

President's Corner



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President's Award Winners 2000–2001

by Linda Gallagher

I am very happy to announce the winners of this year's President's Award for Service and Achievement. While we have many wonderful volunteers, each of the following award winners has contributed uniquely to the chapter during the last few years:

- ▶ Carol Claton
- ▶ Alana Cote
- ▶ Anne Halsey
- ▶ Lynnette Reveling
- ▶ Kim Weathersby

Carol Claton

For the last two years, Carol has served as our Membership Manager. In previous years, she served on the Nominating Committee, presented at an STC regional conference, and was a member of many other committees. As membership manager, she's initiated many actions that have helped our chapter to grow: following up with nonmembers who attend meetings, contacting all new members by snail mail and e-mail when they join, and starting the Meeting Buddy program, where we match up a new member with a veteran member at meetings. Great work, Carol!

Alana Cote

Alana has been managing our e-mail lists since January 1999. We have a total of three lists that she manages: the *techcomm-discuss* list that any member can join,

the Council list for chapter officers and committee managers, and the Web team list. She's in the background maintaining chapter aliases, subscribing and unsubscribing members, monitoring bounced messages, resolving list problems, and generally making sure that we can communicate with each other. Without her efforts, our communication would be severely hampered — a real problem for a group of communicators. She toils in obscurity to help us share information, ideas, and job leads. Alana, keep up the good work!

Anne Halsey

Last summer, Anne began managing the Web team that maintains our chapter Web site. Before that, Anne reorganized the professional resources section of the site, a valuable tool for all of us. In addition, Anne has judged in the chapter publications competition for six years. What I have appreciated most during the last year is Anne's responsiveness. Whenever anyone sends her information for the site, she acknowledges receipt immediately and posts the information or passes it on to the proper team member promptly. Her humorous reminders periodically cajole team members to update their pages. I've enjoyed working with Anne and know that I can count on her to update the site in a timely fashion. Thanks, Anne!

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Technicalities

EDITORIAL

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The editor can be reached during the day at 303.689.0022, via fax at 303.689.0055, and by e-mail at news@stcrmc.org. Please submit electronic files in ASCII text format and include a telephone number where you can be reached. To fax articles or artwork, please call the editor. The deadline for article submission is one month prior to issue release (first of the month, every other month).

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Seminars	Lynnette Reveling
Web site	Anne Halsey
Jobs/Professionalism	David Garrett
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Online	Kathy Ramsey, Marella Colyvas

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS

Online	Kathy Ramsey, Marella Colyvas
Independent Contractors	Jerry Day
FrameMaker	Lolita Mannik
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Western Slope	Sandra Lieb
	Helen Salter

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303.458.0401 ext. 302
Send e-mail to: jobs@stcrmc.org
Job listings are posted on the
Chapter Web site.

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From the Editor

Technical Writers Can Make a Difference

by Stephen Wertzbaugher

Despite the fun I've had over the past few years as a technical writer, there are a few things that still irritate me about our profession. My biggest complaint, of course, is that many of the industries in which we work still do not seem to take technical writers or technical documentation seriously.

The running joke of our profession is that "no one ever reads the documentation," and it is partly true. But why should our end users read what we write when many of our own employers still consider technical documentation an afterthought, something to be thrown into the package on its way out the door? And what can we as technical communicators do to change this attitude?

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. If there were, I'd market it, charge my fellow writers a fortune to explain it, and retire a wealthy and still relatively young man. There are solutions, though, if we know where to look. One can be found in the way companies develop, produce, and sell their product. In the software industry, one such process I discovered recently during a three-day

Here it was, the technical communicator's utopia: the solution that would give technical communicators a voice in the development process and assure that we would finally be taken seriously.

training seminar is called the Microsoft Solutions Framework, or MSF.

Simply stated, the goal of the Microsoft Solutions Framework is to help companies deliver the right product at the right time to the right people. A pretty ambitious plan, and one that any company should jump at if they want to succeed in today's business climate!

What really caught my eye about MSF during my training was its team model, which consists of six peer members from Program Management, Development, Testing, Logistics Management, Product Management, and User Education. Wait a minute — User Education? What was User Education? User Education, I found, includes user training and — wait for it — user documentation. This was exciting! I learned that the User Education role was to act as team advocate for the end user (the person who actually uses the software); act as end user advocate for the team; participate in defining user requirements; participate in designing features; design and develop user support systems; and drive the usability process.

All sorts of verbs began dancing through my mind: advocate, define, design, develop, drive. I could hardly contain myself. Then I learned that under the MSF model, User Education participated throughout the product cycle, from envisioning through product delivery. Here it was, the technical communicator's utopia: the solution that would give technical communicators a voice in the development process.

Will implementing the MSF framework be easy? No. But I have made it one of my goals to push the idea of MSF throughout our company in an effort not only to improve the quality of our software product but to improve the quality of our user documentation — and get us technical writers taken more seriously.

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The Value of Conferences

by Linda Gallagher

I recently attended the WinWriters Conference in Santa Clara, CA. This was the first time I'd been able to attend WinWriters, though I've wanted to go for years. I thought the conference was great and I learned a lot. But someone else who attended said she was disappointed by the conference, and I wondered why. She said that for the price, she didn't think it was better than an STC Annual Conference, which costs much less.

That got me thinking about conferences and what makes them worthwhile. I've been to four STC Annual Conferences, one Help University Conference, one WinWriters Conference, and several smaller conferences and local workshops over the last few years. I find it a little difficult to calculate the value of a conference, and don't know of any formula for doing so.

Still, I've been thinking about what makes a conference valuable to me, and here are my thoughts. I hope they might be useful as you consider attending conferences:

- ▶ **Learn something new** — Of course, I want to learn some new things, or at least glean some new ideas. The ideas need not be profound; I just want see some new way of dealing with issues that I wrestle with, or learn about some new technology or product that I might use in my work.

For example, at WinWriters I attended two sessions that discussed usability studies conducted on help systems. The results of those studies confirmed some things that I'd always thought about help systems (for example, users don't understand secondary windows) and gave me some things to think about as I design online help (for example, secondary windows are useful when a step in a procedure is a link to another procedure that displays in a secondary window and leaves the first procedure visible).

- ▶ **Meet different people** — I also like to meet different people, and hope to make contacts that lead to projects. Finding new projects is not a primary goal for me at a conference, but making contacts that could lead to projects is always great. I met a lot of people at this conference, some of whom I'd met before, some I'd heard of but never met, and some new to me.

I introduced myself to anyone from Colorado (our name tags listed where we live). It was great — I met a number of chapter members and several Coloradoans who were not STC members. I also met people from other parts of the country at lunch and in sessions. I think I met more people at this conference than at any other I've attended.

- ▶ **Find new resources** — Another goal for me at conferences is to learn about new resources. I never know what a client might ask me to do, so I like to know where to find information. The handouts from the conference list many resources including books, Web sites, and the presenters themselves. These are valuable tools — if I can just remember to look them up once in a while.
- ▶ **Ask advice** — I might have a specific problem that I'd like resolve or a product I want to learn more about. We all wrestle with issues about writing, formatting, and using tools, and at a conference you have the chance to meet speakers, attend sessions, and visit with vendors who may be able to shed some light. I try to avail myself of those opportunities at conferences.
- ▶ **Get motivated** — Sometimes we need to decide on a new direction or focus for our work. At the beginning of the year, I try to write down a few goals for things I want to learn or a direction I want to take. In the throes of daily routine it is often difficult to focus on these goals. At the WinWriters conference, I found confirmation and the impetus to move in a specific direction. I'm not yet certain exactly what I'll do, but a couple of sessions confirmed for me that the ideas noodling around in my head were worth pursuing. I'm not planning a drastic career change, just a change in some tools and maybe the focus of my work. Maybe this is why I found the conference to be so valuable.

This is my list of conference benefits; I'm sure you have these and other goals in mind when you attend. For me, the hardest thing after a conference is finding the time to review the handouts and resources I've learned about. I hope I can do better this time, because I know I have a wealth of information that I lugged back in my suitcase! **STC**



Usability Testing Workshop Scheduled for May 23

Can procedural documents be improved with usability testing? When is usability testing a good choice? What kind of testing is most efficient and beneficial? Come to the Usability Testing Workshop on May 23 and find out. This seminar will be presented by Professor James Stratman, Director of the Technical Communication Program at the University of Colorado at Denver. For details and registration information, visit our Web site, www.stc.org. **STC**



Chapter News

Fraternal Twins in May, Legal Craziiness in June

by Gail S. Bernstein

There's lots in store for our last two chapter meetings of the year! In May, we'll learn about instructional design. In June, we'll celebrate the Summer Solstice (ice cream!) as we learn about cyberlaw.

May

Thursday, May 17

Instructional Design

Technical Communication and Instructional Design: It's All in the Family, So What's the Difference? is the title of our May meeting. Kim Lambdin sees technical communication and instructional design

as fraternal twins, and she'll compare and contrast definitions and competencies for the two fields. We'll learn how each profession addresses audience analysis, document design and layout, behavioral objectives and determining purpose, instructional and writing strategies, measuring results, delivery media, and usability. Kim's style is Socratic, so come prepared to ask and answer lots of questions!

Kim Lambdin has over sixteen years of experience in education and technical communications and a Master's Degree in Instructional Technologies. Currently she is Operational Support Systems Education Project Manager at Rhythms NetConnections, and also teaches part-time in the Technical Communications Department at Metropolitan State College of Denver. Kim is a volunteer judge for the STC software and hardware documentation competition. She edits the newsletter *The Golden Grrrowl*, which won an Achievement Award in the STC RMC 2000 Competition.

The Consulting and Independent Contractors SIG will open the May meeting with a discussion of the question, "Do You Need a Web Site?" You don't have to be a SIG member to participate: anyone who is interested is welcome to attend.

June

Thursday, June 21

The Craziiness of Cyberlaw

Fasten your seat belt for the June meeting as we take a trip through the craziness of cyberlaw. Joy Yunker will explain how lack of national boundaries makes cyberlaw so different from other laws governing media. We'll learn why ISPs are viewed as newsstands or bookstores, and are therefore not held responsible for the contents of the sites they host. Joy will also address copyright laws and the implications of the U.S. becoming a member of the Berne Convention.

Joy Yunker is Professor and Chair of the Technical Communications Department at Metropolitan State College of Denver and teaches a Communications Law course focused on cyberlaw. Joy has fourteen years of full-time industry experience as a technical communicator and is a past president of the STC RMC. Many of her former students are active members of the STC RMC. Thank you, Joy!

The June meeting will begin with Jerry Day's presentation on Dreamweaver and Flash extensions for the Online SIG. Jerry is a Knowledge Solutions Engineer for Agilent Technologies and an experienced technical journalist and trainer.

And, because this chapter meeting falls on the first day of summer, there will be a special celebration. Instead of our regular munchies, we'll provide an ice cream (and sorbet, for the lactose-intolerant) sundae bar! **RMC**

STC RMC Calendar

See the RMC Web site for more information about any of these activities.

May 2001



Thursday, 5/3 —
STC RMC Council meeting



Sunday - Wednesday, 5/13 - 5/16 —
STC International Conference, Chicago, IL



Thursday, 5/17 —
*Chapter meeting: Instructional Design
CIC SIG meeting*



Wednesday, 5/23 —
Usability testing workshop

June 2001



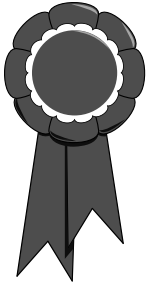
Friday, 6/1 —
Deadline for submitting articles for July issue of Technicalities



Thursday, 6/7 —
STC RMC Council meeting



Thursday, 6/21 —
*Chapter meeting: Cyberlaw
Online SIG meeting*



STC RMC Honors Chapter Competition Winners

by Stephen Wertzbaugher

Awards, recognition, applause. These and other words describe the pinnacle of every technical communicator's dreams. Yet, too many of our peers go unnoticed in the day-to-day bustle of the technical documentation world. Hence, STC and its chapters recognize their members through annual competitions, proving year-by-year that planning, hard work, and talent are the cornerstones of success.

It is with great pleasure and pride, then, that we present the winners of the STC RMC 2000 - 2001 Competition Best of Show, Distinguished, and Excellence awards. For a complete list of the winners from this year's competition, please browse to http://www.stcsrc.org/documents/STC_RMC_2000_Competition_Awards.htm.

Best of Show

Online

Learning Colorado Trails

Lynne Monson, Martha Nelson, Bruce Soule, Brandon Berman
Online Tutorials/Training

Publications

UCAR at 40

Annual Reports
Lucy Warner, Bob Henson, Nita Razo, Zhenya Gallon

Distinguished Awards

Colorado Trails Help

Online help
Lynne Monson, Elizabeth Gehres, Gianna DiFranco

CRRT Online: Putting It All Together

Online Reference Material
Larry J. Prado, Ginny McDonald, Kevin Highland

BestPractices Web Site

Online User Support Tools
Lynn Kaemmerer, Kristi Theis, Kelly Bailey, Julie Kennedy

Learning Colorado Trails

Online Tutorials/Training
Lynne Monson, Martha Nelson, Bruce Soule, Brandon Berman

JeppChart Training

Online Tutorials/Training
Dawn Stevens, Aviation Courseware Group

UCAR at 40

Annual Reports
Lucy Warner, Bob Henson, Nita Razo, Zhenya Gallon

Steadman-Hawkins Sports Medicine Foundation 1999 Annual Report

Annual Reports
John McMurtry, Brogren Kelly Associates, Tim Kridle, Richard Needham

Designing Documents for the Web Training Manual

Training Materials
Michele O'Dell, Zoa Techmedia, Inc.

Excellence Awards

ICSS Customer Care Guide

Online books
Edward Ryan, Lena Karabushin, Carole Hildebrand

Photographic Tools for a Digital World

Online demonstrations
Stacy K. Leeds, Aegis Creative Multimedia Development Team, Express Digital

Photorelect.com Demo

Online demonstrations
Stacy K. Leeds, Aegis Creative Multimedia Development Team, Express Digital

Solar Energy Showcase CD

Online Reference Material
Lynn Kaemmerer, Susan Moon, Jim Miller, Margo Stenzel

The Arctic Climatology Project: Arctic Meteorology and Climate Atlas

Online Reference Material
Laura Cheshire, Florence Fetterer, Robin Welsh, Mike Meshek

Geothermal Today: 1999 Geothermal Energy Program Highlights

Annual Reports
Lynn Kaemmerer, Bruce Green, Theresa Waggoner, Julie Kennedy, William Gillies

Photovoltaic Energy Program Overview, Fiscal Year 1999

Annual Reports
Lynn Kaemmerer, Jim Miller, Susan Moon, Pat Weis-Taylor

Photovoltaics: Energy for the New Millennium

Annual Reports
Lynn Kaemmerer, Don Gwinner, Gary Cook, Ray David

Wind Power Today

Annual Reports
Lynn Kaemmerer, Kathy O'Dell, Susan Sczepanski, Pat Weis-Taylor

GFD Flight Instructor Manual

Books
Richard P. Snyder, Aviation Courseware Group

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Thank You to Our Corporate Sponsors

by Linda Gallagher

This year several companies and universities have supported the chapter in a variety of ways.

We appreciate their support! We are proud to present a Friend of the Chapter award to each of the following supporters:

- ▶ **Adaptec, Inc.** in Longmont hosted our Web Graphics seminar in September of last year, and the Webcast of our November meeting. I'd especially like to thank Robyn Faulkner for coordinating both events at Adaptec.
- ▶ **University of Colorado at Denver** assists us with arrangements whenever we hold a meeting at the Tivoli. We held our October meeting there and expect to hold another before the end of the year. We appreciate Professor Jim Stratman's assistance and that of his staff.
- ▶ **Colorado State University** hosted a location for our November Webcast. Professor Don Zimmerman worked

We are proud to present Friend of the Chapter awards to the companies and universities who have supported the chapter throughout the year.

with us to make the arrangements, and is also providing valuable advice on the chapter membership survey.

- ▶ **Colt Reproduction Center, Inc.** graciously donated the printing for our membership directory (including the binding and color cover), the membership survey, and the survey reminder post card.
- ▶ **J.D. Edwards** has continued its ongoing support of the RMC by hosting chapter meetings, including the Webcast in November and the April meeting, including refreshments for those meetings. Thank you to Frank Tagader and Jay Mead, who coordinate the facilities arrangements.
- ▶ **StorageTek** has also continued to support the chapter by hosting chapter meetings and sponsoring refreshments. I'd like to thank Diane Ohrt for her assistance in arranging for the location.
- ▶ **Zoa Techmedia** is another ongoing supporter of the chapter, providing the facilities for our March chapter meeting and for the online competition. Thank you to Michele O'Dell and David Garrett for their gracious assistance. **RMC**

RMC Member Receives Distinguished Chapter Service Award

by Linda Gallagher

The Distinguished Chapter Service Award from the international level of STC recognizes exemplary dedication to the chapter and its activities. I am proud to announce that Larry Prado is this year's recipient of the award.

Larry has managed the Rocky Mountain Chapter Seminar committee, presented at chapter meetings, and presented at a Region 7 Conference. Most notable is his service as chapter president, undertaken without the benefit of serving first as vice president. Shortly after the 1999-2000 election, the RMC suddenly found itself without a president. Larry, who had just been elected vice president, was asked to take up the presidential mantle. He

agreed to do so and had a very successful year that included a millennium celebration honoring the RMC's fellows, associate fellows, and past presidents; the creation of the membership database that streamlines chapter activities and won a Chapter Pacesetter award; the institution of a President's Award to recognize volunteers; and the creation of a transition task document to aid the annual transition of officers and committee managers.

His efforts in support of the chapter have continued during his year as past president. Thank you for your service to our chapter, and congratulations, Larry!

RMC

Congratulations to Larry Prado, this year's recipient of the Distinguished Chapter Service Award from STC International.



Technical Writers Can Make a Difference

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If the company you work for already takes you seriously, and truly appreciates your work and understands the role your work plays in the overall quality of its product, I salute you. If not, look into MSF and what it can do for your company and your role within the product development

cycle. And if not MSF, find a similar model, because, in the end, we all have a stake in the quality of the product our employer develops, manufactures, and delivers. This is just one way to make sure that it is the right product, delivered to the right person at the right time. **RMC**

President's Award Winners 2000–2001

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Lynnette Reveling

Lynnette has been the manager of the Seminars Committee for the last two years. She also worked on the Online Competition Committee for four years and served on the Hospitality Committee for the Region 7 Conference held here in 1998. During her tenure managing the Seminars Committee, she and her committee have revitalized our moribund seminars program. We've had five seminars so far, with one more scheduled in May. All have been well attended and inexpensive for members, providing an important service for our chapter. In addition, the seminars have contributed significant revenue to the chapter, permitting us to provide additional services. Lynnette, you go, girl!

Kim Weathersby

This year, Kim has served as the Program Manager, arranging our chapter meetings, coordinating with speakers, and continuing our record of great programs. Kim served as co-chair of the Program Committee for the 1998 Region 7 Conference, was on the Nominating Committee, and helped organize the competition awards reception and the volunteer picnic for the last two years. Kim's efforts have ensured the success of many of our most visible and important chapter activities. Kim is great to work with and always does whatever is necessary. We appreciate your contributions, Kim! **RMC**

February Meeting Featured Usability Progression

by Gail S. Bernstein

The February meeting forced those of us present to make some difficult choices. It was a Usability Progression and we could only attend three of the eleven excellent presentations.

Mary Jo Stark covered *Determining Users' Needs* in her discussion of how Landmark Graphics' UNIX Documentation Group increased its interaction with users by talking to user groups, supervising a booth at the company's trade show, and visiting clients on site.

Molly Hammar Cloyd discussed *Strategies for Introducing Human Factors Methods into a Reluctant Organization*. Molly described her experiences with starting a human factors group at Broadbase Software. She offered strategies for introducing human factors methods into a reluctant development organization while keeping those methods, including profiling users, defining task flows, prototyping, and defining interface standards, at the core of product designs.

Heuristic Evaluation, Why and How was the topic of Steven Chalmers' presentation. He sees heuristic evaluations as the evaluator's use of insight and experience to produce a detailed report of shortcomings in an interface. To maximize the effectiveness of the report, supporting references should be included to backup the findings. Steve suggests that the need for heuristic evaluations can best be understood by considering the perspective of the contributors. Project managers, programmers, and most others involved in software development are primarily concerned with features and timelines, not ease of use.

Lesley Hoppert covered *The Value of Usability Testing*, and offered various ways to sell and justify usability efforts by focusing on benefits of usability testing and user-centered design and quantifying benefits versus costs of a usability testing program. She also covered ways to estimate benefits.

Tina Hedlund and Bill Hackos discussed *How an Information Model Affects Usability on the Web*, and how other organizations are using information models and structured writing to provide easy-to-access, customized, and user-friendly information.

In *Data Gathering Methodologies That Don't Bust the Budget*, Jaye Matthews discussed several methodologies that efficiently and effectively gather user data from many remote locations without breaking your client's travel budget. Specific methodologies included online usability testing, phone interviews and online surveys.

Kara Worthen addressed *The Critical Decision Points in a Human Factors Project*. She believes a methodology can help drive and coordinate an effort to produce usable software. It's not guaranteed to help you complete the project within the scheduled time and budget, but a sequential process can minimize costly iterations and duplicate work. Technical communicators should also be aware of other factors that contribute to a successful project and understand the similarities between human factors work and technical communication.

For Kate Freed, who discussed *Everyday Usability*, usability is an attitude, a way of thinking, and can be built into every project you undertake. She presented some simple techniques you can apply immediately to any project.

Lila Laux's topic was *Making Websites Accessible to People with Disabilities*. She addressed why we need to design accessible web pages/sites/applications, and where to go to find out how to do it without increasing development costs.

Carol Akerelrea warned us of *UT Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them*. For the unwary, conducting usability testing remains fraught with pitfalls. She focused on the serious errors and strategies for overcoming them. **RMC**



The Next Great Thing: Microsoft HTML Help 2.0

by Dana Cline

Just when you'd gotten used to the idea of Microsoft HTML Help, they change it all around. Fortunately, most of those changes are for the better. Microsoft announced HTML Help 2.0 (HH 2.0) at WinWriters in early March, with a public beta expected this summer and a release soon after the Visual Studio .NET product ships.

HH 2.0 is similar to the 1.x versions in two ways: they both use HTML for topics, and they both require at least a subset of Internet Explorer to be installed. Other than that, HH 2.0 looks much more versatile in several areas.

The first of these is in embedded help. The new index and table of contents are now drop-in ActiveX controls. They can easily be hosted now in any language that supports ActiveX, such as Visual Basic, Visual C++, and Delphi. Combine those two controls with a browser window control and the whole help system can now be easily embedded in the application. To see an example of how helpful this can be, take a look at the help system in the Visual Studio .NET beta, which was shipped to MSDN customers late last year.

One promised feature that wasn't delivered was information types. Using these, a user (or application) could limit what help the user sees. Filters are now used for the same purpose. Filter names and values are properties of individual topics, and topics can have multiple filters. When a filter is used to limit the available information, all navigation is affected (including the table of contents

and the index). Multiple filters can be combined using Boolean expressions.

Virtual topics are a new type of topic that can reference external files, such as PDF or DOC, or even executable programs. Like all topics, virtual topics have attributes such as a topic title and index keywords. One feature of virtual topics is that multiple topics can reside in the same source file.

Perhaps the best feature of HH 2.0 is that the system information (such as indexes and TOC) is kept in XML files or XML code embedded in HTML topic files. This may open up the door for the automatic creation of help systems from information in XML databases.

Standard Named URLs can be used to set up customized pages within your help system. For example, a page named NavFailPage is called when a selected keyword has no attached topics, allowing you to provide custom failure information (for example, "You need to buy product X to get help on this subject").

Of course, as with any product, there are glaring omissions. One of these is that Microsoft has not announced any support for secondary windows or popups (a deficiency left over from HTML Help 1.x). Also omitted is the ability to run any of the new help systems on anything but Windows. (At least 1.x had that horrible little Java applet.) It remains to be seen whether Microsoft will address these issues, so stay tuned for more information. **RMC**

STC RMC Honors Chapter Competition Winners

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Installing the HP NetStorage 6000

Hardware/Software Combination Guides
Mary Ann Moore, James Powell, Jeff Maust

Highlighting High Performance: Zion National Park Visitor Center

Informational Materials
Lynn Kaemmerer, DOE/NREL FEMP Technical Assistance Team,
Kyra Epstein, Susan Sczepanski

The Borrower's Guide to Financing Solar Energy Systems, Second Edition

Informational Materials
Lynn Kaemmerer, Patrina Eiffert, Paula Pitchford, Helen Young

Staff Notes Monthly

Newsletters
Lucy Warner, Bob Henson, Mike Shibao, Carlye Calvin

Measurements and Characterization Capabilities Series

Promotional Materials
Lynn Kaemmerer, Gary Cook, Don Gwinner, Al Hicks

J. D. Edwards OneWorld: A Developer's Guide

Software Reference Guides
Cathy Robbins, Steve Chris, Steven L. Hester, Chris Enyeart **RMC**

Congratulations to STC RMC treasurer Mary Jo Stark on her recent election as treasurer of the STC International!



A Tale of Two Careers

by Bridget Julian

That darn grass. Sure, I know, it only looks greener; but doesn't it seem soft and velvety and . . . wouldn't it be nice to be on the other side of that employment fence? To find out, I interviewed two of our Rocky Mountain Chapter colleagues: Linda Gallagher and Ed Ryan. Both gave me great information about the pros and cons of contract work and full-time employment in the Front Range. As it turns out, the fence was all in my head.

Linda Gallagher is the owner of Tech-Com Plus, a one-person business, and is currently president of the Rocky Mountain Chapter. She describes herself as an "independent," rather than a "freelancer" or "contractor." It's easy to see why: she finds her own contracts, bids jobs, sets up schedules, bills clients, and generally runs her own company with an employee of one. Which is just the way she likes it.

Ed Ryan is Manager of Documentation and Training at Jones Cyber Solutions — you may have seen their winning ICSS Customer Care Guide at the awards reception in March. Ed has been at Jones for three years, long enough to conceptualize, design, and release several products. Which is just the way he likes it.

So, what do these two people have in common — and would they ever trade places?

Linda: I love being my own boss. It's not always easy or fun, but I've never looked back. I've been in business for five years; now, I have as much work as I can handle. The hardest things are wondering (still!) whether I'll always have enough work, and staying staying on top of my time and contracts. A useful benchmark for me is billing 1,000 hours each year. Otherwise, my billable hours aren't likely to cover my non-billable expenses. Many of my clients are small companies, so I often have two or three projects going at once. It's great to have such a frequent change of pace.

The most important thing for someone thinking about becoming an independent? Well, of course the first thing to do is to attend a Contracting and Independent Consulting SIG meeting, and to read the freelancing material posted

on the RMC Web site at www.stcrmc.org. But aside from gathering information, you really have to want to run your own business, from selling your services and printing invoices to making Social Security payments. And you have to be flexible. Anything can and will happen!

Ed: I like the stability of working for a small company that is part of a large, international corporation. The opportunity to make a difference, to concentrate on a long-term objective, is incredibly satisfying. When I did contract work, I was often focused on a very small piece of a larger project. Sometimes I never saw the final product, and sometimes the project itself never saw the light of day! Here, I know that I'm not only producing a good product; I'm integral to this company's success.

I'd advise anyone looking for their first full-time position to show an awareness of the company's big picture. You aren't being hired to complete one project; you are committed to the overall achievement of that company's objectives. For me, helping create the big picture and then contributing to those goals are the most important facets of my work.

Talking with Linda and Ed, I realized that technical writers can respond to market changes creatively. Each of them emphasized that while trends come and go (Let's get rid of the full-time employees! No, let's cut back on contract workers!), technical writers can, and do:

- ▶ Work as independents.
- ▶ Contract with technical employment agencies.
- ▶ Work for firms that specialize in external documentation support.
- ▶ Work long contracts in a single field, or with one company.
- ▶ Work part-time.
- ▶ Work full-time.

So rather than getting hung up on the employment fence, remember: Whatever your current needs or preferences, there's a patch of grass waiting just for you!

RMC

From contract work to full-time employment, technical writers can respond to market changes creatively.

In Search of Past Officers!

If you've been around for a while, we need your help! We're trying to fill in holes in the history pages on our chapter Web site. Do you know the names of any STC RMC officers in the 1960s, 70s, or 80s? If so, please contact Joel Meier at Joel_Meier@jdedwards.com. **RMC**



In our early writing years, many of us toiled under that one strict teacher who drilled the rules of English grammar into our consciousness. We sweated drops of blood on our pristine paper as we tried to craft perfectly correct sentences for that much-desired “A.” We prayed that we didn’t leave a word or clause misplaced or dangling for the teacher’s angry red pen to mark.

Yet pick up any work of modern (yes, serious) fiction, and you’ll notice the writer has broken many of the rules drummed into our impressionable heads. These days, fiction often resembles the casual style of poetry, with smatterings of sentence fragments, and commas and dashes sprinkled about like seasoning. But in technical communication, we can’t be so casual. We must adhere to those rules of grammar our English teachers upheld — at least, for the most part.

In *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* (Prentice Hall, 2000), John R. Trimble describes some “superstitions” of grammar that many writers and editors cling to as sacred doctrine. These “literary prudes,” as Trimble calls them, maintain that the English language must abide by strict laws — that language is static, not dynamic. Trimble lists a few of their grammar “nevers.” Here are my favorites:

1. **Never refer to the reader as “you.”** — Can you imagine writing a user manual and never referring to the reader as “you”? We would be forced to write sentences like “the Escape key must be pressed” or “one must press the Escape key.” Imagine readers scratching their heads and asking, “So who must press the Escape key — me?”

You would think that no one would still enforce such a rule, but I recently hired a fresh-from-college writer whose professor actually insisted that a writer should never address the reader as “you,” but as “one” instead. My new writer was too timid to craft a sentence with “you” as the subject (even the implied subject), until I was able to ease her into the world of technical communication, where you actually need to address readers as people.

2. **Never write a paragraph containing a single sentence.** — Once again, can you imagine writing a user guide if each step in a procedure must contain at least two sentences? We would weigh down our procedures in a muck of extraneous words, and lose our confused readers.

3. **Never split an infinitive.** — Here’s a fun debate: Ask a group of writers whether it’s okay to split infinitives, then stand back and witness an argument that boils over into emotionally charged opinions. (You’ll get the

same heated exchange by asking a group of Republicans and Democrats who really won in Florida.)

Needless to say, writers have split opinions on split infinitives. One faction of writers maintains that inserting an adjective between the “to” and the verb places important emphasis on the adverb and creates a more natural rhythm, while the other considers it a crime punishable by drowning your draft in a river of red ink.

As Trimble points out, splitting infinitives wasn’t always considered a crime. Reputable authors have split infinitives through the centuries. When and why did infinitive splitting become such a crime? Trimble notes that a group of grammarians in the 18th and 19th centuries set out to standardize the English language and decreed that, as in Latin, the infinitive form “to” and its verb should stay tightly together.

But English is not Latin, and this rule can sometimes force us to write a stilted sentence unnatural to modern ears. In some cases, you want to place emphasis on the adverb, to give it notice: “To boldly go where no man has gone before.” Somehow it’s right that Spock and Captain Kirk “boldly go” rather than “go boldly”!

In my own technical writing, I try to avoid splitting infinitives. But if keeping the infinitive construction together creates an awkward sentence, I stuff the adverb between the “to” and the verb without hesitation. Of course (heavy sigh), there’s always the editor who will force me to extract the offending word.

4. **Never end a sentence with a preposition.** — How many times have you written a sentence with a preposition derelict at the end, then wrestled with the sentence until you wedged that miniscule word in the middle, resulting in a sentence now grammatically correct but painfully stiff? In technical documents I still try to keep my prepositions tucked neatly in the middle of a sentence; but, as with split infinitives, if the sentence sounds stilted when I adhere to the rules, I break the rules.

Trimble quotes Churchill’s famous retort, on having a preposition removed from the end of a sentence by his editor: “This is the kind of impertinence up with which I shall not put!”

Most of these grammatical chimeras come from sound advice, but the problem with these rules is the word “never.” Yes, it’s good writing practice to avoid splitting infinitives and ending sentences with prepositions. But never? Well, to always say never is a philosophy I cannot stand behind. Or should I say, to avoid offending my former English teachers, “always to say never is a philosophy behind which I cannot stand!” **RMC**



Volunteer Spotlight

Meet Bridget Julian

by Helen Tuttle

Having joined the STC in April 2000, Bridget Julian is one of our newer members and volunteers. She has whirled through our organization bringing her special touch to the newsletter, *Technicalities*. This month's issue, for example, contains her article about the pros and cons of consulting vs. full-time employment as a technical writer (see "A Tale of Two Careers," on page 9).

Bridget originally thought her research would uncover two different worlds at odds with each other — the highly paid consultant taking work away from the full-time employee, and vice-versa, and the animosity between them. Instead, she found unselfish people willing to help each other progress and develop regardless of viewpoint. She now believes technical writing can be a "footloose profession" that requires little more than a modem!

In contrast, Bridget's job in a small publishing firm keeps her in Boulder where she dreams up topics for books and then locates an academic expert to write the subject matter. (These are the books of our college days, and we all know what fascinating reading they make.) She follows through with assisting in the editing and production of the finished text.

Nights and weekends are another story, however, and she never stops moving. You can find her backpacking and hiking her way through the state of Colorado — sometimes for fun, but frequently with a pick in hand, blazing and rebuilding trails throughout parks and recreation areas as a volunteer for Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC). She also enjoys spending time with friends and attending theatrical performances such as the recent production of *Swan Lake* presented at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

Bridget is currently taking online classes from UCLA to complete a certificate in technical writing and develop a new career. And why does she want to become a technical writer? She loves interacting with people and developing ideas from them. She likes facilitating communication. She likes building the structure of the communication — crafting the project. Will she make a good technical writer? You bet — her talent and intelligence are apparent and the drive to succeed will get her where she wants to go.

And some breaking news — our newsletter team is launching a Publications Column that will feature recent publications by our talented chapter members. Who hopes to be an active part of the development process? You're right — Bridget Julian! **RMC**

Volunteers Needed — and Definitely Wanted!

by Helen Tuttle

Don't delay — sit down at your computer and volunteer today! Send an e-mail to your Volunteer Coordinator, Helen Tuttle, at a1newwoman@hotmail.com and let her know what interests you. Trust us: We have a spot just for you! Four committees currently need new managers and members. Below are brief descriptions of the purpose and functions of the committees — take your pick!

Membership Committee

- ▶ *Purpose:* To increase membership and distribute STC information to chapter members and potential members.
- ▶ *Activities:* The membership committee welcomes new chapter members, submits membership news to the newsletter editor, assists with mailings, and greets new and old members at the monthly membership meetings. This is a great way to quickly get to know chapter members.

Publications Competition Committee

- ▶ *Purpose:* To conduct chapter-level publications competitions, and to identify qualified chapter entries for the international publications competitions.
- ▶ *Activities:* The annual STC RMC Competition is our chapter's flagship event. The Competition is a showcase for the finest technical communication in the Rocky Mountain region. As a member of the committee you'll help recruit judges and volunteers, publish the Call for Entries, publicize the Competition, and help run Competition events such as the Awards Reception.

Program Committee

- ▶ *Purpose:* To schedule and coordinate monthly chapter membership programs.
- ▶ *Activities:* The Program Committee develops programs and recruits speakers for our seven yearly membership meetings; schedules meeting dates and times; and runs the meetings. As a committee member you do not necessarily have to attend all of the membership meetings, though you'll probably want to!

Nominating Committee

- ▶ *Purpose:* To find candidates for the STC Rocky Mountain Chapter Administrative Council positions.
- ▶ *Activities:* The two members of the Nominating Committee find and evaluate candidates for the RMC Council positions, and plan and run the spring Council elections. Nominating committee members help assure the strength and future of the RMC — in addition, it's a great way to get to know committed professionals in our area. **RMC**



The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

For the latest chapter news, visit our Web site at www.stcrmc.org.

Upcoming STC RMC Chapter Meetings

For more information about chapter meetings, see the article on page 4 and the STC RMC Web site.

May

Instructional Design

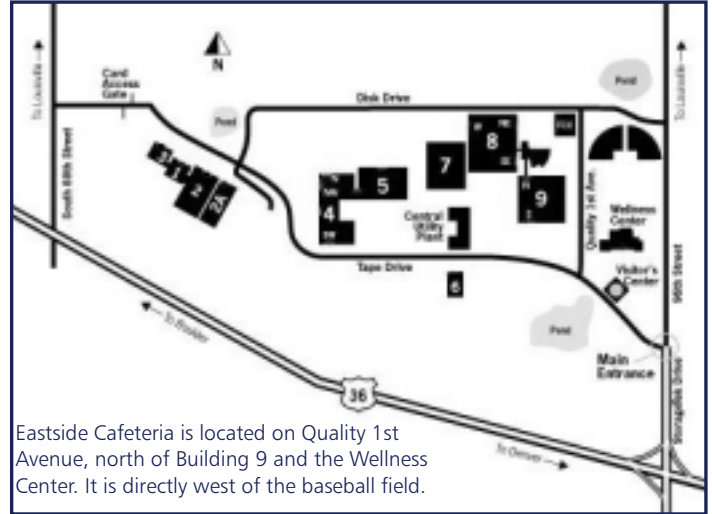
When: Thursday, May 17

Where: StorageTek, Eastside Cafeteria
Louisville

Cost: Members \$5
Non-members \$8
Students free

Agenda:

- 5:45 - 6:45 p.m. CIC SIG meeting
- 5:45 - 7:15 p.m. Networking and snacks
- 7:15 - 9:00 p.m. Announcements and program



Eastside Cafeteria is located on Quality 1st Avenue, north of Building 9 and the Wellness Center. It is directly west of the baseball field.

June

The Craziest of Cyberlaw

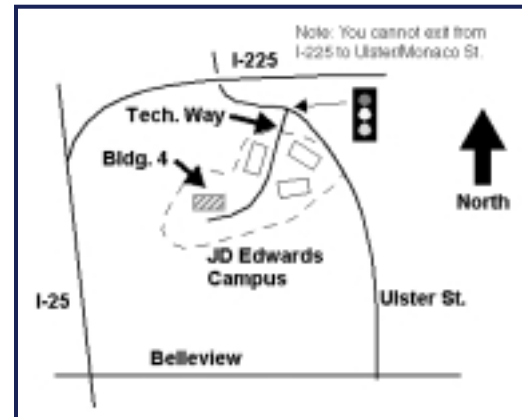
When: Thursday, June 21

Where: J.D. Edwards, Building 4
One Technology Way
Denver

Cost: Members \$5
Non-members \$8
Students free

Agenda:

- 5:45 - 6:45 p.m. Online SIG meeting
- 5:45 - 7:15 p.m. Networking and snacks
- 7:15 - 9:00 p.m. Announcements and program



Technicalities

Rocky Mountain Chapter
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Denver, CO 80202

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