

# intercom

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2013

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

SPONSORED BY



Adobe

Teck Comm  
101

WHAT I WISH I HAD KNOWN	6
A TOOLBOX FOR NEW TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS	10
ON YOUR OWN VS. OWNING A COMPANY: A FREELANCER'S ESSENTIAL DECISION	15
FROM STARVING ARTIST TO WELL-PAID WRITER: TRANSITIONING FROM FICTION TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION	17
INVESTING TIME TO SAVE TIME	21

# Information. Anytime, Anywhere.

A Complete Suite of Tools to Create Professional Documentation for Any Audience, Language or Format



## TRAINING, CONSULTING AND TRANSLATION SERVICES



### TRAINING

Maximize your return on investment with on-site and web-based training, taught by our MAD Certified Flare experts.



### CONSULTING

Find the right consultant for short and long-term projects. Or start consulting for MadSkills with a MAD Certification.

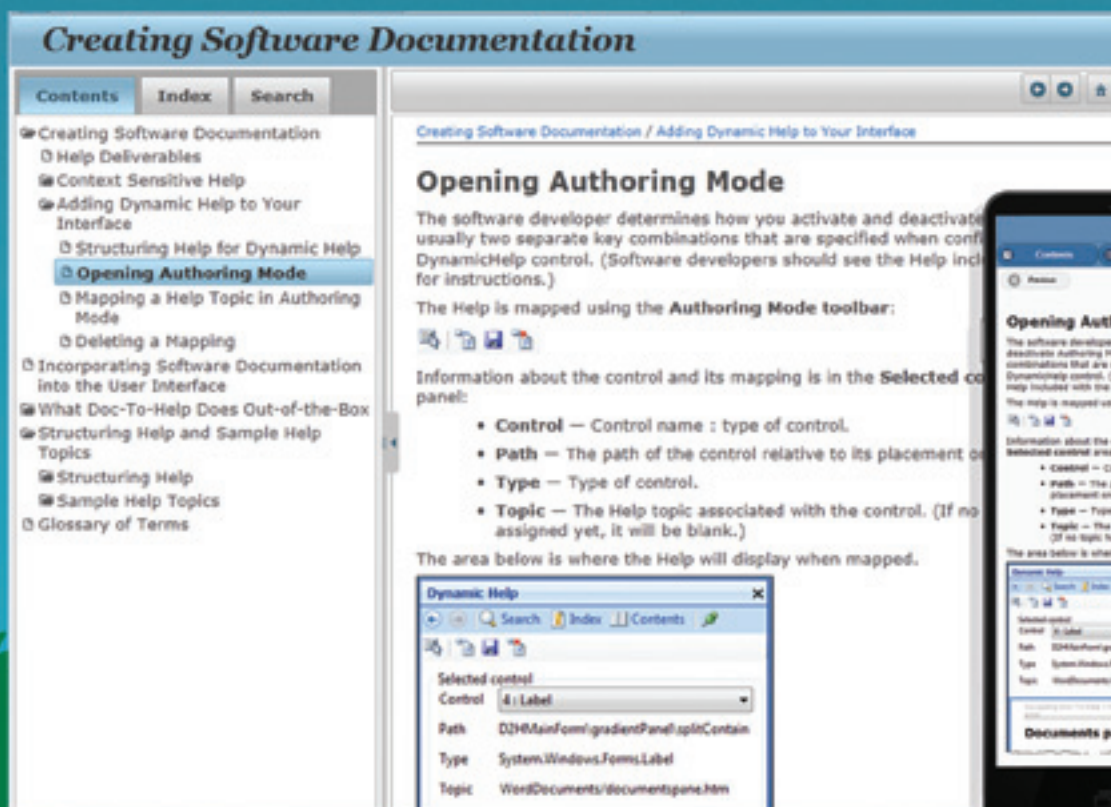


### TRANSLATION

MadTranslations specializes in individual projects or complete end-to-end translation and localization solutions.



# Free Your Content



People want to be able to find information where they work, whether it is on the Web, mobile devices, their desktops, or print. The problem is that this information is often locked away in Word documents, networks, & individual PCs. It's time for a change.

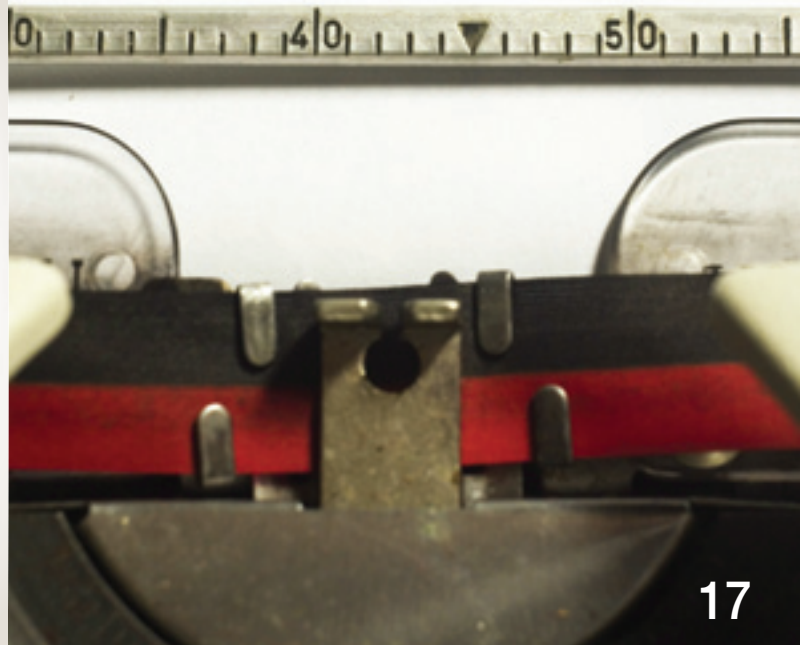
Free your content with Doc-To-Help: publish your content where it's accessible. How? Just write in Microsoft Word or Doc-To-Help's advanced editor, & Doc-To-Help will publish professional-quality deliverables for use on the Web, tablets, phones, desktop computers, & print.

Download a Free Trial @ [doctohelp.com](http://doctohelp.com)

©2013 GrapeCity, Inc. All rights reserved. All products and brand names are trademarks and/or registered marks of their respective holders.



10



17

# Nov/Dec 2013

## Volume 60 | Issue 10

- 4 From the Editor
- 5 From the Guest Editor

### FEATURES

#### YOUR CAREER

#### 6 What I Wish I Had Known

BY JOHN HEDTKE

A glimpse into the author's vast experience with useful career advice, ranging from figuring out who you are and what you want to career development and people skills, to how to be productive and have fun.

#### 10 A Toolbox for New Technical Communicators

BY LINDA OESTREICH

The author maps out what tools you need to have and what skills you need to know to get started in the field of technical communication.

#### 15 On Your Own vs. Owning a Company: A Freelancer's Essential Decision

BY RUTH E. THALER-CARTER

Thinking of owning your own company or working as a one-person business? This article provides excellent guidelines to help you decide on the right business model when starting out on your own.

#### 17 From Starving Artist to Well-Paid Writer: Transitioning from Fiction to Technical Communication

BY ANDREA J. WENGER

From personal experience and examples from other writers, Wenger explains how fiction writers can transition into technical communication by both building on some existing skills and modifying others.

#### 21 Investing Time to Save Time

BY GEOFF HART

By creating a flexible approach for calculating payback time, the author shows us how to define our own criteria for whether it's worth our time to streamline a task or process.

### SOCIETY PAGES

#### 23 Conference Registration Opens 1 December

#### 23 Details on the 2014 Summit Official Hotel

#### 24 Welcome to Phoenix!

BY KIM ROSENLOF

#### 24 What to See and Do While in Phoenix

BY MIACHELLE DEPIANO





Review Share 3D Model  
Secure Collaborate



Interactive Training Videos  
Quizzes Dynamic Presentations

Rh

TS

Fm

Multiscreen HTML5  
EPUB  
KF8  
MOBI  
CHM  
PDF

Cp

eLearning Mlearning  
Simulations Demos  
Screen Capture

XML DITA S1000D  
Author Single Source

Ai

Vector Graphics  
Shapes  
Colors  
Patterns  
Typography

# Shift up a gear with the industry-standard toolkit for technical communication

## Upgrade to Adobe® Technical Communication Suite 4

Now available at a monthly subscription of US\$69!

Try now

Find out what customers and industry experts have to say about Adobe Technical Communication Suite 4. [Read reviews](#)

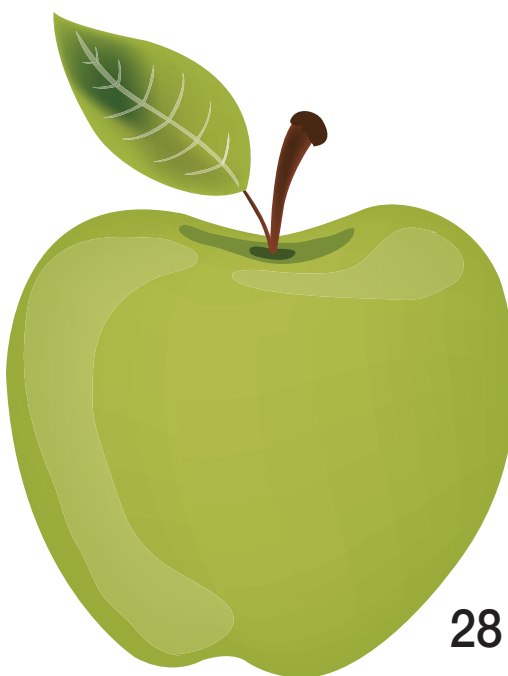


Adobe, the Adobe logo, Acrobat, Captivate, FrameMaker, Illustrator, and RoboHelp are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

© 2013 Adobe Systems Incorporated. All rights reserved.



24



28



30

**26 Community Achievement Award Applications due 21 January**  
By TRICIA SPAYER

**27 Go for the Gold! Renew Your STC Membership with the Gold Value Package**

**27 STC, Social Media, and You**

## COLUMNS

STANDARDS

**28 Standards 101**  
By ANNETTE REILLY

THE ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

**30 A Brief History of the Real World in TC 101**  
By THOMAS BARKER

ETHICS

**33 Ethics and Résumé Design**  
By DEREK G. ROSS

## DEPARTMENTS

FYI

**35 Mark Your Calendar**  
Organization Events Across the Globe

MYJOB

**36 Jackpot! Betting on Technical Documentation at a Gaming Company**  
By SAM LEOPOLD

## ADVERTISERS

**C3, 2 Adobe**  
**C2 Doc-To-Help**  
**4 Johns Hopkins University**  
**C4 MadCap Software**  
**29 STC Membership**



23



# A Note from the Editor

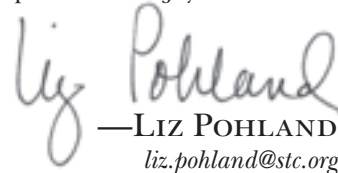


I WAS THRILLED when Leah Guren agreed to guest edit an issue of *Intercom* with content dedicated to entry-level technical communicators. Leah is well-known for her training and consulting work, which has impacted the profession by allowing her to share her knowledge with the next generation of technical communication professionals.

Leah has been in the field of technical communication since 1980. She has worked extensively in software documentation as a writer, technical editor, technical publications manager, and consultant. In 1995, she transitioned over to full-time training and consulting. Many new writers have entered the field through her courses, and many of them are managing technical publications departments at some of the top high-tech companies.

In addition to her work with clients, Leah has also served on the STC board of directors, runs regular education sessions with STC on TechComm 101 and 201, and is a frequent speaker at technical communication conferences around the world. It has been an honor to work with her on this issue of *Intercom*.

I would also like to thank Annette Reilly, Tommy Barker, and Derek Ross for their columns this month, which also center on topics related to TechComm 101—standards, academic issues, and ethics in résumé design. I hope readers enjoy this last issue of 2013!

  
—LIZ POHLAND  
*liz.pohland@stc.org*



KRIEGER SCHOOL of ARTS & SCIENCES  
ADVANCED ACADEMIC PROGRAMS



## HOPKINS IS ADVANCING COMMUNICATIONS

Johns Hopkins University offers flexible graduate programs for communications professionals seeking to advance their careers, and scholars looking to continue their education.

### Master of Arts in Communication

Immerse yourself in an innovative curriculum that integrates digital technology with strategic communication and strong writing skills.

*Location: Washington, DC Campus and Online.*

### Master of Arts in Writing: Science-Medical Writing

Gain the skills you'll need as a writer or editor in health, technology, medicine, nature, space, energy, or other fields.

*Location: Online, plus a 7-10 day residency.*

Learn more: [advanced.jhu.edu](http://advanced.jhu.edu)

# A Note from the Guest Editor

I LOVE THIS PROFESSION—its endless opportunities, fascinating niches, and perfect blend of crisp, hard, technical data with soft, subjective, human factors. I've spent over 33 years in this field and I can't imagine another career that would suit me so well. But the truth is that I entered the field by accident—sideways, if you will. It all started during my undergraduate studies, when I found a part-time job with a small software company near the university. I started as a general assistant within the R&D department, but as soon as the engineers discovered that I could write, I found myself working on documentation. By the time I graduated, this part-time job had become much more than a necessary paycheck; I had found my calling and never looked back.

The profession has changed significantly since 1980. Now, new practitioners are finding it difficult to enter the field without some formal training. As the profession is more widely recognized and supported by more academic programs, employers are expecting some proof that applicants have mastered at least the basics in this complex and demanding profession. These basics can be illustrated in my pyramid of technical communication skill and knowledge areas.

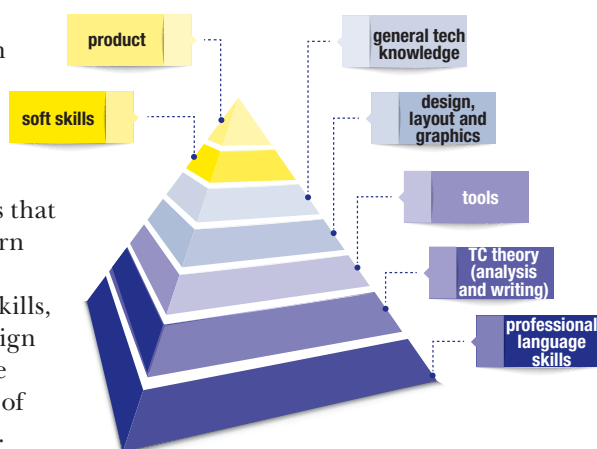
I've met many technical communication practitioners who, like me, entered the field sideways, but became so busy learning about the product and the tools that they never stopped to learn the theory, improve their written communication skills, or develop visual and design skills. Clearly, years in the field are not a guarantee of expertise and knowledge.

In this issue, I've recruited a mix of seasoned veterans and younger practitioners to share their insights and wisdom so that entry-level technical communicators can become true professionals. STC Fellow John Hedtke gives us a glimpse into his vast experience (and quirky humor) with some of the most useful career hacks you will ever read. Past President Linda Oestreich clearly maps out what you need to *have* and what you need to *know* to get started. Ruth E. Thaler-Carter, a relatively new STC member, provides excellent guidelines to help you decide on the right business model when starting out on your own. And finally, STC's favorite fiction author, Andrea J. Wenger, explains how fiction writers can transition into technical communication by both building on some existing skills and modifying others. And finally, the always tool-savvy Geoff Hart explains the wisdom of automating tasks. I am confident that both new technical communicators and seasoned professionals will find something useful in these articles.

Finally, my advice to new technical communicators is to think very carefully about what you call yourself and how you perceive yourself. If you see yourself as a "tech writer" in a cube farm, you may be missing out on the rich variety, intellection stimulation, and financial rewards that are there for the asking. Think big and dream bigger. I'll see you at the Summit!

—LEAH GUREN  
leah@cowtc.com

## The TC Knowledge Pyramid



## intercom

**Intercom**, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication, is published to provide practical examples and applications of technical communication that will promote its readers' professional development.

**Publisher** Society for Technical Communication

**Editor** Elizabeth E. (Liz) Pohland

**Assistant Editor** Kevin Cuddihy

### CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Scott Abel, *Meet the Change Agents*

Andrea Ames and Alyson Riley, *The Strategic IA*

Thomas Barker, *The Academic Conversation*

Nicky Bleiel, *The Essentials*

Marc Lee, *Media Matters*

Jack Molisani, *Advancing Your Career*

Neil E. Perlin, *Beyond the Bleeding Edge*

Linda Roberts and Lisa Pappas, *All Access*

Derek Ross, *Ethics*

Brian Still, *Trends in Usability*

### EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Barrie Byron, Elizabeth (Bette) Frick (Chair),

John Hedtke, Jack Molisani, Andrea Wenger

### STC BOARD OF DIRECTORS

#### Officers

Nicoletta A. Bleiel, *President*

Kit Brown-Hoekstra, *Vice President*

Alan Houser, *Immediate Past President*

Jane Wilson, *Treasurer*

Alyssa Fox, *Secretary*

**Directors** Bernard Aschwanden, Ray Gallon,

Deanne Levander, Ben Woelk

### SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300

Fairfax, VA 22031-1803

+1 (703) 522-4114 | +1 (703) 522-2075 fax

Send questions and correspondence to the editor at the above address. General information about STC: stc@stc.org or www.stc.org.

**Address Changes:** membership@stc.org

**Intercom Editorial:** intercom@stc.org

**Reprint Permissions:** www.copyright.com

**Intercom** (ISSN 0164-6206) is published 10 times a year (monthly, except for August and December) by the Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031-1803, a nonprofit educational organization, as a service to its membership. Membership in STC includes a subscription to **Intercom**. Periodicals postage paid at Fairfax, VA, and additional offices.

**Postmaster** Send address changes to **Intercom**,

Attn: Membership, c/o Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031-1803.

**Copyright** © 2013 by the Society for Technical

Communication. All rights reserved. Printed in the USA.

All articles in **Intercom** are copyrighted by the authors unless otherwise indicated. Anyone interested in reprints, reproductions, or reuse must contact the authors for permission. To advertise in **Intercom**, contact Stacey O'Donnell at stacey.odonnell@stc.org. Society for Technical Communication, 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031. Ph: +1(703) 522-4114; Fax: +1(703) 522-2075.





# What I Wish I Had Known

By JOHN HEDTKE | *Fellow*



MY FIRST OFFICIAL JOB as a technical communicator was in 1984, when men were men and women were women and cars were cars and 640K and dual floppy disk drives were good enough for anybody. I did well and I've generally had a great time. But being a good technical communicator entails a lot more than knowing how to write a good sentence and use a word processor. I would have benefitted strongly from having someone sit me down and say, "Here are things you should know that will save you time, money, and pain if you learn them now."

I'd like to pass on these things to you. All of them are true and all of them apply to you, personally, right where you're sitting now.

## Who Are You?

These things are important for knowing yourself and growing.

## Figure out what you want.

Do homework to identify what you want with a life coach, a mentor, or even a therapist. Knowing yourself lets you grow into the person you want to become, instead of just another stuffed shirt. Also figure out what matters to you in a job: not the big, profound things, but the little stuff. Are you a morning or a night person? Do you mind a long commute? Paying for your own parking? Are you willing to work extra hours or odd schedules? Do you need good coffee there? Is telecommuting important? I know these things sound trivial, but everyone has little preferences like these that make a big difference to overall job satisfaction.

**Tip:** As part of this, figure out if you prefer working captive, freelance, or both. Each has advantages, but people who like freelancing aren't usually as comfortable with captivity, and vice versa. If you are doing one or the other because you think that you "should," you'll only make yourself unhappy. Try both to see how each feels, then go with what you like.

## If you like something, do it.

The saying "Do what you love and the money will follow" is true. Don't be afraid to take some risks. If you've never tried something that sounds interesting, do it! You may love it, you may hate it, but at least you'll know. For example, I became an author because it sounded exciting. (Look at *tradebook author.com* if you're interested in trying this for yourself.) I've published 26 books and almost none of them ever paid off directly, but the money I've made off of my books *indirectly* is another story. A recent contract (doing disaster recovery consulting) is a direct result of my last book (on disaster preparedness). Although the book only made me about \$3,000, I've made \$150,000 on this job so far.

**Tip:** Don't be afraid to fail. The person who has never failed nor gotten fired is not stretching themselves enough.

## Career Development

These things are important for getting the most out of the job you have.

## Network!

STC has done wonders for me. I've made lifelong friends, I've had epic times, and I've made a million dollars I'd not have made otherwise. It's all from participating in STC at the local and Society levels.

**Tip:** You can belong to more than one professional organization.

## Getting exposure.

Never forget that you are usually working somewhere because of the money you're being paid. When someone asks you to do a job for less than the going rate, consider if you'll benefit from the experience. If you don't have much experience or are completely new to a field, you may be willing to work for less money. But don't sign up for a long-term assignment at a cheap rate just because you don't have the experience; at least build in the idea of getting more money as soon as you've proven yourself.

**Tip:** If someone offers you a cut rate and says "it'll be good exposure for you," they're being cheap and they hope you're too dumb to notice. You're definitely going to have problems with people like that, so negotiate hard and don't be afraid to walk away.

## Sometimes you just have to do what's available.

Not every job is noble, fun, or good work. You sometimes have to take an awful job because it's the only job out there. I've had a few. They're unpleasant, but they're what's available. Be professional and keep your ears open for something better. Freelancers, take note: no one ever hires a contractor because they're having a nice day and they want to share it. Clients are hiring you to solve a problem, which usually has an underlying cause that can occasionally be very unpleasant.

**Tip:** Grit your teeth and remember that the client isn't hiring you to be their therapist. You're hired to do a job with a specific scope and purpose. Do it as best you can and be ready to go elsewhere when a better job appears.

## Always be looking for your next job.

Start looking for your next job the day you start your current job. Sure, you need to understand the basics of technical communication and have a good grounding in fundamentals, but after that, you can branch out. You shouldn't leap out the door at a moment's notice, but be open to possibilities.

Think about what you'd like to do next. If you're a writer, consider being a trainer, project lead, technical

Do homework to identify what you want ... knowing yourself lets you grow into the person you want to become.



publications manager, business analyst, usability specialist, or dozens of other things. Your skill set as a technical communicator is 95% of the skills for most other writing, analysis, and consulting jobs; the only difference is how you package these skills.

**Tip:** Cultivate agencies and recruiters. I've known some recruiters for over 30 years. I can always phone them up and ask if they know of a job for me or someone else.

### Keep a day log.

Keep a day log, rather like a job diary. This is *really* private; don't even volunteer that you're doing this. Write the things that happen and what you do. Most importantly, write down how you feel about things that happen. When you start this, you'll write things about how you feel tense or distrustful at a meeting but have no idea why, but three weeks later, you discover that something was going on. Your tummy was warning you based on nonverbal cues.

Keeping a day log lets you build a vocabulary of emotional concepts that you can use to analyze your feelings in later job situations so you can be alert for things coming at you.

**Tip:** Make note of everything you complete, too. That's excellent material during salary reviews. (Write it all down, no matter how trivial it seems at the time.)

### Save copies of everything.

Whenever you create something, keep copies. Get three copies of printed documents. One copy is for your portfolio and online samples; the others are backup copies that get sealed in separate Ziploc bags that go into a black plastic garbage bag, which then goes into a box on a high shelf somewhere. For online docs, burn three CDs or DVDs and store them the same way. You always want to keep multiple copies because you'll never be able to get copies five years later and a single CD might have a read error or get scratched.

Also keep a list of everything you've done: every project or job you had, person you worked for, article you published, conference you attended, and presentation you made. This is very helpful when customizing your résumé for a particular job, as well as for many self-marketing efforts.

**Tip:** You use your copies and history for building portfolios, résumés, online sample files, and personal websites.

### Read!

Read books and magazine articles in the profession! If you read one book and one or two magazines a month for a year, you'll (a) be doing more than 95% of your peers, and (b) you might be ready for a promotion or new job. The most successful technical communicators are learning new tools, skills, and disciplines continually.

**Tip:** Read things completely outside your skill set and career focus. Not only is cross-disciplinary information valuable for solving problems, you may discover something new that you want to pursue fulltime.

## People Skills

These things make your dealings with other people better.

### Dress for success.

Dressing well can get you a lot of extra status (and more money, too). At many contracts, I've been deferred to as if I'm an executive simply because I wear starched dress shirts and have a good collection of ties.

**Tip:** It's okay to dress casually when working at home, but dressing up for your client or employer validates that you're worth whatever they're paying you, particularly if it's a casual office.

### Learn to be an extrovert.

Technical communication is a field that goes very well with introversion: being alone and not interacting with people for hours and all sorts of other things. Unfortunately, being an introvert is not optimal for marketing yourself. You need to develop the ability to act like an extrovert. This is not something that comes naturally to most introverts, but it's good to be able to schmooze people. One of my favorite people is an introvert who's developed an extroverted personality she uses at conferences and with clients ... but she recharges like other introverts, by being alone and not interacting with people.

As part of this, learn your communication style. Consider a Myers-Briggs test. If you're a bounding extrovert like me, you'll discover that some people feel threatened by your mere presence and there's nothing you can do but sit in the corner and be quiet. (Yes, it'll drive you crazy.) If you're an introvert, you need to learn to present your ideas effectively and not get overridden by the noise from the bounding extroverts.

**Tip:** Knowing your strengths and weaknesses helps you communicate better with other people.

### You really are going to have bribe people for information.

You've heard about having to take chocolate chip cookies in to get information out of developers and SMEs? That's true more often than we like. I know you're a professional, you've got a Masters degree, you deserve respect, blah blah blah ... but this is the way things sometimes are.

**Tip:** You may have great skills, but technical communication is not a field that usually pays you in respect. I talk about why this is in a presentation called "Seeding the Clouds," available at [www.hedtke.com/downloads/Seeding\\_the\\_Clouds.mov](http://www.hedtke.com/downloads/Seeding_the_Clouds.mov).

### Some people cheat.

There aren't "two kinds" of people in the world, there are three:

1. People who play fair.
2. People who don't.
3. People who cheat.

## Life is best when you have lots of old friends. Keep in touch with everyone you've liked and bring them forward.

The third class of people is the bad one. They get you to trust them and you'll then discover you've been shafted. You have to go through the mill a few times before you develop radar for this type of person and it won't be fun. Trust your tummy; if it feels tight for any reason, *believe it!* You may not know why at first, but your tummy's going to be right, even if you don't want to believe what it's telling you.

**Tip:** Your day log can help you identify what's happening in this kind of situation.

### The Important Stuff

These are the things that will matter to you for the rest of your life.

#### Protect your hearing.

Computers and printers all have cooling fans that make a surprising amount of noise. It's white noise, so you don't usually notice it, but your ears are getting battered daily. The result of working next to all this gear is that you're going to suffer high-end hearing loss after 10, 20 years. Try wearing noise-cancelling headphones, ear plugs, or move the equipment with the fans as far away from you as possible and put it under a noise hood.

**Tip:** Try turning off all the gear in your office or cube area sometime and see how quiet it really is by comparison. We tune out the noise, but it's overwhelming.

#### Don't overwork.

When you're young and immortal, the temptation to work all night or pull down an extra contract in addition to your regular job is great. After all, you can sleep on the weekends, make mountains of money, and rack up experience faster than anyone you know. I did this for a decade and I had a *terrific* time! I won a couple dozen awards, published my first 15 books, wrote articles, worked impressive contracts and jobs, and garnered fame and some fortune. And, as a result of being chronically sleep-deprived and stressed, I also developed Type II Diabetes, high blood pressure, and a heart problem. No matter what the accomplishments, being diabetic with a reduced life expectancy is simply not worth it.

**Tip:** Get eight hours sleep a night. Eat reasonably well. Exercise, even if it's just taking a 20-minute walk every day. Watch your weight. Don't smoke. You'll feel much better and you'll have a much longer life expectancy.

#### Keep in touch with everyone you've liked.

Life is best when you have lots of old friends. Keep in touch with everyone you've liked and bring them forward. (Social media makes this a lot easier than it used to be.) You'll end up with a huge fan base, too.

**Tip:** Be prepared to lose some people along the way. You won't be able to hold on to everyone and you may even outgrow some people. But don't eliminate someone just because they're "kind of inconvenient" at that moment. You'll regret it.

#### Be optimistic.

I'm an optimist of the "Wow, my glass is 1/32 full!" type. I find opportunities where other people don't. Most of this is simply asking the right question. For example, when you say "I need to buy a new car, but I don't have enough money," you've painted a complete picture of a reality that has no opportunity to change. Change the "but" to "and" like this: "I need to buy a new car, *and* I don't have enough money." All of a sudden, you've changed the script to include both premises, letting you bring other ideas into the mix. Look for the serendipity in your life and give magic a chance to happen.

**Tip:** Don't be right; be happy. If you're busy being "right," you're going to alienate people and usually be gloriously wrong. Being happy is always much better.

All these tips boil down to one basic idea:

#### It's always about fun and bucks.

No matter what you do in life, it's always some combination of fun and bucks. If you're having a tough time, figure out if what you're doing can be expressed as fun or bucks. If there's none of either, you're in the wrong place doing the wrong thing. Get out of there!

**Tip:** Start saving for retirement. Get a copy of *The Richest Man in Babylon*, read it, and do exactly what it says. (No talking back!) Also buy a long-term disability income policy—they're not too expensive when you're young.

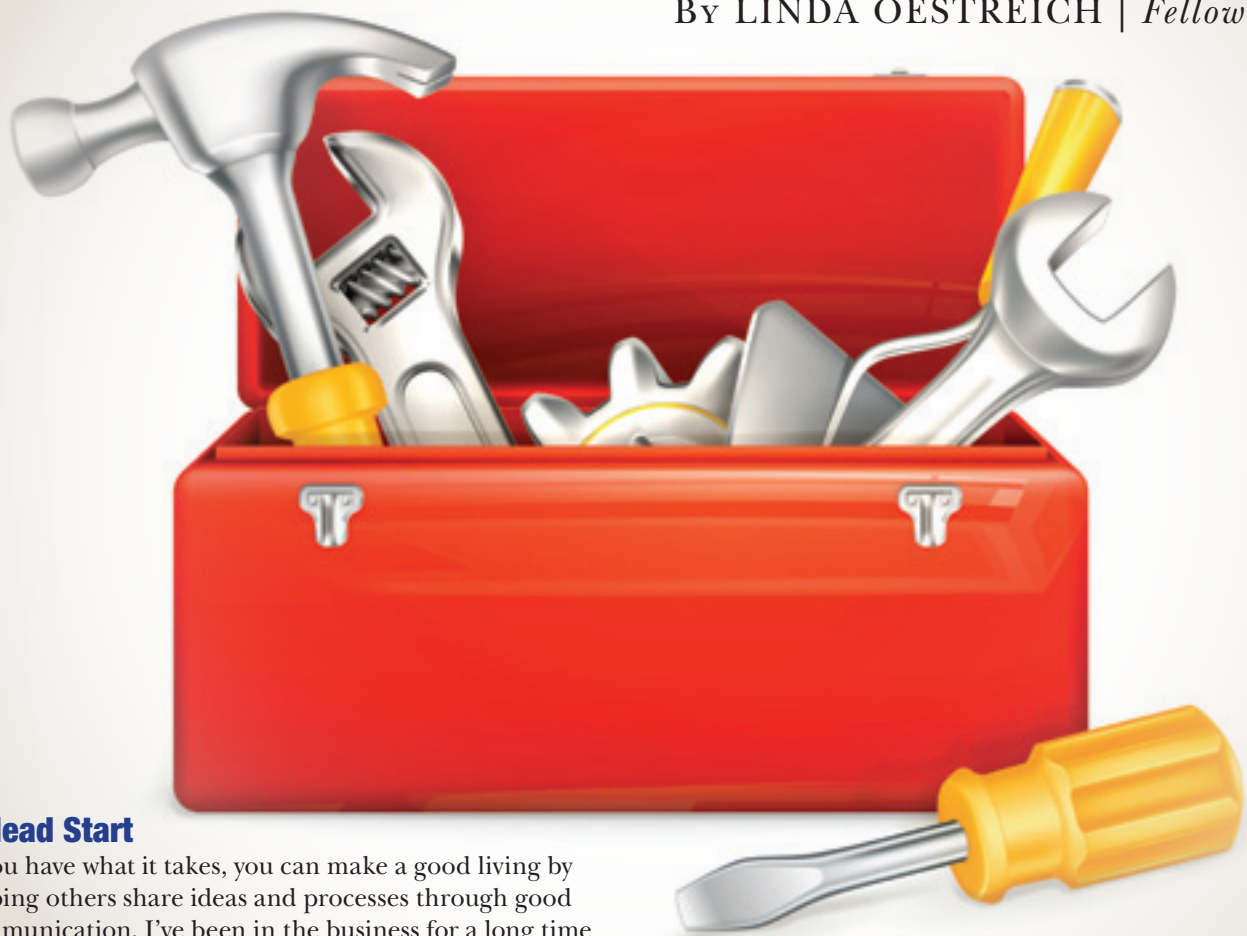
All these ideas will make your life more prosperous, healthier, and much more fun. I would've had a hard time believing some of them when I was a wee sprat, but each idea has improved my life immeasurably for the knowing of it. They'll make yours better, too. I promise. **■**

JOHN HEDTKE *owns and operates JVH Communications, which provides writing, consulting, and training services to private and government clients. He is a Fellow of the Society for Technical Communication and a past Board member. John can be reached through his website, [www.hedtke.com](http://www.hedtke.com). He has all kinds of stories he can't tell in print, so look him up at STC conferences. John lives in Eugene, OR.*



# A Toolbox for New Technical Communicators

By LINDA OESTREICH | *Fellow*



## A Head Start

If you have what it takes, you can make a good living by helping others share ideas and processes through good communication. I've been in the business for a long time and I've taught countless students about technical writing, technical editing, and information design. To me, all of those disciplines plus many, many more make up what we call *technical communication*.

But if you're new to technical communication, you may still be trying to identify what you need to get started.

In this article, I introduce the fundamental skills and tools you need when you enter the field. I've divided those things into two basic groups: things you need to *have* and things you need to *know*.

Soft skills, hard skills, tools, and technology—all belong in the head and on the desk of every good technical communicator.

## Things You Need to Have

In today's world of the Internet, most critical tools can be accessed online. Style guides, grammar books, dictionaries, and other references that were once available only as hardcopies are now as close as your computer. However, you still need to learn how to *use* these resources.

### Style Guides

You can get the answers to questions from a Google search, but the truth is that the Internet contains a lot of misinformation. So, how do you know when you've found the "right" answer to a communication problem? Start by learning to identify legitimate sources. One important source is a *style guide*.

Style guides can be generic, industry-specific, or in-house. Generic style guides provide a set of standards for writing and can incorporate everything from punctuation to abbreviation choices. They have nothing to do with technical communication specifically, but are authoritative references for language usage.

Industry-specific style guides address things unique to a special field. For example, the *ACS Style Guide* (produced by the American Chemical Society) contains rules for typesetting chemical formulas.

Finally, in-house style guides are unique to each company, defining their own terminology and usage rules for editorial consistency and clarity.

I am a strong believer that you should buy a good generic style guide and read it. Most of us in this business believe that *The Chicago Manual of Style* (currently in its 16th edition) is the best of the bunch. It has a wealth of information that you can use as a new technical communicator. (If you want to read a great little book about writing that won't cost a lot, I suggest you get Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. It's not really a style guide, but it's a valuable read and actually humorous from time to time. It is dated, so don't take everything in it as true in today's world. Nonetheless, it is a gem, and I think every good technical communicator should read it.)

If you can't get a recent edition of *Chicago*, visit a used bookstore and buy used, older editions. If you don't have the money, find a generic style guide on the Web and bookmark it (although some of them are only available for a subscription fee).

If you work in the life sciences, you'll probably use *Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*. People who work in marketing or journalism use the *Associated Press Stylebook*. Those in the information technology areas or other high-tech industries often follow the *Microsoft Manual of Style* (MMOS). Other industry-specific style guides abound, and each provides information for a specific area of communication.

Most importantly, when you start a new project, get a copy of the client's up-to-date style guide and learn it.

## Dictionaries and Grammar Books

In addition to style guides, you need a good dictionary and grammar book.

Did you know that not all dictionaries are alike? I once thought that a word was a word and it was always spelled one way, broken into syllables one way, and pronounced one way. Not so. Not only do we have English dictionaries and American English dictionaries, we also have contemporary American English dictionaries, dictionaries of slang, dictionaries of words within a particular discipline, and so on.

The most common dictionaries for American English are *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* and *American Heritage Dictionary*.

If you are working in an area that writes in British English or a language other than English, you need the appropriate dictionary to follow for your work. Find out what the chosen dictionary is and have it handy or bookmark it. If you want a specialized dictionary, you can find one in most any discipline you choose (see this website for a sample: [www.yourdictionary.com/diction4.html](http://www.yourdictionary.com/diction4.html)).

As for grammar books, I seldom use my hardbacks these days. Instead, I look up the problem online. My favorite site is Grammar Girl ([www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl)). From time to time, however, it's good to get the old *Harbrace College Handbook* off the shelf. Today, the book has a new name: *Hodges Harbrace Handbook* ([www.amazon.com/Hodges-Harbrace-Handbook-18th-Edition/dp/1111346704](http://www.amazon.com/Hodges-Harbrace-Handbook-18th-Edition/dp/1111346704)), and it's in its 18th printing! Grammar doesn't change quickly, although some things once disapproved of are now acceptable—despite the kicking and screaming of old purists like me. Because change comes slowly, older grammar books from used bookstores still have value on your shelf.

## Content Development Software and Templates

Content development software, also known as desktop publishing or DTP, and the templates within them, are the vehicles you use to produce deliverables—whether online or print. At work, I have always used whatever my client or my employer has provided, and at home I use Microsoft Word because it is prevalent around the planet (if they have a PC).

However, if you are producing documents for single sourcing or content management and can handle embedded graphics, track numbering of tables and figures, create complex tables, maintain cross references, and generate indexes and tables of contents, you probably use something other than Word. For years, Adobe's FrameMaker was the tool of choice for creating documents in the workplace. Today, FrameMaker has many good competitors, and each has its own strengths and challenges. You can find a good description of different DTP tools in *Scriptorium's Technical Writing 101*, chapter 4 ([www.scriptorium.com/book/tw101\\_third\\_toolbox.pdf](http://www.scriptorium.com/book/tw101_third_toolbox.pdf)). Whatever tool you use, you are responsible for understanding how it works, its strengths, and its weaknesses. Learn how to set up the system and master it, keeping in mind that you might have to start from scratch with each new version of the application!



Along with content development software, you must understand, use, and manipulate templates. Templates are the tool the industry uses to ensure consistency across teams, throughout a project, and within a company. They help ensure that books, documents, websites, blogs, and marketing materials all have the same look and feel. They simplify your work by ensuring that your spacing, headings, margins, typeface, type size, etc., are done exactly the same across time and documents.

Learn about them, use them, and if you're smart, learn how to build them. Good template developers are rare. (I'm convinced being a template expert provides job security.) For a great treatise on templates, see this blog: <http://primacommunications.com/2009/08/the-importance-of-document-templates/>.

We could discuss a myriad of other things to supplement your technical communication career. But start by focusing on the three items I've noted. Learn them and you'll be well on your way to success.

## Things You Need to Know

Technical communication is a wonderful career because it supports any discipline that uses communication to teach, show, inform, and elucidate. So, what are the things you need to know to launch your career? As an experienced technical communicator, I've put a lot of things into my *knowledge about* bucket, but I've trimmed that list to the critical items for new technical communicators:

- ▶ language skills
- ▶ audience analysis
- ▶ information design
- ▶ organizational methods
- ▶ documentation formats
- ▶ global concepts (globalization, localization, and internationalization)

## Language Skills

My students often come to technical writing and editing classes thinking that the class teaches them basic English. It does not. Even entry-level technical communication students should already possess good-to-excellent language skills in whatever language they are writing in. These language skills include punctuation, grammar, and style.

Technical writing and editing follow unique rules to help communicate technical information to specific audiences. That unique quality means that, as a technical communicator, you need to change your writing style. For example, alliteration, assonance, flowery phrases, and formal language might be appropriate in higher education classes in the liberal arts, but they have no place in technical writing. Learning about passive voice, misplaced modifiers, noun strings, subject/verb agreement, and comma faults is more important in technical communication than in expository or fiction writing because your ultimate goal is to provide clear, unambiguous information for the reader.

If you are weak in language skills, you cannot be a strong technical communicator. Attend a grammar workshop, take STC classes and workshops at the annual Summit, and do whatever it takes to develop professional-level written communication skills.

## Audience Analysis

Every good technical communicator recognizes that communication must be clear in two specific areas: it must have a clear purpose and it must meet the needs of its audience. Establishing the purpose of a piece can be difficult, but you must know *why* your piece exists to move forward. In the same way, you must know *for whom* you are writing!

At times, we must address the multiple audiences who all use one document to get answers to their questions. Almost all technical communication addresses one or more of four audience types: administrator, expert, technician, or layperson (Houp and Pearsall):

- ▶ An **administrator** wants to know about time and resources—so you would focus on costs and benefits, the ROI of the work, the training, and resulting revenue of the product you are writing about. They want to know the “bottom line.”
- ▶ An **expert** wants detailed information, including theories and background of the product or research. They want to understand its inner workings from a subjective point of view.
- ▶ A **technician** wants procedures and schematics, information on how to fix or build things, and practical information based on the product's objective details.
- ▶ A **layperson** wants to know whatever is needed to get the product to do what that person needs. Depending on the product, the layperson might want procedural or explanatory information. They usually need analogies, stories, illustrations, and comparisons with things they already know to help them make sense of the new.

You can learn about your audience through tools such as personas and usability tests. But, no matter how you do it, determining the audiences for your communication and then responding to their needs is critical for your communication to work.

## Information Design

Once upon a time, technical communicators worked with graphic artists who helped make decisions about table and art requirements in a document. Today, with PCs and easily obtained graphics and layout programs, anyone can develop graphics. Unfortunately, few technical communicators are an expert in the area of graphics. So, we learn to follow formats and layouts presented to us through templates and best-case examples from experts.

According to Wikipedia, “*Information design* is the practice of presenting information in a way that fosters efficient and effective understanding of it” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information\\_design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_design)).

Your decisions about presentation (design and layout) should be shaped by Robin Williams's four concepts: contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity.

You may not be a skilled graphic artist, but it's paramount that you understand how to select correct color and fonts, correct placement of information, and correct visual elements. Correct design and layout helps users access and understand the information. Good information design can support and enhance ideas—even those that are not well-written. And, poor information design can hinder a message that is written well. Much research has gone into this aspect of technical communication. In fact, you can choose to become expert in information design and/or architecture as you progress in your technical communication career.

## Organizational Methods

As technical communicators, we sometimes lose sight of all the detailed skills we possess. One of those areas of expertise that we take for granted is our knowledge of organizational methods.

When you have information to share, how do you organize it? Several solutions exist (from [www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/writing/sixtrait/organization/patterns.html](http://www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/writing/sixtrait/organization/patterns.html)):

- ▶ chronological
- ▶ cause and effect
- ▶ problem to solution
- ▶ spatial
- ▶ climactic
- ▶ reverse climactic
- ▶ process
- ▶ classification
- ▶ compare and contrast

You, as the writer or editor, need to know what method is appropriate for your document. Then you must provide the right keys within your writing so that your reader can follow what you're doing. When you have no structure and no pattern, your writing becomes convoluted and difficult to understand. To be a better technical communicator, learn to use these and other organizational methods to arrange your content logically and effectively. Remember that organization in technical communication can be different than what you learned in school when writing essays!

## Documentation Formats

Technical communicators also must know basic document types and structures. The following list includes some common deliverables:

- ▶ memoranda
- ▶ user guides
- ▶ proposals
- ▶ maintenance manuals
- ▶ scientific research reports
- ▶ travel reports

- ▶ feasibility reports
- ▶ policies and procedures
- ▶ Web pages
- ▶ online help
- ▶ electronic documents

Over time, you may produce many or all of those products, so learn about as many as you can. You can find information about all of these forms of writing technical communication on the STC Body of Knowledge portal at <http://stcbok.editme.com/>.

Document structures refer to the internal parts of a document. Each part of a document has a purpose and supports your ability to present a message clearly and concisely. You can find a list of document structures here: [www.files.chem.vt.edu/chem-ed/CHP/workshops/samples/structures.html](http://www.files.chem.vt.edu/chem-ed/CHP/workshops/samples/structures.html). This site includes information about structures both for online and printed documents, such as headers and footers, tabular material, ordered and unordered lists, headings, pagination, etc. Without these structures, your work would be difficult to interpret.

If you work a lot with online documentation and become involved with the basic makeup of online information design, content management, single-sourcing, and object- or topic-based writing, document structure takes on more and more complex meaning. As you gain experience in the field, you also learn more and more about these aspects of documentation.

## Global Concepts

Globalization (G12N), localization (L10N), and internationalization (I18N) have become a major part of any technical communicator's toolbox in the last 20 years. In the '70s, a technical communicator usually wrote for an audience from the same country; translation into multiple languages wasn't a common part of the process and life in technical communication was simpler, if much less interesting.

Today, multiple audiences across multiple countries read much of what we produce. In many cases, technical communicators are on teams with other technical communicators who live, work, and write from the perspective of other countries.

Once again, all you can do as a novice technical communicator is know that these areas of expertise exist and what they are. I recently saw this comment online: "Internationalization and localization are about differentiation. Globalization is about unification." How true.

*Globalization* can be a social program, a marketing strategy, a web site, or a software product—G12N is about spreading a thing to several different countries and making it applicable and usable in those countries. When you globalize something, you know it is used around the world and you do all you can to make it workable wherever it is used.

*Localization* (L10N), rather than making something unified, is the process of adapting the text and applications of a product or service to enable its acceptability for a



particular cultural or linguistic market. L10N goes beyond literal translation; in addition to idiomatic language translation, numerous local details such as currency, national regulations and holidays, cultural sensitivities, product or service names, gender roles, and geographic examples must all be considered. A successfully localized service or product is one that seems to have been developed within the local culture.

*Internationalization* (I18N) is planning and implementing products and services so that they can easily be localized for specific languages and cultures. I18N may include the following tasks in documentation:

- ▶ Creating illustrations for documents in which the text can easily be changed to another language and allowing expansion room for this purpose
- ▶ Allowing space in user interfaces (for example, hardware labels, help pages, and online menus) for translation into languages that require more space
- ▶ Creating print or website graphic images so that their text labels can be translated inexpensively
- ▶ Leaving enough space in a brochure to drop in different length languages
- ▶ Separating the language elements from the graphic elements, or abstracting content from markup in a web application and software
- ▶ Using written examples that have global meaning
- ▶ Insuring that the tools and product can support international character sets

As a technical communicator, you are expected to produce documentation that fits these global requirements. Our world is shrinking; as a result, we continually find ways to produce communication that is better received around the globe.

## Final Thoughts

It may seem daunting that a technical communicator must know and use so much when starting out. Let's recap on the main areas presented:

- ▶ Things You Must Have: style guides, dictionaries and grammar books, and content development software and templates
- ▶ Things You Must Know: language skills, audience analysis, information design, organizational methods, documentation formats and structures, and global concepts

Still, the topics in this article barely scratch the surface of our knowledge. Expert technical communicators collect, analyze, and absorb a multitude of knowledge, and we use that knowledge in varying amounts every day in multiple situations. Soft skills, hard skills, tools, and technology—all belong in the head and on the desk of every good technical communicator.

Keep these basic areas of expertise and equipment close at hand, keep learning about them, and keep sharing your knowledge. You'll do well. ■

LINDA OESTREICH is an STC Fellow and was the 2007–2008 President of STC. She joined STC in 1979 and is a member of the San Diego Chapter and the Technical Editing, International, and Management SIGs. Linda has presented at scores of international, chapter, and regional events. She is currently a contract business analyst for The Marlin Alliance, supporting the director of civilian workforce programs at the San Diego-based Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command. She also teaches the STC online course *Technical Editing Fundamentals* and two classes at the University of California, San Diego Extension: *Basics of Technical Editing* and *Information Design for Technical Communicators*.

## REFERENCES

- American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (5th ed.), Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
- Associated Press Stylebook (39th ed.), The Associated Press, 2004.
- Chicago Manual of Style (16th ed.), University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Document Structures, [www.files.chem.vt.edu/chem-ed/CHP/workshops/samples/structures.html](http://www.files.chem.vt.edu/chem-ed/CHP/workshops/samples/structures.html).
- GLENN, CHERYL, and LORETTA GRAY. *Hodges Harbrace Handbook* (18th ed.), Cengage Learning, 2012.
- Globalization, Localization, Internationalization and Translation, [www.translationdirectory.com/article127.htm](http://www.translationdirectory.com/article127.htm) and <http://philip.pristine.net/glit/en/>.
- Grammar Girl, [www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl).
- HOUPE, KENNETH, and THOMAS PEARSALL. *Reporting Technical Information* (11th ed.), Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Industry-specific Dictionaries, [www.yourdictionary.com/diction4.html](http://www.yourdictionary.com/diction4.html).
- Kim's Korner for Teacher Talk, "Patterns of Organization," [www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/writing/sixtrait/organization/patterns.html](http://www.kimskorner4teachertalk.com/writing/sixtrait/organization/patterns.html).
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary (11th ed.), Merriam-Webster, Inc.
- Microsoft Manual of Style (4th ed.), Microsoft Corporation, 2012.
- Prima Communications Blog, <http://primacommunications.com/2009/08/the-importance-of-document-templates/>.
- PRINGLE, ALAN S., and SARAH S. O'KEEFE. *Technical Writing 101* (3rd ed.), Scriptorium Publishing, 2003.
- Scientific Style and Format: The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* (7th ed.), Council of Science Editors in cooperation with the Rockefeller University Press, 2006.
- Society for Technical Communication's TC Body of Knowledge, <http://stcbok.editme.com/>.
- STRUNK, JR., WILLIAM, and E. B. WHITE. *The Elements of Style* (4th ed.), Longman Press, 1999.
- Wikipedia, Information Design, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information\\_design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_design).
- WILLIAMS, ROBIN. *The Non-Designer's Design Book* (3rd ed.), Peachpit Press, 2008.

# On Your Own vs. Owning a Company:

## A Freelancer's Essential Decision

BY RUTH E. THALER-CARTER | *Member*

CHOOSING A BUSINESS MODEL is one of the first decisions when you begin to freelance. How you structure your business depends primarily on your personality and, to a lesser degree, on the kinds of projects you want to handle.

### Options and Definitions

The two main options for your freelance business are a solopreneur or a company owner. A *solopreneur* is a one-person business or entrepreneur, sole proprietor or practitioner, or independent contractor. A *company owner* is someone who hires and manages employees and/or contractors. The decision applies to both the technical communicator who is just getting started and to the senior pro who has always been a “captive” (in-house) employee and is thinking about breaking free.

For this article, *business* or *company* may be synonymous with *company with employees*. This is not to say that solopreneurs are not in business; *we are*. Anyone who wants to succeed as a freelancer needs more than strong technical communication skills and experience. You have to think and behave in a business-like way, regardless of whether you choose to go it on your own or establish a company with employees.

### Skills and Personalities

When weighing which way to go in defining your freelance business, think about what each model requires.

Most of us go into freelancing because we want the independence of being our own boss, free to work on what we

want to work on, how and when we prefer to do our work. That is the essence of the solopreneur, but it also can be the heart of the company model. Even if you have a company, you as the owner are still the one who gets to make those decisions; you just have other people who may carry out the actual work.

The solopreneur model is easy to launch because it requires little more than an up-to-date computer and software, which most of us already have these days. It also, however, takes self-discipline, the ability to work alone without an “office family,” skill in developing resources for fact-checking and research, and willingness to do your own marketing and paperwork (yes, a sole practitioner still has to deal with filing and record-keeping).

In many ways, being a solopreneur is ideal for the introvert, although you will need to reach out to market yourself and find clients. That takes effort for some people who aren’t comfortable with promoting themselves, but it’s essential to your success.

To be the boss of an editing company, you have to understand and be skilled at a lot more than just technical communication. You have to deal with human resources: finding, hiring, training, managing, paying, and occasionally firing employees or subcontractors. You may have to pay benefits. You probably need to find and pay for outside office space and its related costs, although some business owners find they can run a company virtually, with employees and subcontractors working from their own home offices. You have to find projects that are large



shutterstock.com/Mopic

enough to support those office costs and the time of more than one person, even if only one of your people handles a given client. There also is likely to be a lot more paperwork to this model than to the solopreneur business.

Owning a company may be more fitting for an extrovert, since you will have to deal with not only clients but your employees and contractors.

Solopreneurs and company owners will face different tax issues, regardless of the size of the business. There may also be significant tax differences depending on where you live, so it's important to get professional advice when setting up your freelance business.

## Pros and Cons

Any good business person will establish rates and expenses that give the owner a comfortable income and living.

As a solopreneur, your costs will be far lower than those of a company owner. You can usually work from home, and you only need enough work at a high-enough rate to cover your own business and personal expenses. (That does not mean you should short-change yourself in terms of setting rates appropriate for your experience and skills; just that your income only has to cover yourself.) You can take on small or short-term projects without worrying about their effect on your bottom line. You need business savvy, but at a lower level than someone who has employees, outside office space, and related costs.

A solopreneur may feel isolated and need to figure out ways to engage with the world, while the owner of a company usually has socialization built into the day-to-day activities by virtue of having employees and contractors. As the owner of a company, you can handle larger projects, and with a lesser sense of pressure than someone without staff to share the burden.

The fees for smaller projects may not be as attractive as those that large projects (such as editing or writing a huge document) might generate, but the work can be as profitable for a solopreneur as large projects are for companies. The solopreneur ends up with the whole fee, rather than some of it going to employees or subcontractors and those additional outside-office expenses.

Becoming an editing company makes a lot of sense for anyone who wants to handle large publishing projects. A solopreneur can take on big projects, but probably not ones as huge as a company with more than one editor (or writer, proofreader, indexer, graphic artist, webmaster, or whatever your niche may involve) can tackle.

A solopreneur will need to develop a network of colleagues to work with on larger projects, subcontract to,

or give unwanted projects to. A company owner will have those colleagues already in place and at hand.

Solopreneurs who work with MA and PhD students or academic authors trying to submit manuscripts to journals often do quite well on projects that would not be big enough for a company, or whose authors might not be able to afford the fees of a company.

Some of that financial aspect is a matter of perception and assumption, though. A technical communication company might not charge that much more than a solo freelancer, but some prospective clients assume that companies will be more expensive than individuals. Individual freelancers can often use that as a bargaining chip when negotiating with prospective clients.

It can be difficult to find individual clients who will pay enough to be worthwhile clients for either solopreneurs or company owners. The expanding world of self-publishing means more and more authors, but many do not think that they need editors to improve their work. Finding clients who pay what you are worth is an ongoing challenge for any freelancer, regardless of business model.

## Tips and Advice

While deciding whether to be a solopreneur or a business owner is a key decision for a freelancer, setting up your freelance technical communication business involves much more than that. See Further Reading, below, for sources of advice on all aspects of launching and maintaining your freelance business.

## The Bottom Line

Deciding whether to use the solopreneur vs. company owner model is not a battle. It's simply a business decision, based on each freelancer's preferences and personality. Keep in mind, too, that the solopreneur can always branch out into being a company at some point, and the company owner can always cut back and revert to solopreneur status if necessary. The beauty of freelancing is in that flexibility. **i**

**RUTH E. THALER-CARTER** ([www.writerruth.com](http://www.writerruth.com)) is an award-winning writer, editor, and proofreader who has made presentations on freelancing, proofreading and editing, and websites for freelancers to local and national STC conferences and webinars. She also owns *Communication Central*, which hosts an annual conference for freelancers ([www.communication-central.com](http://www.communication-central.com)); STC members are eligible for a colleague's discount on registration.

### FURTHER READING

Freelancing Basics blog by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter for STC, <http://notebook.stc.org/freelancing-basics>)

An American Editor blog by Rich Adin, <http://americaneditor.wordpress.com/>

"Get Paid to Write! Getting Started as a Freelance Writer" by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter, [http://writerruth.com/GetPaidtoWriteGettingStartedasaFreelanceWriter\\_RuthE.Thaler-Carter.htm](http://writerruth.com/GetPaidtoWriteGettingStartedasaFreelanceWriter_RuthE.Thaler-Carter.htm)

"Freelancing 101: Launching Your Editorial Business" by Ruth E. Thaler-Carter, [www.the-efa.org/res/booklets.php](http://www.the-efa.org/res/booklets.php)

*Writer's Market*, *Writer's Digest Books*, [www.writersmarket.com](http://www.writersmarket.com)

*The Writer*, *Writer's Digest*, and *Poets & Writers* magazines



# From Starving Artist to Well-Paid Writer:

BY ANDREA J. WENGER | *Senior Member*

Transitioning from  
Fiction to Technical  
Communication

ARE YOU A CREATIVE WRITER starving for your art? You don't have to be. In technical communication you can make a good living as a writer, improve your skills, and still find time to write fiction.

I work full-time as a technical communicator and write women's fiction in my spare time. With the help of five writers with experience in both fields, I've compiled information and advice for fiction authors exploring technical communication.

## Common Skill Sets

Many of the skills of fiction authors will serve them well in a career as a technical writer.

## Creativity

In a guest post on Tom Johnson's *I'd Rather Be Writing* blog, Lopa Mishra explains the role of creativity in technical communication: "You need to take care of every little detail that helps make the user's life easy. You have to think of new ways to convey information if the traditional approaches do not work for the user. On many occasions, you have to make sense out of chaos, bring order to haphazard chunks of information, and organize random facts" (<http://idratherbewriting.com/2012/03/14/guest-post-is-technical-writing-creative/>).

My process for writing fiction isn't all that different. I have plot points and bits of dialogue floating in my head, and I compile that scattered information into a draft of a scene. Then, I go back and layer in the emotional elements that turn the raw material into a story that will engage the reader.

## Facility with language

Most people who pursue writing as a profession love words and enjoy putting them together into sentences. Their innate sense of flow moves the piece forward in a way that feels logical to the reader, and if the structure is off, they can sense it.

Knowledge of grammar and style is critical to the success of both fiction and technical writers. In fiction, a good editor can often fix problems for you. In technical communication, though, employers may rely on peer editing, so you're expected to be as knowledgeable about grammar and style as an editor.

## Discipline

Both fiction and technical writers must respect deadlines. A novel is a product, as is software or hardware, and the writer's job is to help ensure that the product releases on time.

Also, fiction authors know that constructive feedback is critical to the success of a writing project. So do technical communicators. While tech writers are less emotionally attached to their words than creative writers are, both groups must develop a thick skin when it comes to editing.

## Panelists

### Betty Bolte

**Fiction:** novel-length romantic, historical, and paranormal fiction

**Tech comm:** technical editing, user manuals, award justifications

**Website:** [www.bettybolte.com](http://www.bettybolte.com)

### Brianne M. Kohl

**Fiction:** literary short stories and flash fiction

**Tech comm:** project management and technical writing

**Website:** [www.briannekohl.com](http://www.briannekohl.com)

### Joan Leacott

**Fiction:** contemporary small-town romance

**Tech comm:** programming, user manuals

**Website:** <http://joanleacott.wordpress.com/books/>

### Bart Leahy

**Fiction:** science fiction short stories

**Tech comm:** chief of communications in aerospace industry, technical proposal writing, engineering documents, marketing materials, fact sheets

**Website:** <http://bartacus.blogspot.com/> and <http://heroictechwriting.wordpress.com/>

### Julio Vazquez

**Fiction:** crime fiction, detective novels, general fiction

**Tech comm:** information architecture, user manuals for hardware and software, member of the initial DITA task force

**Website:** [www.lulu.com/spotlight/julio#](http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/julio#/)!

## Intellectual curiosity

The ability to conduct research and ensure accuracy is important in both fields. Fiction writers ask *what if?*, exploring various plot options. They research historical events, unique settings, and unusual careers to create more interesting stories. Historical fiction author Betty Bolte makes sure the words she uses existed at the time when the story is set.

Technical writers want to understand how the products they document work. Science fiction writer Bart Leahy was once spotted at his desk reading a textbook on object-oriented programming because he wanted to know what the programmers around him were doing. As a technical writer, you're not expected to be an expert on the subject matter you write about, but you need a basic understanding.

## Focus on Reader Experience

Fiction authors need an empathetic imagination, both to get into the viewpoint of their characters and to create a satisfying emotional experience for the reader.

User experience is also an important part of tech comm. “Putting yourself in the user’s seat,” says contemporary romance writer Joan Leacott, “is the best way to write documentation, especially for users new to a complex application.”

## Differences in Craft

Of course, many differences exist between the craft of fiction writing and that of technical writing.

## Artistry vs. Precision

In fiction, I often use figurative language like metaphors. Instead of stating the meaning directly, I may imply it and let readers draw their own conclusion. Maybe the words are intentionally ambiguous or contain a double entendre. These devices are part of the artistry of fiction—and they’re disastrous in technical communication.

Technical writers say what they mean. They say it bluntly, in few words.

“Fiction writing wants to look for the right word or phrase to evoke an emotion,” says crime fiction writer Julio Vazquez. In technical communication, the reader wants you to get to the point. Even though technical writing needs to provide enough context to orient readers to the task, too much will overwhelm them and keep them from reading on. “Too many words in technical writing tend to keep the reader from achieving their goal.”

While the tech writer’s job isn’t to entertain readers, I do try to keep mine awake.

## Solo vs. Team Effort

Fiction writers work independently. They may have editors or publishers or agents to please, but the writer tells the story and holds the copyright.

Tech writers don’t own their content. It’s the company’s story to tell. The technical writer may have significant control over the *how*, but not the *what*. They rely on subject matter experts (SMEs) to provide them with source material and to approve the documentation.

## Skill Growth Opportunities in Tech Comm

Technical communication offers many opportunities to learn skills that aren’t normally available to fiction writers.

## Tool Skills

- ▶ **Word processing:** Most technical communication jobs require the mastery of desktop publishing tools like Adobe FrameMaker or MadCap Flare. Leacott says, “As a technical writer, I created complex documents, so Word holds no mystery for me. It’s easy for me to create manuscripts that are easy to format for self-publishing.”

- ▶ **Photo editing:** In my technical communication work, I regularly edit product photos and catalog cover images in Photoshop. So when I took an online course on creating book covers, I was already comfortable with the software and had a basic understanding of good design.
- ▶ **Coding:** Many technical communication jobs require a basic familiarity with HTML or XML coding. If you want to design your own website or produce e-books as an indie author, this knowledge is handy.

Working with different software packages teaches you perseverance and problem-solving skills. More important than any specific tools knowledge you gain is the experience of learning a wide variety of tools—and realizing that new technology is nothing to fear.

## Soft Skills

The focus on user experience in tech comm can improve your fiction, Vazquez says. “I tend to think more of the audience now than when I first started writing fiction.”

Leahy agrees. “In my nonfiction work, I usually have to hit a specific page or word count, make the engineers happy, occasionally make the lawyers happy, and still make the readers ‘happy’ to the extent that they understand what I’m saying.” He applies this mindset to his fiction as well. “Technical writing has definitely helped me in the quality-control portion of my prose.”

“Knowing how to break down a complex issue,” says Leacott, “to decide what’s important to tell, is invaluable in writing a synopsis.” The same holds true of outlines: “The ability to break something down into a cause-and-effect sequence is invaluable in producing a solid outline before I begin writing the story.”

## Career and Professional Development in Tech Comm

Technical writing offers some advantages that fiction writing doesn’t. For most authors, as Vazquez notes, there’s “definitely more money in technical writing.” The broader variety of skills required gives writers the opportunity to choose from among a number of specializations and rise to expert status. Bolte notes that it’s easier to receive recognition as a professional writer and editor in a technical arena than as a fiction author.

Literary fiction author Brianne Kohl says of technical communication, “The corporate structure allows upward mobility and usually has the requirements for that stated somewhere.... Succeeding as a fiction writer seems a lot more ambiguous to me.”

Working in a business environment teaches tech writers about the costs of producing documentation. I’m sometimes called on to estimate the number of hours required to develop a documentation set. I also get quotes from our translation service and print vendors. These experiences have taught me that words cost money, so writing concisely is a valuable skill.



## Impact of Tech Writing on Fiction Writing

### Negatives

“Technical writing has downsides for the person who wishes to write creatively off duty,” Leahy says. “You’re using the same brain cells to craft words for both types of work.... If I’ve been burning through a proposal all day, my brain wants a break from writing.”

“The simplicity of sentence structure required for user documentation really gets in the way of narrative,” Leacott says. “I have to concentrate to go beyond the obvious ‘It’s a chilly spring day and there’s a party happening.’”

“As a technical writer,” says Kohl, “you must be clear and concise, following a very specific style guide. It is easy to pare down when writing topic based tasks but your head can get stuck in that mode.”

## Even technical documents require a certain narrative flow that makes sense.

### Positives

Leahy notes that technical writing offers benefits for science fiction authors. “I get to learn how actual science and technology work, as opposed to the processes I was imagining or that you might find on TV or even in textbooks. First-hand knowledge makes things more real and technically correct.”

“Technical writing forces me to give complete information using as few words as possible,” Kohl says. “So, in editing fiction, that is actually a really good skill to have.”

Says Bolte, “The greater focus on audience analysis and readability leads to a more focused approach to addressing the expectations of the reader.... Knowing who will read the fiction, by age group, demographic, etc., guides me to write so that ‘reader’ will enjoy the story.”

## Potential Pitfalls of Using Creativity in Tech Comm

Sometimes, creative word choices must be avoided in tech comm. In situations where safety is concerned, wording must conform to corporate standards. Also, many employers maintain a list of deprecated terms (that is, words writers aren’t supposed to use) for consistency’s sake. If you use “variable frequency” in one place and “adjustable frequency” in another, users may not realize that those terms mean the same thing.

In fiction writing, word choice is often tied to atmospherics. Not so in technical writing. Says Bolte, “I have to be very careful not to choose just any word to substitute for another one in order to not change the intended meaning of the sentence.”

Kohl says, “As a technical writer, I follow a very specific style guide. Corporate decides so much of that and reviewers and approvers wouldn’t tolerate a lot of creativity. The target reader wouldn’t like it, either. They want to know what they need to know as quickly as possible.”

## Advantages of Creative Writing Skills in Tech Comm

Under certain circumstances, Bolte says, a more entertaining style could better engage the user. This might be true when writing proposals, for example, or a script for a video.

While the tech writer’s job isn’t to entertain readers, I do try to keep mine awake. Fiction writing has taught me the importance of sound. Readers hear the words in their heads as they read, so using more impactful words helps to avoid lulling them into a stupor.

Leahy says it’s worthwhile to ask whether you’re telling a good “story” in your business prose. “Even technical documents require a certain narrative flow that makes sense.”

In addition, Vazquez points out that analogies are useful in technical writing, helping readers understand new technology by comparing it with something familiar.

## Education and Experience

If you want a career in technical communication, you’ll almost certainly need a bachelor’s degree. Most jobs also require training in the field. If you don’t have experience or a degree in technical communication, formal education can help fill the gap. You can pursue a masters degree or enroll in a certificate program (like the one available from the continuing studies department at Duke University).

Kohl offers several tips for novice technical writers:

- ▶ Take advantage of the educational opportunities offered by STC.
- ▶ Volunteer for an open-source software manufacturer to build your skills and portfolio.
- ▶ Seek out as much experience as you can find and add it to your résumé, even if you weren’t paid.
- ▶ Work with a recruiter or a tech writing staffing firm.
- ▶ Visit [odesk.com](http://odesk.com) to find freelance opportunities.
- ▶ Network with other freelancers for support and information, especially on the business end (like taxes).

## Conclusion

Technical communication is a good career choice for someone seeking to write professionally. It pays well, and the skills you learn can have a positive effect on your fiction writing.

Kohl says, “I’ve heard technical writing described as the ‘dark side’ of writing. Or, selling out. But, artistic integrity doesn’t pay my mortgage and my day job gives me the freedom I need to pursue fiction writing as a second job. So, I’m thankful for it.” ■

ANDREA J. WENGER is a technical writer at Schneider Electric in Raleigh, NC. She serves on the STC Nominating Committee and as past president of the Carolina Chapter. President of the Women’s Fiction Chapter of the Romance Writers of America, she contributed to the anthology *Heart of the Matter by the Heart of Carolina Romance Writers*.

# Investing Time to Save Time

By GEOFF HART | *Fellow*



shutterstock.com/VoodooDot

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, you often delay finding ways to accomplish a task better or faster. This can range from procrastination over simple things like creating a new AutoCorrect entry for Microsoft Word, to more complex procrastination such as not holding a meeting to revise your team's workflow or your document templates. The best way to get past that procrastination is to convince yourself you'll save so much time that you'll never miss the time you invested. Randall Munroe of XKCD provided a helpful graphic that lets you figure this out by consulting a simple table of values (<http://xkcd.com/1205/>). Unfortunately, his calculations only work for a payback period of five years, and this may be long enough to demotivate you.

Inspired by XKCD, I've created a more flexible approach for calculating the payback time so you can define your own criteria for whether it's worth your time to streamline a task or process. First, I'll present this verbally for those who aren't comfortable with algebra. Then I'll present it mathematically for readers who prefer an equation.

## Verbal Approach

First off, figure out an appropriate frequency. Let's start with weeks:

1. Determine how often you do the task in a typical week (its frequency).
2. Figure out how much time you save each time you perform the task using the more efficient method.
3. Multiply the time saving by the frequency to determine the total time you will save each week.
4. Estimate how long it will take you to solve the problem.
5. Divide this development time by the total time you will save each week to determine the number of weeks before you recover that initial investment.

Other frequencies may work better. For example, if you copy certain files manually to a Dropbox account every day, choose "days" for your time units; for infrequent tasks such as monthly reports, months may be more appropriate. So long as you use the same time units in all calculations, there won't be a problem.

If you're willing to wait that long to repay your investment, stop procrastinating and solve the problem. After you recover your investment, you'll save this much time each time you do the task. If you're not willing, don't give up just yet. Someone in your team or one of the subject-matter experts you work with may be able to solve such problems quickly, and may enjoy the break from their usual work.

## The time you save can be enormous.

### Mathematical Approach

As in the verbal approach, choose time units appropriate for how often you perform the task. We'll use the following variables in our equation:

The best way to get past that procrastination is to convince yourself you'll save so much time that you'll never miss the time you invested.

F = how often you do the task (its frequency) each week

S = time saving each time you do the task (in minutes)

T = time saved =  $F \times S$  (in minutes)

I = time invested to solve the problem (in minutes)

ROI = your return on investment (how soon you recover your invested time)

Using these simple criteria, perform the following calculation:

$ROI = I / T$  (in weeks)

After you recover your investment, you'll save S minutes each time you do the task.

### Stop Procrastinating, Start Saving!

The only difficult part is estimating how long you'll take to solve the problem. Sometimes this is simple: once you know the text you want to avoid typing, it takes less than a minute to create a Word AutoCorrect to do the typing for you. Sometimes it's more complex: it may only take 10 minutes to revise a document template, but you may have to add 10 minutes for each of your team members to review the template, 60 minutes to reconcile differences of opinion, and 30 minutes to incorporate the review comments in the template. Sometimes all you can do is come up with an educated guess. For example, changing a process or a policy can take many hours: you'll need a brainstorming meeting to come up with possible solutions, time to test each solution to confirm it works, another meeting to discuss the results of these tests, yet another meeting to get management approval, and a final meeting to confirm the results were as good as expected.

Don't let that stop you from trying. The only way to develop good estimating skills is to spend time designing and implementing solutions. The time you save can be enormous. For example, mastering just three keystrokes for more efficient movement within a file saves me up to 15 minutes of editing time daily ([www.geoff-hart.com/articles/2011/moving.html](http://www.geoff-hart.com/articles/2011/moving.html)). My payback time was less than a day, and that investment freed up 15 minutes each day to ponder and implement other efficiency tricks. Or to stop work early for the day. ■

GEOFF HART ([geoff@geoff-hart.com](mailto:geoff@geoff-hart.com)) has worked with many difficult and challenging individuals during a diverse career as a technical communicator and sometimes-manager. None of this prepared him for having to manage himself as a freelancer.



# Conference Registration Opens 1 December

CONFERENCE REGISTRATION FOR the 2014 Technical Communication Summit, taking place 18–21 May 2014 in Phoenix, AZ, opens 1 December. Visit the Summit website, <http://summit.stc.org>, for full details on the Summit as they are available.

STC is again offering the Really Early Bird registration rate through 31 December. Be one of the first to register and pay only \$835 for access to all the great education, vendors, and networking that the Summit offers. That's a savings of \$140 over the Early Bird rate of \$975 and \$400 less than the nonmember rate! After 31 December the price goes up, so act fast. *New this year: members at the Gold Value Package level get the Really Early Bird Rate no matter when they register! See [www.stc.org/membership](http://www.stc.org/membership) for full details on everything Gold Value Package membership provides.*

All conference events take place this year in the Phoenix Convention Center, just across the street from the Hyatt Regency Phoenix! Hotel registration also opens on 1 December, with a special STC rate of \$164 (plus 12.27% tax)—that's lower than the 2013 Summit. See this page for more information about the conference hotel.

Make your plans now for the 2014 Summit and save. Register fast and register first to be sure you get the best rate possible. **i**



# Details on the 2014 Summit Official Hotel

THE 2014 SUMMIT takes place 18–21 May 2014 in Phoenix, AZ. This year the official conference hotel is the Hyatt Regency Phoenix, with all events taking place just across the street at the Phoenix Convention Center.

STC has negotiated a special conference room rate of \$164 for a single or double (plus 12.27% tax)—that's less than for last year's Summit hotel. You must register through the STC Summit website, <http://summit.stc.org>, to get that rate.

According to the hotel's website, the Hyatt Regency Phoenix is at the center of the city and "an urban oasis of comfort and calm." *Intercom* will be publishing a series of articles by members of the Phoenix Chapter on things to do near the hotel, in Phoenix, and in Arizona. See the first one on page 24.

Dining and entertainment options at the hotel include Networks Bar and Grill, Compass Arizona Grill, Terrace Cafe, Einstein Bros. Cafe, and Compass Lounge.

## Why stay at the official conference hotel?

Staying at the official conference hotel benefits both you and STC. Here are a few reasons to stay in the Hyatt Regency Phoenix for the Summit.

- ▶ **Convenience.** All education sessions are held directly across

the street, just steps from the front door of the hotel. No cab rides, no rental cars—just a short walk.

- ▶ **Internet.** Get complimentary in-room Internet access when you register with the STC block.
  - ▶ **Networking.** There are so many informal networking opportunities beyond the official conference hours. Impromptu dinner parties start in the hotel lobby, hotel restaurants are full of Summit attendees, and the hotel bar is packed well into the night with all sorts of conversations, debate, and networking. You'll bump into technical communicators from around the world in all parts of the hotel.
  - ▶ **Help keep Summit prices down.** Meeting our contracted room block enables STC to continue to negotiate affordable room rates for future meetings. Based on the number of rooms blocked, hotels will provide complimentary meeting space, which enables STC to offer discounted registration fees for a longer period of time.
  - ▶ **Assistance from STC.** And finally, by staying at the official conference hotel, you'll have STC's assistance if there is a problem with your hotel reservation.
- See you at the Hyatt Regency Phoenix! **i**



Hyatt Regency Phoenix

# Welcome to Phoenix!

BY KIM ROSENLOF | *Phoenix Chapter President*

THE STC PHOENIX Chapter is pleased to host the 2014 Summit on 18–21 May. As the host chapter, we're excited to have the opportunity to show off our city, and perhaps our uniquely beautiful state, to technical communicators from around the world.

While we won't make you wear cowboy hats or force you to two-step, we will do our best to showcase western hospitality, culture, and cuisine. Perhaps you'll gain the courage to try that green stuff next to the salsa (if it's thick it's guacamole; if it's thin it's green chile salsa—usually both are mild!). We'll help you explore downtown Phoenix with its museums, clubs, and nightlife. Or maybe you'll take a day trip to see the red rocks of Sedona, the majestic Grand Canyon, or historic Spanish missions in Tucson and Southern Arizona.

During the next few months, we'll be using this space in *Intercom* to introduce you to metropolitan Phoenix and the state of Arizona. Our goal is to help making the decision to come to Phoenix an easy one. Since Summit 2014 will be held in downtown Phoenix, we'll provide information on restaurants, happy hours, museums, and other attractions near the Summit hotel. We'll also provide information on transportation around Phoenix to get you from airports to downtown. And in case you might want to burn a few vacation days, we'll introduce you to natural and manmade wonders around our state that can serve as wonderful day trips.

The STC Phoenix Chapter hopes you will accept our hospitality and spend a little time with us in May 2014. We look forward to seeing you at the Summit! ■

# What to See and Do While in Phoenix

BY MIACHELLE DEPIANO | *Senior Member*

PHOENIX OFFERS A wide variety of activities and adventures, many that are truly unique. Phoenix is also a great central location to exploring the state if you decide to stay a little longer, whether you go to Tucson and explore historic gems such as the San Xavier Mission, go to Sedona, or go to the Grand Canyon to view nature's majesty at its finest.

For those looking for things to do specific to Phoenix, here is a list of places to explore.

**Desert Botanical Garden.** Think the desert is a boring, dry place with little flora and fauna to soothe the nature lover's soul? Think again. The Desert Botanical Garden, located at 1201 N. Galvin Parkway, Phoenix, is a truly beautiful experience nature

lovers won't want to miss. Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, the garden contains a variety of exhibits representational of the different desert ecosystems found in Arizona. In addition to the garden and research efforts, there are always artist exhibits and performances presented at the Desert Botanical Gardens. And if that wasn't enticing enough, during the time of the STC conference it is likely saguaro cacti will be in bloom, a truly beautiful sight at the Desert Botanical Garden. For more information, visit [www.dbg.org](http://www.dbg.org).

**Phoenix Art Museum.** For those who may not be used to the warmer temperatures, the Phoenix Art Museum, located at 1625 N. Central Avenue, Phoenix, offers an inspirational respite from the heat. The largest museum in the Southwest, the PAM presents a variety of artwork, with a vast art collection including fashion, modern art, contemporary art, photography, Latin American art, and more. The PAM has a close relationship with the Center for Creative Photography and visitors benefit richly from the access to some of the most historic photography collections and exhibits in our nation's history. For more information on current exhibits and operating hours, visit [www.phxart.org](http://www.phxart.org).

**Taliesin West.** No trip to the Phoenix area would be complete without a respectful nod to famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright and Taliesin West. Located in Scottsdale, Taliesin West is preserved the same way Wright created it, down to the furniture he designed and built for the property, as was his habit. Taliesin West wasn't just a home he designed, it was and still is home to the Frank Lloyd Wright School of Architec-



See unique seasonal sculptural exhibits at the Desert Botanical Garden. Sculpture: Phillip Haas.

ture. Numerous tours are available throughout the day, and there is even a sunset tour available for photographers to take advantage of. For full details, visit [www.franklloydwright.org/about/TaliesinWestTours.html](http://www.franklloydwright.org/about/TaliesinWestTours.html).

#### **For the Old West experience.**

What trip to Phoenix would be complete without a bit of the Old West experience? Two locations are sure to give you a glimpse of Phoenix's colorful past. Goldfield Ghost Town (<http://goldfieldghosttown.com>), located at 4650 N. Mammoth Mine Road, Apache Junction, sits at the base of the beautiful and legendary Superstition Mountain. Goldfield offers a mine tour, a ride on Arizona's only narrow gauge train, gun fights, a reptile exhibit, gold panning, and more. Stop in the saloon and enjoy a fresh, cold sarsaparilla and enjoy the boots and hats of past visitors hanging from the ceiling.

For an adventure with a bit more action, Rawhide Western town in the Gila River Indian Community is the home of the Arizona Roughriders stunt group, and offers stagecoach rides, gold panning, and burro rides. Feel really daring? See how long you can ride the mechanical bull. And when you've built up your appetite, Rawhide Steakhouse provides fantastic food and live music to dance to. For details see [www.rawhide.com](http://www.rawhide.com).

**Rustler's Rooste.** Phoenix has many highly acclaimed restaurants and you won't have a hard time finding your favorite style of food. Perched in the foothills of South Mountain at 8383 South 48th Street, Phoenix, Rustler's Rooste offers a menu of cowboy-style food, live country music seven days a week, and dancing. For a truly unique Arizona experience, Rustler's Rooste is one of the few places where you can bravely try an appetizer of rattlesnake (it tastes like chicken). Find out more at [www.rustlersrooste.com](http://www.rustlersrooste.com).

**Tempe Town Lake.** Tempe Town Lake, located by downtown Tempe/Mill Avenue, offers a variety of things to do and see. A man-made reservoir of the Salt River, it's a favorite locale for walking and running, and is flanked by the Tempe Center for the Arts, another

fantastic venue for performances and exhibits. In the evening, the Light Rail bridge is beautifully lit and is a favorite spot for photographers. Tempe Town Lake offers kayak and hydrobike rentals. Crews can be seen rowing in their morning workouts. Visit <http://boats4rent.com/tempe-town-lake> for more information on boat rentals. Parking is available for free by the Tempe Center for the Arts, but if you choose to explore the Downtown Tempe/Mill Avenue district, parking elsewhere is not free.

**Mystery Castle.** Mystery Castle, located at South Mountain, is one of the Phoenix area's most eclectic tourist sites. Built by Boyce Gully, Mystery Castle is a native stone castle encompassing 18 rooms, 13 fireplaces, and numerous nooks and crannies. The story of Gully's illness and desire to build his daughter a castle will keep you intrigued as you wander through this unique home. See [www.mymysterycastle.com](http://www.mymysterycastle.com) for more.

**Tovrea Castle.** Tovrea Castle, recently renovated, is one of Phoenix's most well-known and curious city landmarks. Sitting atop a knoll and surrounded by an amazing saguaro garden, it resembles a wedding cake. Built in 1930 by Alessio Carraro and his son Leo, what began as a vision of a hotel in the center of a resort destination and housing subdivision is now a 501(c)(3) public landmark. Tours are available year round but are limited to groups of 14. For more information, visit [www.tovreacastle.com](http://www.tovreacastle.com).

**Historic Downtown Chandler.** The downtown Chandler district is a great place for dining and entertainment. There are a variety of restaurants offering menus sure to please the most discerning palates. Here you can find sushi, Mexican, European, and Irish cuisine, as well as gift shops and boutiques. And quite frequently there are events being held in the Downtown Chandler area, offering something for everyone who visits. Looking for art? The Vision Gallery, Xico Art, and the Chandler Center for the Arts offer a variety of artistic experiences. See <http://downtownchandler.org>.



*Enjoy a lesson in driving high-speed go karts.*

**Bondurant School of High Performance Driving.** The Bondurant School is one of those true Phoenix gemstones. Bob Bondurant, famed race car driver, opened the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in 1968 following an impressive career in racing. The school offers a variety of classes for all levels of experience. It also offers nightly go-karting classes, and we're not talking the lawn mower engine go-karts of your youth. See [www.bondurant.com](http://www.bondurant.com) for more.

**Hike in Phoenix.** Hiking is a favorite pastime of both residents and visitors. Depending on your skill level, these three hikes should whet your appetite for exploring nature and getting a different view of the Phoenix area. The Wind Cave at Utey Pass, located by Apache Junction, offers beginner to intermediate hikers a breathtaking view of the East Valley of Phoenix. Identified by a large stripe of quartz across the top, the Wind Cave will challenge you but not wear you out. For those who want more of a challenge, Piestewa Peak, located in the Phoenix Mountain Preserve and named for Lori Piestewa, the first Native American to die in combat, is an intermediate to advanced hike. It provides a very rocky, stair stepper-type climb. Piestewa Peak is second to Camelback Mountain in height. Due to the heat typically experienced in May, please bring plenty of water. For a great article on the top 10 hikes in Phoenix, visit [www.arizonafoothills.com/features/features/5253-10-best-hiking-spots-in-phoenix.html](http://www.arizonafoothills.com/features/features/5253-10-best-hiking-spots-in-phoenix.html). **I**



# Community Achievement Award Applications due 21 January

BY TRICIA SPAYER | *Chair of the Community Achievement Award Committee*

WHAT IS A Community Achievement Award (CAA)?

This award honors STC communities that have achieved success. There are three levels of recognition: Merit, Excellence, and Distinction. An award of Merit means that a community is a) running properly, and b) providing programs and services that further the mission of the Society. Excellence and Distinction awards are given to communities that go above and beyond the minimum requirements.

The CAAs will be presented at the 2014 STC Summit in Phoenix. Two of the outstanding CAA honorees will also be awarded “Most Improved Community” and “Community of the Year.”

## Who should apply for the award?

All STC communities (chapters, SIGs, and student chapters) should apply for this award! An award of Merit means that your community is doing what it should be doing. Every community should be able to earn at least a Merit award.

Earning a CAA means that you have a successful community. You can post the award banner on your website, brochure, or other communications. It gives your community **credibility**. People are more likely to join your community if you have a good track record.

Earning Excellence or Distinction is a huge deal, giving communities bragging rights. All community members present at the Honors Banquet at the Summit are invited on stage to receive the award and all its accolades.

## Tips for applying

- ▶ **Plan ahead:** While it's too late to begin planning for the 2013 year, use the award criteria as a success plan to run your community in 2014. Assign a community member to keep track of accomplishments, and have council/board members report to that individual when they have accomplished something. An immediate past president/manager is often a good choice for keeping track of accomplishments.
- ▶ **Use innovative activities:** If your community is doing activities you believe should count on your application, send a description of those items to the committee before the deadline, and before you submit your application—and allow the committee enough time to review them.
- ▶ **Review Excellence criteria:** Most successful communities are doing these activities. Some criteria are no-brainers—take a look! Use substitutions if necessary.
- ▶ **Review Distinction criteria:** Although there are only a few “Required Distinction” criteria, communities achieving Distinction typically will have numerous activities completed in the “Optional” categories. Communities of Distinction are voted in by the committee as truly outstanding from other communities.

## What's new this year?

- ▶ New committee email: [stc.caa@gmail.com](mailto:stc.caa@gmail.com).
- ▶ The application has been simplified for your convenience and now contains six sections

instead of seven—Fundamental and Merit have been combined.

- ▶ Criteria in the application have been aligned with Community Success Plan
- ▶ Some criteria have been moved to another level (from Merit to Excellence, for example). Contact the committee for details.

## Get more information

The 2013 Community Achievement Award Guidelines and applications are available on the STC website at [www.stc.org/membership/recognition/awards](http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/awards).

## Questions?

Contact the Community Achievement Awards committee (Tricia Spayer, chair) at [stc.caa@gmail.com](mailto:stc.caa@gmail.com). 



# Go for the Gold!

## Renew Your STC Membership with the Gold Value Package

RENEW YOUR STC MEMBERSHIP for 2014 today with the Gold Value Package to take advantage of quick and built-in access to extra education and networking. The Gold Value Package is new for 2014 and combines the best of the previous Gold Education and SIG Value membership levels.

Receive free and discounted education, increased networking opportunities, a locked-in low rate for the 2014 Summit, and more. Pay once


and have access to the resources you need when you need them. The Gold Value Package includes a wealth of benefits for the busy professional, all in one bundle.

### Exclusive to the Gold Value Package:

- ▶ Five free live Web seminars
- ▶ 50% off one online course
- ▶ Really Early Bird pricing for the Summit regardless of your registration date

## STC, Social Media, and You


STAY CONNECTED WITH STC wherever you go! STC's Notebook blog (<http://notebook.stc.org>) includes multiple posts during the week on STC events, communities, and more. There are also regular guest bloggers on multiple tech comm topics. On Twitter, follow STC @ *stc\_org* and follow the #*stcorg* hashtag; get information about the Summit from @*STC\_Summit* or #*stc14*. Are you on LinkedIn? Search for the Society for Technical Communication group, or visit [www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2926](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2926). And now we're on Facebook, too, at [www.facebook.com/STC.org](http://www.facebook.com/STC.org).

STC has started putting more videos up on YouTube as well; find us at [www.youtube.com/Society4TechComm](http://www.youtube.com/Society4TechComm). And sign up for our RSS feeds, too—click the RSS icon on the STC home page, STC's Notebook, and both *Intercom* online (<http://intercom.stc.org>) and *Technical Communication* online (<http://techcomm.stc.org>). And of course, visit MySTC at [www.stc.org/mystc](http://www.stc.org/mystc) and get involved in STC's own social network, just for technical communicators. It's all part of staying connected and getting more out of your STC membership. 



shutterstock.com/cosma

- ▶ All of the Classic membership benefits
- ▶ Membership in any or all of our special interest groups (SIGs)
- ▶ Membership in one chapter of your choice

When renewing your membership, simply click on the edit option next to your current membership type. This will allow you to select the Gold Value Package and enjoy the benefits. And you receive all of the above, more than a \$700 value, for only \$200 more than a Classic membership. Go for the gold and renew with the Gold Value Package today! 

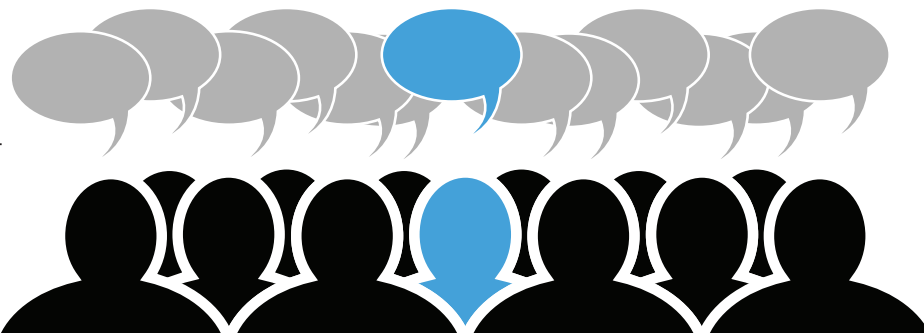
### STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

INTERCOM (ISSN 0164-6206) is published ten times a year by the Society for Technical Communication, a nonprofit educational organization, as a service to the membership. Members may pay \$60 for a print subscription to INTERCOM.

The mailing address of both the publication and the publisher is 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax VA 22031-1803. The publisher is the Society for Technical Communication, and the editor is Elizabeth Pohland. The owner of the publication is the Society for Technical Communication.

There were 550 printed copies of INTERCOM published in September 2013. The average for the preceding 12 months was 520. The paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions for the September 2013 issue were 510; the average for the preceding 12 months was 470. Total distribution for September 2013 was 530. The average for the preceding 12 months was 495. Twenty free copies of INTERCOM were distributed by mail in September 2013 and the average number of free copies distributed during the preceding 12 months was 25. Twenty copies of INTERCOM were not distributed in September 2013, and the average number of copies not distributed during the preceding 12 months was 25. The percent paid/requested circulation in September 2013 was 96 percent; for the preceding 12 months, percent paid/requested circulation was 95 percent.

shutterstock.com/Mastepanov Pavel



# Standards 101



shutterstock.com/Vanatchanan

**BY ANNETTE REILLY** | *Fellow*

IF YOU ASK a group of technical communicators what standards they use, some might name a favorite style guide or dictionary, XHTML, Wikipedia, a version of a common graphics tool or help topic software, or perhaps a metadata standard like DITA. All of these take us toward the goal of a standard, which is to set minimum agreed requirements for a process or product. But the hypertext and metadata standards, valuable as they are to single sourcing, leave out important parts of what technical communicators aim to do. Going beyond website tagging and metadata

are standards that establish consistent processes to produce technical information of consistent quality in its content, structure, and format.

Standards have several characteristics that make them valuable for technical communicators: they are developed by open groups, reflect consensus from a balanced group of balloters, are suitable for international use, and are maintained by a recognized, impartial standards development organization, such as ISO, IEEE, OASIS, ANSI and NISO (US), or W3C. Standards are not proprietary, vendor-specific, or tool-bound. We agree to use standards to support interoperability, produce

consistent products, form a basis for process stabilization or improvement, and even give two parties in a contract a basis for agreement on how work will be done.

If you are looking for the basic standards for technical communication, your choice depends on your role: are you a designer, developer, manager, outsourcer, contractor, tester, editor? In the past ten years, STC members contributed to a suite of international standards aimed at these roles. The “2651N” series of standards is designed to be used individually or as a set.

- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 26511:2011, Systems and software engineering—Requirements for managers of user documentation
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 26512:2011, Systems and software engineering—Requirements for acquirers and suppliers of user documentation
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 26513:2009, Systems and software engineering—Requirements for testers and assessors of user documentation.
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 26514:2008, Systems and software engineering—User documentation requirements for documentation designers and developers
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 26515:2011, Systems and software engineering—Developing user documentation in an agile environment
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 15289:2011, Systems and software engineering—Content of life cycle information items (documentation)
- ▶ ISO/IEC/IEEE 24765:2010, Systems and software engineering—Vocabulary: freely available at [www.computer.org/sevocab](http://www.computer.org/sevocab)

Most of these standards are aimed at team members involved with software user documentation. STC members concentrated on user assistance standardization (as well as in DITA), because the majority of



members work in this area, and there is a body of practical experience and research findings as the basis for standardization. For example, the 26515 standard is invaluable if you find yourself supporting an agile development project. However, these standards generally apply beyond software user documentation to any kind of instructions or help, and to managing, outsourcing, or testing documentation for any project. The ISO/IEC/IEEE 15289 standard has broader applicability: it outlines the content of virtually every kind of documentation you would need to produce on a systems or services project: policies, plans, procedures, reports, requests, specifications and descriptions. For more information, see "Audience-Oriented Standards for Software Documentation from ISO," *Intercom*, March 2011.

STC is not a standards development organization because the infrastructure needed to govern, manage, develop, ballot, maintain, and market international standards projects is considerable. Standards organizations, even not-for-profit or governmental organizations, need to cover their costs, so most standards have a price. You can buy standards from ISO ([www.iso.org](http://www.iso.org)), IEC ([www.webstore.iec.ch](http://www.webstore.iec.ch)), or IEEE (<http://standards.ieee.org>). Or look for your own national standards body, such as ANSI in the United States, which resells the international standards.

Standards may seem pricey, but compare the cost if your organization had to make up that much authoritative guidance on its own and then convince the rest of the world to agree with your way. In most cases, the price of a standard is less than

a day's pay for a technical communicator and comparable to a college textbook. Efforts are underway to produce a reasonably priced CD collection of the basic 2651N standards, which would be particularly useful for students.

Looking ahead, several standards projects will affect STC members. Besides DITA work, new ISO/IEC/IEEE standards are being developed for content management and for websites that provide technical information. These two should be ready for publication by late 2014. **f**

ANNETTE REILLY ([annette.reilly@computer.org](mailto:annette.reilly@computer.org)), *PhD*, is the Convenor of ISO/IEC JTC 1/SC7/WG2, systems, software, and services documentation, and the editor or co-editor of four ISO standards. She works as a proposal developer for Lockheed Martin.

As a member,  
you get the tools  
you need to  
be successful.

- Education and Training
- Chapters and Special Interest Groups
- Job Bank
- Annual Conference
- Award-Winning Publications
- Body of Knowledge
- Affinity Program
- Networking
- Discounts and Special Offers



Society for  
Technical  
Communication



[www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)

# A Brief History of the Real World in TC 101



shutterstock.com/Monkey Business Images

BY THOMAS BARKER | Senior Member

A TIME-HONORED METHOD of teaching technical communication requires that instructors base their lessons and documents on the working world of technical communicators or workplace communicators. Because of the link of technical writing and “real-world” workplace writing in general, the urge to make assignments applicable to students’ future careers has resulted in a history of real-world examples, assignments, exercises, and evaluations. This edition of *The Academic Conversation* focuses on what academics have said over the

years about the relationship of their classrooms to the real world of work, and, specifically, what techniques and strategies they use to create assignments that mirror workplace practice. As we shall see, the growth of the very concept of real-world assignments parallels the opening of the pedagogy of technical communication to the now practically border-free, digitally saturated classroom.

## The Upside of Real-World Assignments

First, what does the technical communication classroom gain by focusing on real-world assignments?

Beyond the obvious answer to that question—experience outside the classroom—students gain the chance to structure their work around workplaces structures, namely, projects. Projects provide a kind of integrated learning experience, giving students skills in management, research, design, usability testing, and writing. What’s more, projects involve clients and client values, and real reader information needs. They expose students to the standards and practices of the professional workplace. Finally, they bring opportunities to network with professionals and possibly develop mentoring relationships.

## The Downside of Real-World Assignments

On the downside, real-world assignments are messier than those in conventional teaching. They bring fewer lectures and greater student responsibility for learning. Put simply, the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered brought anxiety. “But I have to *teach* the active voice,” a bothered instructor once told me. Well, yes, but why do your students need to know it? Their readers use the passive voice *all the time*. And further, instructors had to wait, white-knuckled, for students to ask them how to organize a report. It was a troublesome time for academics, this “workshop” style of teaching. And, in addition, students worked more in teams and their final products showed great variability in genre, form, readers, format, and other characteristics. This brought challenges to grading and assessment. Under the old system



This column focuses on a broad range of practical academic issues from teaching and training to professional concerns, research, and technologies of interest to teachers, students, and researchers. Please send comments and suggestions to [ttbarker@ualberta.ca](mailto:ttbarker@ualberta.ca) or the column blog at <http://theacademicconversation.ning.com/>.

instructors knew what to expect and what counted as quality. Now the old standards dissolved in the wash of relevancy and accountability.

## Projects for “Real-World” Clients

The most common of community and workplace assignments are those that require “real-world” clients. Such assignments ask students to work in groups or find readers for their reports, instructions, and proposals. They wrote manuals and instructions for their work or the classroom. Looking to the university context, instructors set students on projects such as writing proposals for the college or university, or brochures for student groups and clubs. They composed reports of usability testing of personal or university websites. A favorite assignment of this type is the résumé: the quintessential “real-world” assignment. Résumés were both personal but impersonal in that they could follow a small handful of acceptable formats. Most students really cared about their résumés, because they cared about jobs. And more, résumés were *designed*, with a variety of fonts and formats to engage the human-resources persons who read them. The Internet contains no end of examples and good advice on résumés. Of all the real-world assignments in technical communication, the résumé reigns because it has all the hooks a teacher could want for engaging students in the first week of first-year technical communication.

Real-world assignments like these have built-in benefits for engaged learning. They decentralize the instructor and the content by shifting authority for learning to readers and users. Thus they legitimize the classroom in ways that theory, history, lectures, tests, and readings cannot. Deborah Hinderer, for example, explored how usability testing challenged students to find suitable test participants, a process that enriched their learning of the testing process.

But these kinds of assignments had more than an effect on student learning. The often represented an expanding of the classroom, a breaking down of walls that increased the legitimacy of technical communication courses. Instructors began forming partnerships with business and industry that brought new teaching resources into their grasp. Sharing classrooms across national boundaries opened their students up to unfamiliar cultures, but it also opened up instructors to opportunities for intercultural exchange of teaching techniques. This kind of “network building” helped instructors and programs by providing opportunities for advisory boards and expanded teacher research opportunities. In the meantime, the urge to evoke the context of communication got help from business communication classes where cases and simulations represented the backbone of managerial and communication instruction.

## Cases as Real-World Assignments

Case studies grew in business, management, public relations, and marketing units in colleges and universities. In these environments, instructors routinely reshaped their workplace experience into cases that challenged students to build new businesses, explore new markets, and apply textbook principles of accounting, economics, and finance. Business law, also, provided an incentive for case-based learning and teaching.

Case studies in technical communication gained popularity in teaching during the 1990s, a time when technical communication made the shift from content-based teaching to workshops and a growing sense of the larger community surrounding the academy. Indeed, proponents of the case method, such as Jone Rymer, touted the method because it provided a “slice of business life” inside the classroom. Rymer’s book

*Cases for Technical and Professional Writing* embodies the approach.

Cases, as a teaching tool, require a number of features that make writing interesting: rich, suggestive narratives give students the chance to apply their imaginations to problems and solutions, role assignments provide a humanistic focus on tasks, and dates and specifics bring a sense of real life to learning.

More recently, cases and simulations as a teaching strategy have gained popularity in teaching ethics. Scandals such the Enron scandal and the Challenger disaster give communication teachers rich examples for interrogation and development of critical thinking. Centered in the academic area of business communication, case-based learning and teaching allows students to experience the ethical issues in communication. Business ethics, in particular, needs a focus on making ethical decisions, which cases provide due to their open-ended nature. Cases allow for a set-up that focuses on specific questions about legal, risk, and personal issues that often crop up in situations calling for ethical communication. They allow for discussion and they stimulate critical thinking in students. Also, since law is often “case-based” instructors find a ready supply of legal cases to use in the communication classroom. Along with real-world assignments, cases set the stage for instructors to embrace the next wave of real-world focus in technical communication: service-learning.

## Service-Learning as Real-World Assignments

Service-learning as a teaching technique has come of age in technical communication. Sending students to do volunteer work in not-for-profit sector for community partners represents, in some ways, the epitome of the impulse toward engaged, real-world learning. But service-learning brings a rich history and intellectual context to the equation. Service-



learning—defined by Wikipedia as, “a method of teaching that combines classroom instruction with meaningful community service. This form of learning emphasizes critical thinking and personal reflection while encouraging a heightened sense of community, civic engagement, and personal responsibility.” The pioneering work in this area by Melody Bowden and Blake Scott in *Service-Learning in Technical and Professional Communication* defined projects and processes for technical communication instructors but also reviewed the rich history of service-learning as a way to build awareness of the very humanistic issues that lie at the heart of our discipline but have been so much ignored by administrators over the years.

In my WRS 305 course this semester at the University of Alberta, students use the principles of technical communication on risk communication projects for non-profit organizations in Edmonton. Currently, for example, we’re working with a homeless shelter, a service center for at-risk youth, two seniors centers, and a service organization for the disabled. One project will focus on hazards surrounding a set of stairs in an older building that are out of code for new buildings, but still present a challenge for elderly citizens. Students on this project will explore the various fall, slip, and confined-space hazards associated with this stairwell, as well as interview clients to assess risk factors. They will use design principles for complex problem solving to develop communication messages and materials (posters) to help clients make safe risk decisions in using the facility.

In this class, students benefit from a network of community partners managed by the University’s Community Service Learning program. Technical communication and other instructors can find their



own clients, but at the University of Alberta they can benefit from the CSL program’s networking, Web portal, and other services like police checks for students working with vulnerable populations. Most universities in North America have similar programs that work across departments and disciplines and can help in all phases of service-learning course development, from course design to evaluation. In this way, those wishing to take this step towards real-world assignments can get plenty of help.

### Alive and Well

John Freeman, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* on 21 August 2009, argued that the new era of electric communication has robbed us of the contexts of our

lives. We need to turn back to the real world and slow down in order to build meaningful and rewarding relationships. Others, such as Ann Kroeker, ([notsofast.org](http://notsofast.org)) point out how technology can both enrich our lives and enhance it at the same time. Arguments about technology aside, this brief history has shown that the real world—the context of community as business, industry, and service organizations—is alive and well in technical communication 101. Forging partnerships with communities has brought, in the main, an era of increased accountability for teaching, enriched learning experiences for students, and enhanced community partnerships for both individual instructors and programs. **f**

#### FURTHER READING

BOWDEN, MELODY, and J. BLAKE SCOTT, *Service Learning in Technical and Professional Communication*, Alan & Bacon Series in Technical Communication, 2002.

EServer TC Library, sv. “service learning,” <http://tc.eserver.org/dir/Service-Learning>.

# Ethics and Résumé Design

BY DEREK G. ROSS | Member

TWITTER, THEY SAY, could be the next big thing in résumés. Doug Meigs, for CNN, writes that “Twesumes,” 140-character job ads, are “being touted as the best way for media-savvy types to snag a dream job.” Even if you are not tweeting your accomplishments, your online presence could be what gets you in the door for your next job. According to numerous online news sources, Web presences and personal profiles are now more highly valued in the job search process than traditional paper-based or electronic résumés. Vivian Giang, for example, with the *Business Insider*, writes, “many employers think that who you are online is more revealing of your character than a résumé.”

Rachel Silverman and Lauren Weber, writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, note that recruiters are turning to social networking because they are “fed up with traditional recruiting sites and floods of irrelevant résumés.” Modern job hunters often send out numerous generic résumés without modifying any aspect for the job to



This column features ethics scenarios and issues that may affect technical communicators in the many aspects of their jobs. If you have a possible solution to a scenario, your own case, or feedback in general, please contact Derek G. Ross at [dgr0003@auburn.edu](mailto:dgr0003@auburn.edu).

which they are applying. Their mindset, we might infer, is that there are lots of people applying for jobs, and the more résumés floating around, the higher their chances of getting hired. On the human resources side of the job search process, however, generic résumés mean that hiring committees are tasked with sorting through literally hundreds

of résumés (in some cases) that offer little or no job-specific information. Meanwhile, as Jen Doll of the *Atlantic Wire* writes, an online presence offers specific and unique insights into an applicant's life, which should provide some insight into the sort of work for which the applicant is qualified—a potential news anchor's tweets should differ, for example, from a potential comedian's. Of course, as Meigs notes in his examination of twesumes, “social media [...] has [also] made it much easier for unqualified wannabes to jam up the job search.”

## The Problem with Social Networking

Despite potential benefits, social networking could be the reason why you *don't* get a job. Constructing a branded social identity takes a lot of work, points out Doll, and your personal life may be something you don't want prospective employers to see (Joyce). So how much is too much? Most of us have long given up on expectations of any real sort of privacy in an online environment, even with all of the filters that many networking sites, such as Facebook, provide. In her article on the Twitter résumé, for example, Katherine Bindley shares the story of one woman whose tweets landed her a job. The successful job hunter, however, also noted that she found out that the company that hired her had spent time investigating her online interactions to see how she matched up with the company's needs before she even knew about the position.

This sort of rapid, unconsented information exchange is powerful, and perhaps just a bit scary. As Bindley notes, “As effective as social media can be for landing a job, it can also ruin your chances just as easily.” If Bindley's case tells us anything, it is that opportunities may be passing by because of an off-handed, poorly #hashtagged,

ill-timed joke. Or that picture of you waving a beer bottle in the air. But traditional résumés have their own problems as well, which takes us back to the beginning of our discussion. If social networking opens the door to information overload, then traditional résumés have to be designed to give your potential employer what they need, and that means clean, professional, well-edited design and content filled with job-specific information.

## Designing the Traditional Résumé

Not all job hunters know how to construct a professional résumé. I've worked with a local community writing center and career center to help coach résumé writing and design, taught numerous technical writing classes where I've worked with hundreds of students on their job application materials, and am conducting research on résumé design. If I've learned anything, it is that people don't always understand the value of a résumé at all, much less a well-designed one. Some that do, however, turn to outside sources for help. Local résumé help in many cities abounds, and online résumé writing centers are prolific, to say the least. At the time of this writing, a Google search for “résumé writing services” offered 43,200,000 results (11,700,000 if you include the quotation marks). A Bing search with the same terms offered 44,700,000 (2,650,000 with quotes). That's a lot of potential options for outsourcing your résumé design. But is having someone else put together your job application package ethical? Does outsourcing that all-important experiential snapshot create an ethical conundrum?

In some cases, we may have to answer “yes.” Résumé design is a writing skill, akin, perhaps, to the ability to craft an acceptable essay, a readable white paper, or a fundable

grant. It's an ethics conundrum because life circumstances tell us that having someone write an essay for class for you is cheating, and presenting someone else's work as your own—in almost any field—is plagiarism. But life experiences also tell us that paying someone (or a group of someones) to write workplace documents is not only acceptable, it's expected. After all, many of us are professional writers—this is what we do! The résumé is confusing and conflicted. You can't hire a company to write one for you if you're in a class that uses résumé writing as an assignment. You might, depending on your teacher, be allowed to use a template. But outside of the classroom we can hire professionals to take care of this résumé business for us, and then present that writing as our own—all in a perfectly legal, much duplicated transaction.

So what's the problem? The following brief scenario following Merle and his job-search process helps us get to the ethical issue at hand.

### A Brief Ethics Scenario

Merle has been looking for work for over six months. He is fairly typical of the modern, tech-savvy American job-hunter—he posts regularly to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and keeps his friends and followers filled in on everything from his ongoing job search to his favorite television shows. He doesn't really filter his online postings, and doesn't spell-check his posts, but, then again, neither do most of his friends. Professionally, Merle has a few years' worth of experience in office-management and low-level administration, and knows that if he can just get in the door for an interview somewhere—anywhere!—he'll likely get the job. No matter where he applies,

however, he's never called in for an interview. He's beginning to think that his résumé is what is holding him back. So he sends what he has to a résumé-design professional who organizes all of his information, edits his information down to a single page, removes all of his spelling and grammatical errors, and sends him back a gorgeous, scannable, professional-quality résumé. All of the information on the document is his, but Merle knows that he's not capable of that level of design and editing himself.

Merle submits his résumé to a large, local health care company looking for an administrative coordinator, and not six weeks later gets an interview. His résumé is one of the best they receive, and the company is excited to meet him. The company does not, it is worth noting, examine Merle's Web persona. They need someone who can communicate with clients via telephone and in person, maintain records and office files, compile reports, compose and maintain office correspondence, and schedule appointments, and Merle's résumé shows that he not only has experience, but an eye for detail. In his interview, Merle is asked about his experiences and work history, and, sure enough, he gets the job.

Four months go by. Merle completes all of his required training, and should be well on his way to settled in. Unfortunately, however, he's having trouble at the office. Most of his work involves writing (more than he expected), with some small amounts of programmatic design. Even though he has experience in office communication, he just can't seem to catch all of the small details! This new, larger company seems more focused on professionalism, and more detail oriented, than the small business where he previously worked. Eventually, The Boss has a pointed conversation

with Merle about his inability to design and write at a professional level. "When we hired you," says The Boss, "we thought we were hiring someone who had an eye for detail. Did you lie in your interview or on your résumé?"

How is Merle to answer? Superficially, no, he didn't lie. He never said, "I am a professional designer," though, as many of us might, he offered all of the appropriate assurances during the interview when asked if he could handle workplace-level writing. After all, he *did* have prior office experience. His résumé, however, could be seen as a physical act of deception. Did Merle need to disclose that he'd had a professional design his résumé for him? Is he in the right if he answers that, no, he never lied?

What about the online component we discussed earlier? Could an investigation of Merle's online presence have kept him from getting hired in the first place? If his résumé looked good, and he interviewed well, would that have been an ethically viable approach to making sure that the company hired the right person? In the here-and-now, should you be allowed to have a different online persona than your professional persona? Should your online presence count for more than your physical presence in an interview? More than a traditional résumé?

As always, all *Intercom* ethics cases—even the short one presented in this essay—are fictitious and are intended to provide opportunities to highlight and discuss ethical issues in technical communication. Any resemblance to real people or organizations is coincidental. But what do you think? Please send your responses to [derek.ross@auburn.edu](mailto:derek.ross@auburn.edu). Responses will be printed in an upcoming issue of *Intercom* as space permits. ■

#### FURTHER READING

- BINDLEY, KATHERINE. 2013. Twitter résumé: How your social media profiles could land (or cost) you your next job. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/21/twitter-résumé\\_n\\_2732885.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/02/21/twitter-résumé_n_2732885.html).
- DOLL, JEN. 2013. Will the "Twitter résumé" ruin Twitter? *The Atlantic Wire*. Retrieved from [www.theatlanticwire.com/business/2013/04/twitter-résumé/64082/](http://www.theatlanticwire.com/business/2013/04/twitter-résumé/64082/).
- GIANG, VIVIAN. 2013. Now there's a way to apply for jobs directly through Twitter. *Business Insider, Careers*. Retrieved from [www.businessinsider.com/job-seekers-can-use-twitter-résumés-2013-4](http://www.businessinsider.com/job-seekers-can-use-twitter-résumés-2013-4).
- JOYCE, SUSAN P. 2012. Social proof: Twitter and your résumé. *Job Search News*. Retrieved from [www.job-hunt.org/job-search-news/2012/05/14/social-proof-twitter-résumé/](http://www.job-hunt.org/job-search-news/2012/05/14/social-proof-twitter-résumé/).
- MEIGS, DOUG. 2013. Can you land a job with 140 characters? *CNN*. Retrieved from <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/22/business/twitter-résumé-cv-job>.
- SILVERMAN, RACHEL EMMA, AND LAUREN WEBER. 2013. The new résumé: It's 140 characters. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from [http://online.wsj.com/article\\_email/SB10001424127887323820304578412741852687994-LMyQjAxMTAzMDAwOTEwNDkyWj.html](http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB10001424127887323820304578412741852687994-LMyQjAxMTAzMDAwOTEwNDkyWj.html).



# Mark Your Calendar

Organization events across the globe

1  
3 6

2  
4 5

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to [intercom@stc.org](mailto:intercom@stc.org).

## 1 27–30 Jan

The Annual Reliability and Maintainability Symposium (RAMS) 2014 will be held at The Broadmoor in Colorado Springs, CO. This year's theme is "Engineering Customer Trust." For more information, contact: RAMS  
+1 (603) 863-2832  
[www.rams.org](http://www.rams.org)

## 2 13–17 Feb

The 2013 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting will take place at the Hyatt Regency and Fairmont hotels in Chicago, IL, from 13–17 February. For more information, please contact: AAAS  
+1 (202) 326-6450  
[meetings@aaas.org](mailto:meetings@aaas.org)  
<http://meetings.aaas.org>

## 3 25–30 Mar

The American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) will hold the IA Summit in San Diego, CA. For more information, contact: ASIS&T  
[asis@asis.org](mailto:asis@asis.org)  
<http://2014.iasummit.org/>

## 4 13–16 Apr

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) will hold its Performance Improvement Conference in Indianapolis, IN. For more information, contact: ISPI  
+1 (301) 587-8570  
[conference@ispi.org](mailto:conference@ispi.org)  
[www.ispi.org/AC2014](http://www.ispi.org/AC2014)

## 5 30 Apr–3 May

The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference in Charleston, SC. For more information, contact: ASI  
[conference@asindexing.org](mailto:conference@asindexing.org)  
[www.asindexing.org/](http://www.asindexing.org/)

## 6 18–21 May

The Society for Technical Communication hosts the Technical Communication Summit at the Hyatt Regency Phoenix in Phoenix, AZ. For more information, contact: STC  
+1 (703) 522-4114  
<http://summit.stc.org>

\* STC-related event



777

Jackpot!

BAR



# Betting on Technical Documentation at a Gaming Company

shutterstock.com/Sonulaster

BY SAM LEOPOLD | Member

IT IS TIME to relax. You anticipate the excitement and fun of winning, and fantasize about hitting that big jackpot! You slide into the chair of your favorite theme and are ready to play. When you make that bet, pull that arm, or push that button, did you ever consider the technical documentation that a slot machine requires? Let me introduce you to technical communication at WMS Gaming, a leading innovator in the casino industry.

Slot machines are no longer just the mechanical models where the player pulls the arm and all the action is isolated to the cabinet. Today, the latest computer, networking, display, and sound technology are finely tuned to provide a player with an interactive and immersive experience. Slot machines are endowed with cutting-edge hardware and software, from large banks of collaborative gaming, surround sound, and overhead displays, to systems that are networked across hundreds of casinos.

To provide the player with the ultimate experience, all gaming equipment must pass stringent regulatory testing before installation, configuration, and maintenance. The WMS Technical Documentation Department has seven communicators that are dedicated to providing the precise instructions required to place the games in the field, ready to play.

For more than 70 years, the creative teams at WMS Gaming (formerly Williams) have developed everything from pinball to arcade video games, and now sensory immersion networked gaming machines. The talented subject matter experts that work with the technical communicators include a variety of engineers, artists, mathematicians, and even musicians. The mix of disciplines, ingenuity, and imagination focused on producing entertaining games makes for a very dynamic, fun, and stimulating environment, and results in the development of some of the world's most compelling experiences.

Each year, hundreds of technical documents are released, including service manuals, technical bulletins, customer service notifications, exploded views, and labels. The audience for the documentation ranges from field technicians to gaming commissioners, and all require specific and comprehensive details to certify a game meets player expectations and local regulations (gaming is one of the most regulated industries in the world). The technical communicators' experience is critical to document a game correctly, as they see the slot as a sophisticated machine, not just a fun game. At WMS, the technical communicators

come from a variety of industries, including telecommunications, transportation, financial consulting, software development, publishing, and advertising. Their diverse backgrounds contribute to inventive methods of disseminating the information needed by the end users.

To maintain the communicators' versatility and to keep product knowledge sharp over the lifecycle of a gaming product, WMS communicators are assigned projects as simple as basic hardware installations to complicated software configuration manuals. The majority of assignments are game theme documents that provide all the instructions needed for the lifecycle of a gaming product. Recent themes have included blockbuster movies, legendary comic book characters, and some of the world's most popular board games. At the onset of a theme project, communicators will often volunteer for a theme they expect to enjoy. Work is fun when you get to play with your favorite characters!

Once the creation process for a game is kicked off, technical communicators document all the theme information the end users will need to know, including the gameplay overview, hardware installation, and software configuration. Over a period of a few months, the communicators work with studio staff, engineers, and technical trainers to harvest the vital information.

A studio is the primary team that produces a game and conceptualizes the look, feel, and sound of a theme. With a studio, communicators will document the expected gameplay and understand the overall scope of the project.

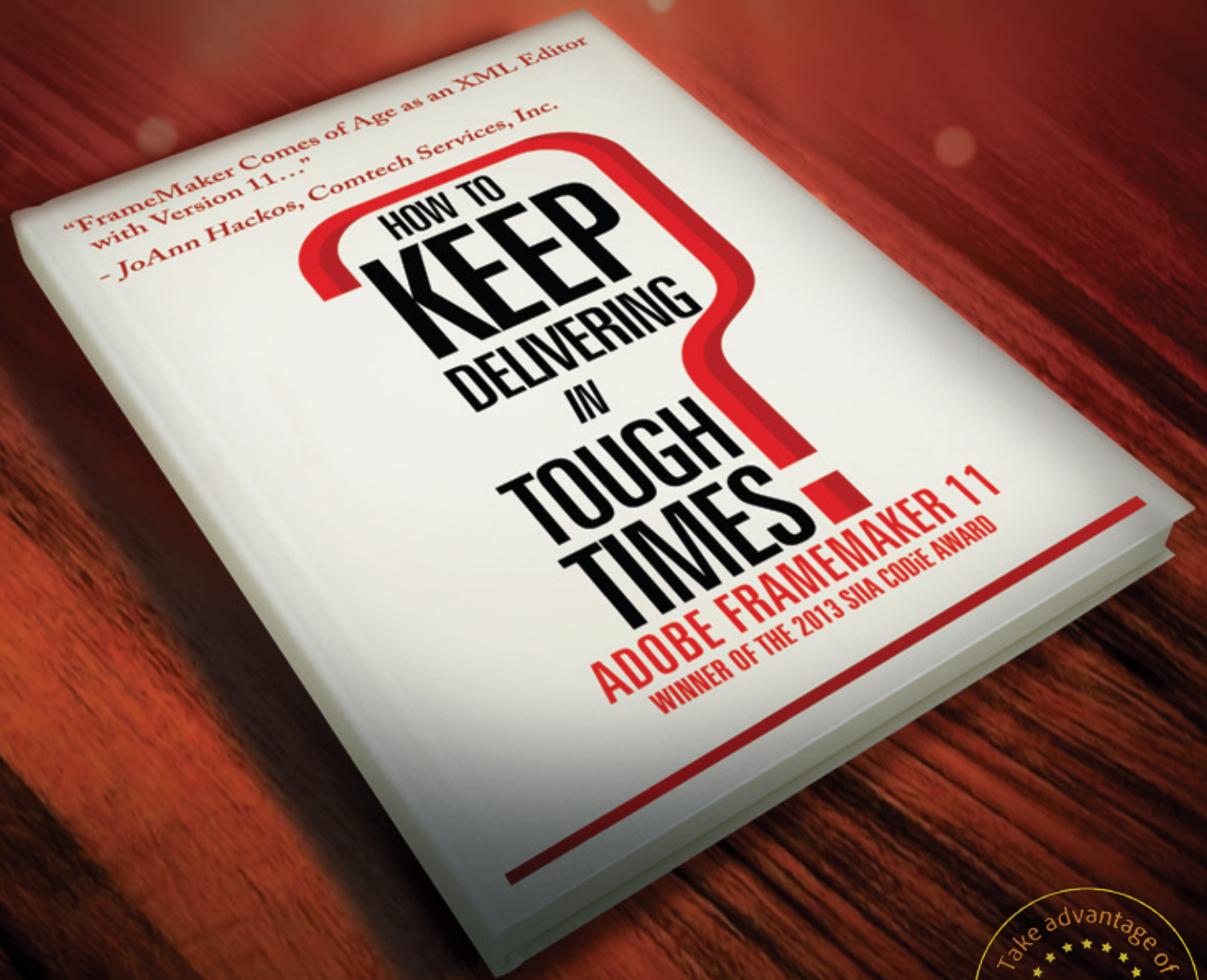
What the studio producers, artists, programmers, and mathematicians have created must be brought to life three-dimensionally by mechanical and electrical engineers. Communicators will work with the engineers to generate the assembly instructions for the individual mechanical and electrical components that must be placed together at the casino.

The documentation is enhanced by working with the technical trainers who have years of knowledge with installing games in the casinos. The trainers confirm the communicators have covered all the details that field technicians will need to install a theme quickly, keeping in mind the installation is often happening at 3:00 AM, while a casino slot manager expectantly awaits to offer the games to the players.

Although the process of developing documentation for a slot machine is rigorous and expectations are high, do communicators get to pull that arm, press those buttons, relax, and have a little fun? You bet! ■



Adobe



## Author XML/DITA content faster and smarter Upgrade to Adobe® FrameMaker® 11



Try now

Find out what customers and industry experts have to say about Adobe FrameMaker 11. [Read reviews](#)



Adobe, the Adobe logo, and FrameMaker are either registered trademarks or trademarks of Adobe Systems Incorporated in the United States and/or other countries. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.

© 2013 Adobe Systems Incorporated. All rights reserved.