was because they weren’t rejected yet.

5. You Are Writing for Short Attention Span Theater

This takes résumé secret #3 to a whole new level. Not only will people not read your entire résumé, they probably won’t even read entire paragraphs, bullet lists with more than three items, and so forth.

A résumé is just a vehicle that shows that you have what the reader is looking for. Anything else you include may cause them to stop reading and move on.

6. Having Everything Doesn’t Guarantee an Interview

You can have everything a company is looking for and still not get an interview. Why? See the first five résumé secrets.

A company once called me about their need for a technical writer in Houston with patent writing experience. We found someone and submitted his résumé, and the manager emailed me back 15 minutes later saying, “He doesn’t have patent writing experience.”

The candidate did have patent writing experience, but it didn’t appear in his résumé until the middle of the second page. The manager just didn’t read that far.

7. You’re Considered Unqualified Until You Prove Otherwise

Recruiters automatically
advancing your career

assume you are not qualified for the job for which you are applying. Because the great majority of résumés companies receive are from candidates who are not qualified for the job for which they are applying, recruiters have statistics on their side and will assume you are unqualified until you prove otherwise.

This is another reason why the first page of your résumé (preferably the first paragraph) must show that you have what the reader is looking for.

8. Companies Want Current Skills

Whatever companies are looking for, they want you to be doing it in your current job (or in your last job, if you’re not currently working). There’s an illogical assumption that somebody who’s doing a task in their current job is better at it than someone who’s not currently doing it, no matter how many years of experience they may have.

One way to counter this assumption is to put a summary at the top of your résumé that shows you have exactly what the company is looking for. Then, put less detail about your current job and more detail about the job you were doing that involved what the hiring company is looking for. You also could put the skill(s) to use in volunteer work for a local nonprofit to show that your experience is “current.”

9. Job Tasks Are More Important Than Job Titles

What you do in your job is more important than your actual job title. The easier it is for the reader to find what they’re looking for in your résumé, the better your chances of getting an interview. So state what you did, not what your title was.

If a company is looking for a “technical writer,” put “technical writer” on your résumé, not “information engineer” or “user experience advocate” or any other title. Someone in HR probably won’t know those are different names for the same position.

10. Typos and Errors Really Do Kill Your Chances

The smallest typo or formatting error can scuttle your chances of getting an interview. If you can’t write two error-free pages for your résumé, how can anyone expect you to write 200 pages of error-free documentation?

Ending on a Positive Note

Now that we’ve gone over all the actions you shouldn’t do when submitting résumés for a job, let’s make each a positive action to do:

1. Remember that your résumé is a vehicle that shows you match what the reader is looking for, so tailor your résumé for each job for which you apply.
2. When possible, find out what the hiring manager is looking for and include that information early in your résumé.
3. Make your résumé long enough to show how you match what the reader is looking for, and no longer.
4. Remove information that would get in the way of the reader finding what they are looking for. Save all that additional information, stories, duties, and so on for the interview.
5. Be brief but clear—you are writing for short attention spans!
6. Be sure the summary of your résumé shows how you match what they are looking for—you can’t assume they will see the information in the body of your résumé!
7. Be sure applicable experience appears early in your résumé so you aren’t immediately rejected as “yet another unqualified applicant.”
8. Keep your skills current, even if you have to take on volunteer projects that show you are currently doing what the reader is looking for.
9. Use job titles that reflect what you did, not what you were called.
10. Make sure you have zero defects in your résumé.

The end result should be more interviews. Apply these techniques and let me know how it goes!

For more information, listen to a recording of my web seminar from the STC Job Seeker Boot Camp at www.stc.org/pFiles/MP3/Resume-Secrets-That-Might-Surprise-You.mp3.

Jack Molisani is an STC Associate Fellow and the president of ProSpring Technical Staffing (www.ProspringStaffing.com), an employment agency specializing in staff and contract engineers, project managers, and technical writers. Jack also produces the LavaCon Conference on Professional Development (www.lavacon.org).

More information: www.lisa.org/events
**where**

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to intercom@stc.org. For STC’s complete calendar of events, visit www.stc.org/edu/relatedEvents01.asp.

1. **Willow Grove, PA**
   - **26–27 March 2010**
     - The STC Philadelphia Metro Chapter (STC-PMC) will be holding its annual conference at the Conference Center in the Willow Grove Giant building in Willow Grove, PA. For more information, contact: STC-PMC webmaster@stcpmc.org www.stcpmc.org

2. **Rochester, NY**
   - **9 April 2010**
     - The Rochester, NY Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) will hold its 51st annual conference, spectrum2010, at the Hyatt Regency Rochester. The theme is Tech Comm 2.0: MAKING CONTACT, and the keynote speaker is Saul Carliner. For more information, contact: STC Rochester spectrum2010pr@gmail.com www.stc-rochester.org

3. **San Francisco, CA**
   - **17–22 April 2010**
     - The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) will hold its Performance Improvement Conference in San Francisco, CA. For more information, contact: ISPI +1 (301) 587-8570 conference@ispi.org www.ispi.org/AC2010

4. **Dallas, TX**
   - **2–5 May 2010**
     - The Society for Technical Communication (STC) will hold its 57th Technical Communication Summit at the Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower in Dallas, TX. For more information, contact: Lloyd Tucker +1 (571) 366-1904 lloyd.tucker@stc.org http://conference.stc.org

5. **Minneapolis, MN**
   - **13–15 May 2010**
     - The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference in Minneapolis, MN. For more information, contact: ASI conference@asindexing.org www.asindexing.org/site/conferences/conf2010/index.shtml

6. **Atlanta, GA**
   - **14–18 May 2010**
     - The Council of Science Editors (CSE) will hold its annual meeting, “The Changing Climate of Scientific Publishing—The Heat Is On,” in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact: CSE +1 (703) 437-4377 CSE@CouncilScienceEditors.org www.councilscienceeditors.org/events/annualmeeting10/index.cfm

7. **Chicago, IL**
   - **16–19 May 2010**
     - The American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) will hold the 2010 International Conference & Exposition in Chicago, IL. For more information, contact: ASTD +1 (703) 683-8100 www.astdconference.org

8. **Maastricht, the Netherlands**
   - **19–22 May 2010**
     - The 4th International Maastricht-Lodz Duo Colloquium on “Translation and Meaning” will take place in Maastricht, the Netherlands. For details, contact: Dr. Marcel Thelen +31 43 346 6471 m.m.g.j.thelen@hszuyl.nl www.translation-and-meaning.nl
"Pop Culture Historian," it says it right there on my personal email signature. So what is that exactly? When I introduce myself to people I tend to introduce myself as a writer first and foremost. The Pop Culture Historian label came from one of my publishers, and it seemed such a good fit for what I do in my “off hours” that I borrowed it. Actually, writers don’t have off hours. If they aren’t actively writing, most writers are thinking about writing. Let’s just say the Pop Culture Historian label covers my “non-technical” writing.

I tend to split my time between my technical and business communications consulting company, 4Js Group (http://4jsgroup.blogspot.com), and my pop-culture writing career. So far I’ve had books published about Batman, The Beatles, James Bond, and Star Trek, plus contributed to others on Batman, James Bond, novelist Terry Pratchett, “The Time Tunnel” TV show, and champion racing driver Nigel Mansell.

I also write comic books, and currently write the regular monthly comic book series based on the Disney*Pixar movie “CARS.” A couple of paperback collections from the series will also be in stores this year.

It all really started with a degree of frustration. My first real post-college hobby was collecting comics books in general and Batman-related merchandise in particular. At its height, my collection had more than 12,000 items in it. But there wasn’t any single guide book to help let collectors know what was out there, so I pitched the idea and found a publisher for The Unauthorized BATMAN Collectors Guide, which saw print in 1997 (and, amazingly, still sells on a fairly regular basis even though it is now more than a decade out of date).

After spending some of my college years in Liverpool, my other passion was learning more about The Beatles and how they came together. Amazingly, no one had written a book focused on the Fab Four’s teenage years in Liverpool, so I wrote one. With Before They Were Beatles, I tried the self-publishing route and learned a lot about the whole publishing process.

The toy collecting gave way to a writing career that has given me the opportunity to peruse and research many of the pop-culture icons that I have enjoyed over the years. After Batman and The Beatles, the most logical next step was the third big pop-culture icon of my youth—James Bond. I had written about Bond for a few magazines and done some introductory essays for some Bond newspaper comic strip reprint collections, and that lead to the deal that saw me spending a year immersed in the world of 007 to write JAMES BOND: The History of the Illustrated 007. Then, last year, I reread 40 years’ worth of Star Trek comic books and newspaper strips to produce STAR TREK: A Comics History.

So how do I approach a new pop-culture project? Over the past year or so I’ve brainstormed various ideas with a couple of publishers, once again based around the idea of books I would like to read but haven’t been published yet. Ideas we’ve talked about include a critical history of Batman on TV, a history of the illustrated western from the pulps to modern graphic novels, and a couple more Beatles-related topics.

It looked as if the Westerns book would be next up, so we did some initial research on the potential market and I started to gather material. Then, at a convention last year, I attended a panel celebrating the 80th anniversary of Buck Rogers. The turnout for the panel was amazing, standing-room only, and every Rogers item I saw on the show booths was selling out. At dinner with my publisher the evening after the panel, we decided to put the Westerns book on hold and do a book on the complete history of America’s first science fiction hero instead.

Currently, my off hours are filled with rocket ships, jet packs, and ray guns as I have started to watch all the old movie serials and am rereading all the printed Buck Rogers stories, starting with his first appearance in the August 1928 issue of Amazing Stories magazine.

It’s looking like my 2010 will be spent jumping between the 20th and 25th centuries, and I’m looking forward to the ride. So excuse me while I go and figure out how this anti-gravity belt works….
Conquer Time ➤

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