



[.pdf version](#)

[masthead](#)

[archives](#)

[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Chapter news](#)

[From our Director-Sponsor](#)

[President's corner](#)

[Message from the editor](#)

[Tips from the trenches](#)

[February chapter meeting review](#)

[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)

[2003-2004 Technical Communication Competition results](#)

[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)

[Think weird and prosper](#)

[A model for transforming STC](#)

[Chapter support is good for all](#)

[STC RMC home](#)

[STC International home](#)

## In this issue...

[Chapter news](#): Keeping you up-to-date on the latest happenings in the Rocky Mountain Chapter

[From our Director-Sponsor](#): Back to basics -- good writing skills are as important as ever

[From our president](#): First-rate achievements still abound, even the second time around

[From the editor](#): Reflections on the ever-changing nature of the field of Tech Comm

[Tips from the trenches](#): How marketing your worth as a writing professional trumps touting tool skills

[February meeting review](#): Techniques for teaching skills online

[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#): For she's no ordinary fellow: Honoring Maxine Singer

[STCRMC's 2003-2004 competition results](#): And the envelope please—accolades at both the local and international levels

[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#): Projects *not* to list on your resume

[Think weird and prosper](#): When thinking outside the box is too trite

[A model for transforming STC](#): The next installment from the STC Transformation Team

[Chapter support is good for all](#): by Linda Ostreich, Director-Sponsor of STC Region 5

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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Newsletter of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

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[.pdf version](#)      [masthead](#)      [archives](#)      [◀ Back](#)      [Next ▶](#)

- [Technicalities home](#)

---

- [Chapter news](#)
- [From our Director-Sponsor](#)
- [President's corner](#)
- [Message from the editor](#)
- [Tips from the trenches](#)
- [February chapter meeting review](#)
- [STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)
- [2003-2004 Technical Communication Competition results](#)
- [TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)
- [Think weird and prosper](#)
- [A model for transforming STC](#)
- [Chapter support is good for all](#)

---

- [STC RMC home](#)
- [STC International home](#)

## Technicalities

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### Editorial

Managing Editor: Ron Arner  
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Technicalities is published bi-monthly by the Rocky Mountain Chapter (RMC) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and is distributed to chapter members, editors of other STC newsletters, and officers of the Society. It is available on request to anyone interested in technical communication. Other STC chapters and publications may reprint material if credit is given.

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication.

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Readers are encouraged to submit material on subjects of interest to Society and chapter members. Please credit repeated material and send a copy of the original material to: [news@stcrmc.org](mailto:news@stcrmc.org).

The editor can be reached during the day at 303.405.8122 and by e-mail at [news@stcrmc.org](mailto:news@stcrmc.org). Please submit electronic files in ASCII text format and include a telephone number where you can be reached. If you need to mail or fax articles and/or artwork, please contact the editor for a mailing address and fax number. The deadline for article submission is one month prior to issue release (first of the month, every other month).

The *Technicalities* staff reserves the right to edit articles for clarity and length; substantive editing of feature articles will be reviewed with the author prior to publication.

### STC RMC 2003-2004 Officers

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A complete listing of all chapter officers and SIG Coordinators can be found at: [http://www.stcmmc.org/chapter/officers\\_managers\\_2003-2004.htm](http://www.stcmmc.org/chapter/officers_managers_2003-2004.htm).

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical Communication Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming STC](#)[Chapter support is good for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Chapter support is good for all

by Linda Ostreich, Region 5 Director-Sponsor

There has been a flurry of activity on the STC Presidents' Listserv regarding who pays for what to support chapter members who go to the STC Annual Conference. Tieline for March 2002 addressed that issue in an article called, "Appropriate Use of Chapter Funds." I've received a few emails from chapter presidents to get my opinion on this situation, and so spawned this month's topic!

Ed Rutkowski, from the STC Office, responded to the listserv with some actual quotes from that Tieline article. I repeat some of what Ed said here:

As with all questions regarding Society expenses, this one raises the issue of whether the return on the chapter's investment primarily benefits the Society, or whether it primarily benefits an individual. Please note that Article 4 of STC's Articles of Incorporation states that "none of [STC's] net earnings shall be distributed to or enure to the benefit of any private . . . individual."

As explained in the article, chapters may subsidize a chapter president's travel to Leadership Day at the annual conference "because the training obtained at Leadership Day would benefit the chapter. Many technical sessions at the conference also focus on chapter leadership duties, so funding conference registration for a chapter leader who attended these sessions would also be acceptable.

However, simply funding a valuable volunteer's travel to the annual conference (without his or her attending Leadership Day or a number of STC-related sessions at the conference) would NOT be acceptable, since information learned at the conference would primarily benefit the individual."

So, what does this mean? It means that if a chapter and its administrative council believe that subsidizing costs for a member to attend the conference will benefit the chapter and the Society, by all means, do it. It also means that a chapter should not just pay for a member to attend the conference as a "gift," with no strings attached.

If the member you send returns with information, leadership skills, and added connection to the STC community he or she belongs to, and that benefit is returned to the chapter in a more experienced and better informed volunteer, then it is NOT enurement, but a wise distribution of funds for the good of all.

As an administrative council, make wise decisions. You know your membership. You know those who will return and share their experiences and lessons learned to the community. And by so doing, the rules are followed. Subsidizing an incoming or current president, subsidizing someone who is receiving an honor, subsidizing someone who has been of long-time service.all these cases are valid IF those people return to the chapter and provide value to the membership.

The money in your treasuries belongs to the membership, not to the admin council, not to the president, not to the treasurer, but to the members. Insist that you receive receipts for funds expended. Pay for something that is recordable. the conference fee itself, perhaps. Some of the presidents who responded to the listserv noted that they require their chapter leaders who go to share a room or to do other things that will limit the expenses to the chapter.

Not every chapter will be able to afford the same level of subsidy. Don't put your treasury in jeopardy, but if you have the budget, use it. Don't hoard your funds. As that Tieline article also says, "wiegh the benefit to the individual against the benefit to the chapter in the context of your chapter's financial robustness."

In this time of unemployment and severely reduced employer support, I believe that the chapters who can help should help. And, certainly not a small thing, this particular year will be an important one for your leaders to be there. Transformation will be spoken about at Leadership Day, in the halls, in the sessions, and at the lunches. The more your leaders know about it, the better they will be able to question it, understand it, help define it, and support it. So, reach into your treasuries and offer that support. But do it with wisdom. Only support those who will, in return, support your members.

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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Standard [disclaimers](#) apply.

[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## A model for transforming STC

by *Thea Teich, Andrea Ames, and Suzanna Laurent*

In the last article "Vision Model: Where We Are Going," we discussed the vision model that has been developed for STC. Because STC is not a business but a non-profit organization, we had to make adjustments to that initial analysis. This vision is now being used to develop a model to help us reorganize STC in ways that better meet the needs of our members. A model does not have to be perfect, because it can be reshaped by our findings as we move through the transformation process. This update shares the organizational model developed in five key areas to determine what the "ideal state" of STC might look like in the future.

As we began our work to identify the best operating metaphors for the new STC, many metaphors were studied. The result of that research identified a combination of two different metaphors that would best serve our organization—a "holding" company and an "automotive" company.

A "holding" company exists by growing and acquiring other companies. STC will exist to grow and nurture its successful communities because it will provide the overarching mission and strategy, provide shared services, facilitate knowledge sharing, and define the expectations and rules of engagement for our communities. Automotive companies "go to market" as a company brand plus a model, such as a Ford Taurus. The dealer sells the car, and then sells additional services from the parent company, such as an extended warranty or financing. Combining these metaphors frames a vision in which the international STC organization is the holding company and communities are the component companies. STC exists to build, acquire, grow, and nurture successful communities within the bounds of its mission. STC will "go to market" as a combination of the STC brand and the community model.

## The Key Areas

Teams have now been formed in each of the key areas, and the team members are working hard as they consider the high-level criteria for the success of the proposed organizational design. The organizational areas for development are Communities, Financial, Shared Services-Education, Shared Services-Infrastructure, and Governance.

## Communities

These team members will develop the definition of a community and consider both the distinct stages of life for a community and the unique needs of that community.

As the team develops the criteria, they will use these requirements to guide their decisions. At a minimum, a community must:

- Support the needs of its members
- Contribute knowledge to the larger STC community
- Develop a clear mission
- Have leadership to support the mission
- Create things of lasting value, such as a knowledge base
- Develop a means of regular interaction and communication
- Remain vital and/or self-sustaining
- Be created equal to other communities
- Develop a best practice that allows communities to get new members involved quickly so commitment is encouraged early in their Society experience

## **Financial**

These team members will develop the financial requirements to fund and ensure the success of STC in the future. As they develop these requirements, a number of questions must be addressed and solutions proposed. They will also consider new revenue opportunities.

The minimum requirements that the team will consider are:

- How can members be offered sustainable choices in membership levels? What would those membership categories be, and what bundle of services, pricing, and selection opportunities could be offered?
- What key metrics should we monitor for organizational health?
- What budgeting process changes must be made to give us more visibility and control of expenses?
- What accounting process changes can give us a better idea of the true program and member costs, without adding undue complexity?
- How can the transformation initiatives be funded?
- How can we ensure a balanced budget for STC moving forward?

## **Shared Services-Education**

This team is developing a model for presenting additional educational opportunities to STC members in a wide variety of formats and prices. To accomplish this, STC will establish a committee that works with leaders from business and from our communities of practice to determine their educational needs and trends for future topics. Once some initial topics are determined, the committee will work with the STC office to decide what format should be used to deliver the topic, who will present the topic, and how best to market the topic to members and corporations.

## **Shared Services-Infrastructure**

This team is developing a model to ensure STC's use of technology is the most up-to-date possible and that it is used efficiently to meet the needs of its members.

## **Governance-Structures, Representation, Responsibilities**

This team is considering the governance aspect of the new organizational design. How should the board of directors be structured so our communities of practice are represented? Should we have a general board election and then have responsibilities for community groups assigned after the election? We know that we should include voices from both industry and academe, but should those voices include non-members for status and direction as well?

**Coming up next:**

A Communications team will convey the progress on the various transformation programs to STC members from this point forward. Be sure to watch for the Transformation Team updates on <http://www.stc.org/transformation.asp>.

**Blog Update:** As many of you know, the Transformation Team has been maintaining a blog at <http://trans4mation.typepad.com/>. The same articles that have been distributed via e-mail and posted on the STC Web site have also appeared on the blog. The blog has given us the ability to receive and post comments to each article.

However, we will soon begin using a new communication tool for our transformation efforts: A series of telephone broadcasts on transformation-related subjects. The STC Web site will offer opportunities to submit comments on these broadcasts, as well as small surveys to help us better focus our messages.

Because of this new tool, and also due to declining interest in the blog, the Transformation Team will discontinue updating the blog.

Thea Teich, President  
Andrea Ames, First Vice President  
Suzanna Laurent, Second Vice President

◀ Back

[Technicalities home](#)

Next ▶

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Think weird and prosper

by [Rahel Baillie](#)

In the driver's side pocket of my car door, I keep a red clown nose, one of those foam bulbs you find in joke shops. I got it from a dynamic speaker who talked about giving ourselves permission to be an oddball, to shock people out of complacency by daring to be different. I don't use the nose all the time, but in the times I have, the nose has effectively deflected road rage (who can resist a middle-aged woman in a Jaguar with a red foam nose?), helped me make traffic maneuvers requiring the cooperation of an adjacent driver, and brought smiles to the drivers around me. It's a weird, but powerful, tool.

Being weird, the outsider, the oddball, has never bothered me much. So you can see why I like this quote from Tom Peters: "The only way to effect true transformation in the workplace is to enlist the outliers in your organization to your cause. Find the weirdos and the freaks, offer support for the projects they're secretly pursuing, then get them to help you with your own revolutionary change ideas."

Part of the reason I like this quote is because I—and many other technical communicators—identify with being an "outlier" in an organization. TechComm has traditionally been seen as an outlying department. Until recently, we hadn't been seen as a group poised to help an organization go through "revolutionary change." But as the importance of good user experience takes hold, we are clarifying our license to contribute, and contribute in ways that the corporation has never really thought of until now.

As I've discussed in previous articles, the global economic shift is pushing us to become contributors of value. To contribute value, we have to change the way we think about business and think about our skills.

Now, more than ever, we need to "think weird." Some may call it thinking outside the box. But that expression has become trite, and the inner bureaucrat has used that concept to promote bureaucratic thinking in new and different ways. That's not what I mean here. I mean, we have to think, weird. Embrace your inner clown (my apologies to past STC president, Mary Wise, who actually went to "clown school" before becoming a technical communicator) or your inner wildbrain (as coined by Dale Douten to describe certain types of people whose creative genius often goes unrecognized, and too often punished, in the workplace). Tap into ways of working, ways of managing, ways of being that shake up the hunker-down-till-the-economy-picks-up attitude we've taken on.

What would this look like in your professional life? What could this look like? Let me counter that with a question for you: How far can you stretch your imagination? Let me give you a small example with big implications.

Scene: A software engineering firm creating C code is about to branch out into C++ using UML. The developers want to use the code comments to generate the bulk of the API documentation. Is this a techcomm nightmare, or a fabulous opportunity?

Cut to: The "inside the box" thinker who says: Oh no, we'll be reduced to glorified proofreaders. Give me back my control over the documentation! Cut to: The "out of the box" thinker says: Great, once we clean up the comments in the source code, I'll spend less time maintaining this documentation, and have more time for other things.

Now cut to: The weird thinkers, who are so out of the box that they're in a whole other box, say: Wow, what a concept! How can I leverage that technology or a similar one to get that same result on other projects? Maybe I can eliminate most of the production work and spend my time doing strategic thinking to add end-user value!

This is a true story, and as you may guess, I was the "weird" thinker. (If I weren't, the story would be told from an entirely different perspective.) When that situation arose, my in-the-box colleagues branded me a renegade, a troublemaker. Why couldn't we just churn out work like we'd been doing for years? Was that not what our "core business" was: editing documents using the assembly-line production model?

Now, after barely weathering the economic storm, the department is no longer. The I-like-the-box thinkers have moved on, some to other in-the-box positions, others to new in-the-box opportunities. The weird thinker, on the other hand, became a consultant, bringing out-of-the-box thinking to clients as a "strategic contributor who can write." Happy clients, happy consultant.

In the various informational interviews I give, I hear people ask a similar question in many different ways: Where does one start in the quest to "think weird"? How do I differentiate myself from the rest of the market? How can I get someone to "pick me" from among their choices? The answers are as varied and personal as the number of questioners. I imagine it's much like beginning any other venture—a diet, a fitness program, or even therapy—that requires self-reflection and action. For me, it started with a little red ball of foam.

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Technical Standards names worst manual

by [Michelle Weir](#), *Technical Standards*

Technical Standards, Southern California's source for specialized documentation staffing and technical writing, today announced the winning entry in its fourth annual Worst Manual Contest. This year's \$100.00 prize went to Rhonda Bracey of Western Australia for her submission of the two-page safety section from an air-conditioner user's guide.

"The frustration that's caused by a poorly written manual is almost a universal experience. Poor documentation can cause more confusion than comprehension and could lead to liability issues and hidden costs for companies," said Michelle Wier of Technical Standards. "Good product documentation results in satisfied repeat customers, reduced costs, and limited liability exposure for companies."

With entries solicited from the 25,000+ membership of the Society for Technical Communication, Technical Standards' Worst Manual Contest is designed to underscore the importance of clear technical writing for everything, from consumer products to computer software guides and employee handbooks.

### This year's winner: The safety section of a commercial air-conditioner user's guide

This year's worst manual, submitted by Rhonda Bracey of South Perth, Western Australia, is part of a user's guide for a commercial product marketed to the general public. Rhonda's entry only consisted of the two-page safety section, but that was enough. As Rhonda puts it, "translator beware!"

If the phrase, "...to have the observance without fail to prevent the damage to harm and the property beforehand to the person who use this product and other persons" doesn't scare you, then some of the other text will!

The symbol key alone provided much questionable material. For example, the symbol key contained a symbol that wasn't referenced in the text, but didn't contain a symbol that was referenced. The same symbol was used for both Warning and Caution, but the text represented very different consequences. The difference between possible death compared to minor injury or material damage seems worth symbolic distinction. There were also symbol descriptions such as "Attention rousing," "Prohibition," and "Compulsion."

A few excerpts from the text:

"Please do not put the one embarrassed because it gets wet under the air conditioner."

"To apply the cold wind to the body for a longtime and so as to not exist about cooling too much"

"Do not blow the wind to animals and plants directly. It occasionally causes a bad influence for animals and plants to be exerted."

Often, poorly written manuals for consumer products can be attributed to translation problems. Clear, accurate translations are extremely important when communicating health and safety warnings associated with operating or assembling a product.

"For many end users, bad documentation amounts to nothing more than an inconvenience and possibly a poor impression of the company," said Wier. "But for companies, the results can affect the bottom line in terms of overloaded help lines, reduced revenues from dissatisfied customers who won't come back, and increased liability."

To view the top entries and more information about Technical Standards' fourth annual Worst Manual Contest, go to their Web site at [www.techstandards.com](http://www.techstandards.com).

### **About Technical Standards**

Technical Standards provides documentation writing and staffing services to Southern California companies in a wide range of industries. Carefully assessing the specific needs of its clients, Technical Standards provides a customized fit for each job by handpicking candidates from its pool of writers. When handling outsourced projects, Technical Standards produces clear, accurate, and understandable documentation to help ensure end-user satisfaction and reduced liability.

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)

[masthead](#)

[archives](#)

[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Chapter news](#)

[From our Director-Sponsor](#)

[President's corner](#)

[Message from the editor](#)

[Tips from the trenches](#)

[February chapter meeting review](#)

[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)

[2003-2004 Technical Communication competition results](#)

[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)

[Think weird and prosper](#)

[A model for transforming STC](#)

[Chapter support is good for all](#)

[STC RMC home](#)

[STC International home](#)

## 2003-2004 Technical Communication Competitions' results

by [Ron Arner](#)

### STCRMC winners also do well at the International Competition!

For the 29th year the Rocky Mountain Chapter sponsored the Technical Art, Technical Publications, and Online Technical Communications competitions. This year's entries were excellent examples of technical communication in action. 46 awards were given out at the local level. Of the seven entries that received Awards of Distinguished and were sent on to Internationals, five won Awards of Excellence or better at the International Competition!

Congratulations to all who entered!

### Outstanding winning entries

The judges made the following awards:

Technical Art Competition			
Award	Entrant(s)	Company	Entry Title
Distinguished	Al Hicks, Susan Moon, Susannah Pedigo	NREL	Bell Labs' Solar Battery: 50th Anniversary

NREL's Bell Labs' entry went on to win an Award of Excellence at the International Competition!

Technical Publications Competition			
Award	Entrant(s)	Company	Entry Title
Distinguished	Lucy Warner	UCAR	Picturing Climate's Complexity: Community Climate System Model

Distinguished	Bonnie Biafore	MonteVista Solutions, Inc.	The NAIC Stock Study Handbook
Excellence	Karen Boush	Leopard	Agilent Technologies brochure
Excellence	Karen Boush	Leopard	IBM Consultants & Integrators brochure
Excellence	Grace Griego	NREL	FEMP Renewable Energy Overview
Excellence	Grace Griego	NREL	Renewable Energy: Clean, Secure, Reliable
Excellence	Kim Brown	Apple Computer	Soundtrack User's Manual
Excellence	Nicole Ashton	Advanced Energy	Linear Ion Source: LIS 300/370
Excellence	Tom LaRocque	NREL	Alternative Fuel News
Excellence	Kathleen Rohling	BLM	Riparian-Wetland Soils
Excellence	Kim Brown	Apple Computer	DVD Studio Pro 2
Excellence	Kim Brown	Apple Computer	Final Cut Pro 4 User's Manual Vol I, II, III
Merit	Karen Bousch	Leopard	Leopard em brochure
Merit	Howard Brown	NREL	DOE Thermochemical Users Facility
Merit	Grace Griego	NREL	2001-2002 Federal Energy Saver Showcases
Merit	Karen Boush	Leopard	The Race is On white paper
Merit	Yvonne Kucher	Cisco Systems, Inc	Cisco SIP Proxy Server Admin Guide, Version 2.1
Merit		Advanced Energy	Pinnacle 3000 Power Supply Synchronized Receptacle Capable
Merit	Joe Evers	Dynojet Research	Air Fuel Ratio Module Installation & User Guide
Merit	Lucy Warner	UCAR Communications	Staff Notes Monthly
Merit	Lucy Warner	UCAR Communications	UCAR Quarterly
Merit	Lucy Warner	UCAR Communications	"How random is our winter weather?"
Achievement	Grace Griego	NREL	Super Energy Savings Performance Contracts

Achievement	Karen Boush	Leopard	The Utility Management Infrastructure white paper
Achievement	Karen Boush	Leopard	Enabling Utility Services exec brief
Achievement	Nicholas Petterssen	Electric Rain	Electric Rain Swift 3D V3 User Guide
Achievement	Paul Goble	Agilent Technologies	Agilent N4219A Packet Analysis
Achievement	Lucy Warner	UCAR	In the thick of climate change

The UCAR entry Picturing Climate's Complexity: Community Climate System Model went on to win an Award of Excellence at Internationals!

### Online Communications Competition

Award	Entrant(s)	Company	Entry Title
Distinguished	Kyle Schinkel	S&T Consulting	Data Integrator Help
Distinguished	Laurie Lamar	Lamar Online Design	Navigant Technologies Website
Distinguished	Karen Boush	Leopard	IBM Tivoli Virtual City Demo
Distinguished	Karen Boush	Leopard	Agilent AOI Demo
Excellence	Mary Darr	Intelligo	FRx DrillDown Viewer and Report Launcher Help
Excellence	Linda Gallagher	TechComm Plus	Window Washer 5.0 Online Help
Excellence	Kristy Lantz Astry	Encoda Systems	DALstation Help
Excellence	Grace Griego	NREL	DOE Weatherization Assistance Program Website
Excellence	Dawn Stevens	Jeppesen	FliteCrew DLS
Excellence	Karen Boush	Leopard	Leopard em Demo
Merit	Shawn Schuldies	Lightbridge	Fraud Centurion Online Help
Merit	Amy Casey	NSDIC	Antarctic Megadunes
Achievement	Ed Ryan	Jones Cyber Solutions	JESS Instructor Guide

Achievement	Grace Griego	NREL	National Renewable Energy Lab Website
Achievement	Marcia Popp	BNFL, Inc.	BNFL Inc., Corporate Website
Achievement	David Garrett	ZNXT Corporation	TFE Computer-based Training
Achievement	Vandi Williams	PeopleSoft	PeopleSoft EnterpriseOne 8.9 Demonstration

At the International Competition, Leopard's Tivoli Virtual City demo won an Award of Distinguished. The Agilent AOI Demo, also by Leopard, and the Navigant Technologies Website by Lamar Online Design both won Awards of Excellence!

Make sure to watch your email and the [chapter Website](#) for information on the Awards Reception, which will be held in lieu of the May chapter meeting.

[Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Naming honorary fellows - an STC tradition

by [Joanne Hackos](#)

At the STC annual meetings in Baltimore this May, a new Honorary Fellow will be named for 2004. She is Maxine Singer, a distinguished research scientist at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and President Emerita of the Carnegie Institution, Washington, D.C., where her innovative programs in science education for children and teachers served as models for the National Science Foundation. Her writings on molecular biology and genes research, with Nobel Laureate Paul Berg, have been praised for their clarity and lucidity.

In 2003, Fellow Natalie Angier was honored. A science writer and Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the *New York Times*, her book, *Woman: An Intimate Geography*, won critical acclaim from *Salon* as "a tantalizing, witty journey through female biology, debunking many entrenched stereotypes and myths and a lot of questionable science."

David Macaulay, Honorary Fellow in 2002, whose most recent book is *Mosque*, wrote *The Way Things Work and Cathedral* — two popular books that combine design, artistry and graceful writing about the inner workings of practical and not-so-practical constructions.

Our own David Suzuki was named Honorary Fellow in 2001 for his contributions to scientific and technical literacy through communication, and in 2000, our Honorary Fellow was the late Stephen J. Gould, professor and eminent scholar of evolutionary biology, who succumbed to cancer soon after we honored him.

This is an outstanding lineup of luminaries who have made significant contributions in their fields and who have enhanced the reputation of technical communication in the process.

This year, in particular, Maxine Singer exemplifies the role of a responsible scientist in society. She was a leader in establishing the rules of ethical behavior in gene research in the '70s and '80s, and after 9/11 she urged the government to engage the scientific and academic community in the fight against terrorism in op-ed pieces in the *Washington Post* and in collaborating on the book *Age of Terror: America and the World after September 11*.

We're looking for candidates for 2005 and 2006 and welcome nominations from members. If you have a candidate you think deserves our attention, check the current issue of *Intercom* or [www.stc.org/PDF\\_Files/AD-08-94.pdf](http://www.stc.org/PDF_Files/AD-08-94.pdf) for eligibility and nominating details, and write to Sheila C. Jones, Manager, Honorary Fellows Nominating Committee at [sheila@wordsmithss.com](mailto:sheila@wordsmithss.com). We want to hear from you!

## Maxine Singer: No ordinary fellow

by [Sheila C. Jones](#), Associate Fellow, Canada West Coast Chapter, and Manager, Honorary Fellows Nominating Committee

*Editor's note: Maxine Singer will give a presentation at STC's 51st Annual Conference on Monday, May 10, 2004, at 11 AM.*

There are many reasons Maxine Singer was chosen as STC's honorary fellow for 2004, but prime among them is her ability to tackle the important question of the day--the scientist's responsibility to society.

In a 2001 interview in the *Daily Nexus*, Freeman Dyson, a distinguished physicist, commended Singer for meeting this responsibility: Said Dyson, "She was the leader of the movement to establish rules for gene splicing some twenty years ago. The biological community all over the world stopped doing experiments for ten months so they would have time to think about the consequences, which was quite unique.

"Those rules have been maintained for the last twenty years without any problems. That's a great triumph for ethical behavior on the part of scientists. I wish the physicists had behaved as well when they had similar problems."

In the wake of 9/11, Maxine Singer wrote an opinion piece for the *Washington Post* in which she urged the government to call on the scientific and academic community to provide its expertise in the fight against terrorism—just as Vannevar Bush, head of the Carnegie Institution in 1940, urged President Roosevelt to bring openness, innovative ideas and research to the war effort. The result then was the establishment the Office of Scientific Research and Development. In a subsequent collaboration on the book *Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11*, and in a course at Yale based on the book, Singer addressed the challenge to science from new terrorist threats.

Maxine Singer is no ordinary fellow: She speaks out clearly and articulately, and makes her voice heard. She is a model for us all in these uncertain times.

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## February meeting review: Bill Horton, "Beyond the page and the Help window"

by [Jay Mead](#)

On a snowy night in February, 60 or so stalwart members of the Rocky Mountain Chapter gathered for a membership meeting presentation by author, consultant, and chapter member Bill Horton: "New techniques: Beyond conventional paper and online documents."

Bill is well known to STC members for his insightful presentations about online information design. A veteran of many international STC conferences, Bill and his partner Kit Horton always demonstrate an exciting array of creative techniques for presenting information. Most important, Bill's approach and method evolves over the years to keep abreast of technology and the most exciting new ideas about user needs and online learning.

Tonight did not disappoint. Bill's presentation, complete with his extensive commentary and detailed slide demonstration, showcased many approaches to online information that bypass altogether the old standbys of paper books dumped online and standard WinHelp and HTML Help systems. His approach can be characterized by a principle of learning we too often forget: people don't learn best by reading or listening. They learn by doing.

How can we use a computer keyboard and monitor to give users "hands-on" learning experiences in a variety of fields, some of which may have nothing to do with computing? Bill presented a number of innovative techniques. Current technology makes possible software simulations, for example, that can be highly interactive and engaging. Bill demonstrated a "Crime Scene Game" he had developed for a law enforcement client, in which "players" took on investigator roles and made choices about how to interview suspects and witnesses, and how to react to different behaviors. The game is largely text-based and uses few images, but with rich interactivity the user is constantly engaged and active, and can learn what kind of questions and comments elicit information - and what approaches lead only to dead ends.

Games are similar to simulations, though often with a more light-hearted approach. Word games, puzzles, adventures, game show games - as trivial as the method sounds, research shows that games may receive four times or more the voluntary participation of simple fill-in-the-blanks learning activities. Bill showed a puzzle game he had developed to teach architecture terms and concepts, along with a tutorial. He pointed out that their research had showed that users who skipped the tutorial and went right to the game scored as well on post-tests as those who diligently studied the tutorial.

Online coached practice sessions and guided tours are effective ways of leading users

through complex situations, giving them choices, and teaching them right and wrong approaches. These can be like elaborate wizards, with the difference being that wizards often simply demonstrate proper procedure, while an effective online coaching session gives the user choices and explains incorrect selections in detail, much as a human coach might.

Other online teaching techniques involve the use of databases tailored to user needs ("online museums"); community knowledge sharing, networking, and discussion; virtual laboratories; scavenger hunts; and libraries.

Bill discussed skills needed to build these kinds of interactive and highly personalized online learning systems. Most are skills many of us have or can acquire: Flash is probably most important; Javascript and HTML are also required for most online information delivery development. For systems based on large repositories of information, database skills may be necessary as well. Communicators who want to expand their range of online information delivery techniques may want to develop these skills, as well as keep current with the large variety of information delivery software on the market.

Have a look at Bill's website for more information and a compendium of information development resources: [www.horton.com](http://www.horton.com). The Powerpoint handouts for his February RMC membership talk are available at [www.designingwbt.com/content/newtechniques.pdf](http://www.designingwbt.com/content/newtechniques.pdf).

And keep in mind Bill's own motto: "Doing the thing right is no good if you are doing the wrong thing." Bill demonstrated some of the right and wrong things we're doing to serve our users. We have the technology and the skill—it's up to us to explore new methods of communicating information in ways that best serve our users.

◀ Back

[Technicalities home](#)

Next ▶

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Tips from the trenches

*by* [Deb Lockwood](#)

During his presentation at the February chapter meeting, Bill Horton asked a rhetorical question about how we market ourselves. His question got me thinking about the whole area of personal marketing. Do we market ourselves by the tasks we perform, or by the tools we use? If you look in the Sunday newspaper, you will see that most employers still ask for tool users, not task performers. So how do we break out of that tool-user mold? The answer is to educate our potential employers and clients.

To gather information for this article, I sent a message to our chapter's e-mail list with the following questions:

- How do you market yourself?
- When people ask you what you do for a living, what do you tell them?
- What is your elevator speech?
- Have you changed your marketing message to accommodate a changing job market?

I received several responses. All respondents agreed that marketing ourselves by the tools we use is a poor plan of action. Rather, we need to tirelessly champion the idea that technical communicators are cross-tool, cross-subject, cross-industry professionals who clearly and concisely convey information about a product or topic to a target audience.

Of late, I have noticed a few employers including tasks, rather than tools, in their job postings on the Rocky Mountain Chapter's Web site. With that encouraging thought in mind, read on to see how this month's contributors market their services to potential employers and clients.

The responses are arranged by question and have been edited. Thanks to everyone who responded to my query.

### How do you market yourself? When people ask what you do for a living, what do you tell them?

In the dozen years I've been contracting and consulting, I've always marketed myself by tasks, not tools. You can teach a good writer to use the tools; you can't necessarily teach a tool-user to be a good writer. For example, can you design a document set? How many years of what tool demonstrates that you are good at that task? Can you develop a useful index? It's the thinking that's important; you can use whatever tool the document is in.

Alas, the typical recruiter gets a requirement from a client (who typically doesn't

understand the writing tasks very well) that says something like "X years FrameMaker." I've even seen requirements of "X" number of years for a tool where the "X" is several years more than the number of years the tool has existed. Probably the client didn't know the history of the application, just that he'd heard about it, it was great, and he wanted someone who could use it. If 2 years is good, isn't 5 years even better?

The "number of years per tool" discussion is a helpful barometer in an interview. If the interviewer is concentrating on these issues, it may be a clue that this is an environment that may not understand or be supportive of quality writing. (It may take awhile to develop a "gut feeling" of whether a contract will be a good fit for you as a technical communicator.)

Personal example: My longest contract started as a 3-month stint to develop a service manual for a medical diagnostic instrument. I'd never done service manuals or medical writing, but the SME/interviewer saw the thinking processes and ability to learn these subjects. The client renewed the contract multiple times—I was there more than six years, writing many service manuals, one of which received a Distinguished Technical Communication award at STC's international competition.

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I've always marketed myself by what I can do. It has dismayed me for years that many employers put more emphasis on tool knowledge than on writing and designing abilities.

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First, I state who I am and my mission: I am a writer and editor who helps you articulate what your company does, how it is unique, why that is important, and what you need to be successful. Then I state what I do: I produce documentation that needs to be written, rewritten, updated, etc. Then I state for what kind of application: I produce operations, administration, and business development documentation. Then I state the deliverables: I have produced such varied deliverables as plans, forms, templates, manuals, and guides. Then I make a value statement.

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I market myself by skills. The tools change all the time, so that seems limiting to me (and only encourages employers to focus on tools at the expense of actual talent). No wonder employers think anyone can do the job, if "professional" technical communicators convey the notion that their job is a matter of knowing a couple of tools that almost any administrative assistant can learn. We're allowing ourselves to be out-sourced offshore by not defining our value appropriately.

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This is a sore point for me. I was in the field before it became focused on tools, so this focus has always seemed absurd. I've had to learn many tools over the years, and it's never been terribly difficult to learn a new one. The value in the profession is the ability to research, interview, understand technical concepts, use new products without the advantage of documentation, and, yes, actually be able to write in a clear, concise manner. I can understand that if an employer is hiring for a short-term contract, it's essential that the person know the tools to be used. If employers are hiring long-term employees, they need to invest in training as the field changes.

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The field has changed tremendously over the years. I've found that a good technical writer can adapt to new tools much better than a tools-focused individual can adapt to technically challenging writing projects. I also believe that technical writers need to be very knowledgeable in at least one technical area. I still prefer to call myself a writer, rather than a document analyst or documentation specialist or whatever other titles might be in vogue at the moment. I consider writing my strong point. I'm always trying to educate employers. I have had the experience of not taking a job because the interviewer seemed too tools-focused. I assumed it wasn't a good fit for me.

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Instead of a user of tools or a doer of tasks, I market myself as a provider of solutions because I can't think of a single company that doesn't have problems!

I've been in this field for 25 years. I would never think of marketing myself on the tools. In fact, I consider it an insult. I market myself as an experienced writer with a strong technical background and an ability to explain technical concepts in a clear, concise manner. I put the tools on my resume, but I don't define myself by them.

When asked what I do, I say I'm a technical writer. I choose that title because I think people may have some notion of what it is. Other terms that I often use with colleagues, like technical communicator, I think are too vague for those outside of our field to understand.

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After hearing the presentation at the senior member's dinner, I think I'm going to change my marketing tactics to focus more on my analysis and information-processing skills, in hopes of shifting away from the technical writer category to something either more general or more specific. (I don't know the answer to that question quite yet: general or specific?)

I've never been big on selling my skills with a particular tool or technology. I've always thought of myself as a writer; the end. To my way of thinking, the person who tells me they're an expert in MS Word isn't telling me anything about his or her writing skills. If that person can't write, all the toolset experience in the world isn't going to make any difference.

## **What is your elevator speech?**

I am an award-winning document developer and technical writer who makes complex information understandable for your users. (I then add 1-2 customized sentences, depending on the situation.)

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I write user guides for hardware and software products for both print and online use.

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As a technical communication consultant, my job is to help clients analyze and distill complex information into its essential elements in such a way that their customers can understand and use the knowledge to do their jobs more effectively. I also help clients examine their processes and documentation for internationalization issues so that they can save costs in localization while improving quality and better meeting the needs of their international customers.

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I write content for all kinds of things: books, Web sites, training materials. Basically, I make technical subjects easy for readers to understand.

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I have several elevator speeches tucked under my belt and pull out the one that best fits the audience. Am I at a cocktail party where no one knows what the heck a technical writer is? Am I at an STC regional conference where it will be necessary to distinguish myself from the other 100 people in the room? Am I at a networking event of businesswomen who are genuinely interested in what I do for a living?

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Hi, my name is (name here). I help companies describe how to do things...how to use a product...how to put it together or make it work...how to perform a task. My clients ask me to write their documents because they know I can explain things and make them easy to understand. That saves them money and keeps their customers happy. When was the last time you read a good instruction manual or user guide?

## **Have you changed your marketing message to accommodate a changing job market?**

Only one contributor responded to this question. She said that she has not changed her marketing message, but she has had to be more flexible on rates and payment options. She does emphasize her ability to create both print and online outputs from a single source, thereby saving time and money and ensuring consistency.

Contributors: Leslie Bateman, Rita Braun, Kit Brown, Rose Dotson, Carol Elkins, Linda Gallagher, John Martin

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Change: The nature of the beast

by [Ron Arner](#), Managing Editor

How many of you know what an RSS feed is?

I recently received an email from a member of the newsletter editors' listserve asking me if our newsletter (or chapter Web site) had an RSS feed. "RSS feed???" I thought. "What's that?"

I hate feeling like I've missed out on the opportunity a new technology or program offers, and I can't help but feel a little embarrassed when someone drops a phrase like "RSS feed" that I've never heard of. I've come to realize, however, that change is simply an aspect of the field of technical communications that will not, pardon my redundancy, change. The constantly evolving nature of technology and the highly competitive economics of our world will continue to shape the future of technical communication for some time.

It turns out that RSS is an XML format that allows you to share (syndicated) information from your Web site with others, or vice versa. This happens via a publisher, if you're sending information, or a reader, if you're receiving it. Your publisher will send and/or your reader will receive information and update Web pages automatically whenever something of interest happens. It's like a high-tech version of the tickertape machine. The information managed by RSS can be anything from headlines to new product pitches.

The latest issue of *Intercom* mentions another up-and-coming variation of XML called VXML. I did a little better guessing at what VXML stands for than I did with the term "RSS feed." The V in VXML stands for voice—not direct interaction with a computer as I thought it would be, but rather for interaction over a phone line. VXML, once perfected, will offer users the ability to communicate with computers over the phone in a much more sophisticated manner than simple push-button response systems. Similar technologies and variations of VXML are already in use as you may know.

I try to stay current on the latest trends in our industry by being an active member of STC, reading publications like *Technical Communication* and *Intercom* faithfully, and by working towards an M.S. degree in Technical Communications. Nevertheless, I continue to be amazed by the new advances in technology and the adaptability those advances require of us as technical communicators. I have come to the conclusion that it is very naive to try to develop skills in all aspects of our field, or to master every software program that is commonly used. Such efforts will only result in mediocre skills in all areas rather than advanced skills in one.

I believe I can become a much more effective technical communicator by choosing the aspect of technical communication that I like the most and applying myself in that direction. At the same time, I need to keep looking in my rear-view mirror for the next

advancement that threatens to pass me by on the cyber highway of life. If I can see a change coming, I can at least try to keep up with it so I'm not left in its dust, or worse, devoured by it's ravenous appetite.

*Source cited:*

*Voice Extensible Markup Language Status* by Richard J. Lippincott, *Intercom*, April 2004.

*RSS Websites:*

[What is RSS?](#) (XML.org)

[Publishing 2.0](#) (Doc Searl's weblog)

[Supporting enterprise knowledge management with weblogs: A weblog services roadmap](#) (urlgreyhot.com)

◀ Back

[Technicalities home](#)

Next ▶

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-  
Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting  
review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for  
2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical  
Communication  
Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst  
Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming  
STC](#)[Chapter support is good  
for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Bragging rights

by [Frank Tagader](#), STC RMC President

During my second trip through the RMC presidency, I had planned to do some sweeping editorials on the state of the industry. Then, the state of the industry interceded, changed my working life, and I decided not to step into the role of industry prognosticator. Instead I've focused on what has been happening to me during this year of change. Getting knocked from one's high perch can give you a new perspective. Trying to make guesses on where the industry is headed is heady stuff. It's difficult to even know what one's core job responsibilities are on a day-to-day basis.

So, let me talk about something I feel comfortable talking about: holding the office of president of this chapter. Has this year been a better presidency for the chapter than the last time I served in this role? The ultimate answer lies outside my purview and with the members of this chapter. But from a personal standpoint I know I am far more confident than I was a few short years ago. I'm far less likely to bend my will to accommodate the popular view of the moment. I think my approach is far more businesslike and less likely to be driven by an emotional response. And, I'm more than willing to push my own agenda (knowing that I am doing my best for the chapter). I am far more arrogant. I am definitely more of a curmudgeon. There are certain things I wanted to accomplish this year (and for the most part I have). And there have been plenty of situations to deal with as they arise (I've lost count). This chapter/this society can make you laugh, make you cry, make you scream, and still come away with the satisfaction that you know you did the right thing for yourself and for your fellow members.

STC is in a bit of an identity crisis. The Transformation Committee at the international level is addressing the factors that need to be addressed for the society to move forward. There is a sense of limbo and ennui that go hand in hand with this type of transformation. There is a certain uncertainty as to what the future will bring.

But, where does the RMC chapter stand? What are the advantages that this chapter can continue to capitalize on?

- We're big. While we will probably never rival the Silicon Valley chapter in number of members, we can hold our own among the top chapters in the world.
- We're financially solid. At STC conferences, we are envied for the large cushion of money we have to fall back on. For many years, while other chapters have freely spent their coffers, the RMC has continued to invest money in interest-bearing accounts. While recent years have not been the greatest for generating interest, this chapter's funding remains something to brag about. And, the administrative council is more than willing to spend money wisely. If you see a need for a program or offering that might cost us money that does not take it out of consideration. You as a member should let us know where to spend our

funds. As your elected board, we may bypass on some things, but we are more than willing to entertain new ideas.

- We're rich in volunteers and leaders. This chapter has a committed group of volunteers/leaders. This is both a blessing and a curse. There is a perception from some members that this "group" is "cliquish." I much prefer a perception of cronyism to having a lack of leadership and continuity. A nearby chapter seems to definitely lack stable leadership. I have a couple of friends who were chapter presidents of this other chapter at about the same time I last served as RMC president. Neither of them is involved in their chapter any longer nor are they members of the society. Within this chapter, you will find that many of the past officers continue to remain active in the chapter and to continue to care about the continued welfare of the chapter's future.
- New people will come here willingly. Despite the continued economic malaise here, people do want to work here. While our strong group of leaders can continue to support and mentor this chapter, my biggest wish for this chapter is for us to foster leadership in younger/newer members so that they can continue to carry forward the strengths of this chapter into the future to serve their constituency. This is not my usual plug for volunteers to fill specific positions. If you feel you have the leadership qualities that you want to have nurtured, then get involved in the chapter. And, make it a commitment. Not just for a year or two, but for the long haul.

I'm definitely older. I see myself as wiser. I hope I've done the right thing for you.

[◀ Back](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Next ▶](#)

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[.pdf version](#)[masthead](#)[archives](#)[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)[Technicalities home](#)[Chapter news](#)[From our Director-Sponsor](#)[President's corner](#)[Message from the editor](#)[Tips from the trenches](#)[February chapter meeting review](#)[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)[2003-2004 Technical Communication Competition results](#)[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)[Think weird and prosper](#)[A model for transforming STC](#)[Chapter support is good for all](#)[STC RMC home](#)[STC International home](#)

## Back to basics: Writing skills are still crucial

by [Rahel Baillie](#), Region 7 Director-Sponsor

With all the discussion about commodity job migrating across the globe, and the need to expand our skill set and re-invent ourselves, you might think that, by extension, the emphasis on writing is diminishing. I certainly don't believe this; I think that strong writing skills are a critical part of the skill set we bring to the workplace. Whether our jobs are called business analyst, usability professional, or technical writer, our ability to clearly communicate information to our audiences is a given.

I do, however, challenge writers to rethink how we think of our writing skills, to put them in a new perspective. When I am convincing an employer or client of my value, I don't focus on the fact that I'm a writer. To use a bit of business jargon, that's not my value proposition. The value that I bring is to solve a communication problem, and I do that through clear communication, which involves, as a matter of course, good writing skills.

To use a different metaphor, a carpenter doesn't impress me because he has a fancy drill. He impresses me because he can use it, as part of his tool set, to build the cabinet I want built. I don't actually care what kind of drill he has, as long as the results work and are attractive. The carpenter certainly cares about the quality of his tools, as they allow him to create a better end product, but I don't want him trying to convince me that his end product will be better because he owns a fancier drill. Likewise, I don't try to convince a client that I can fix their problem because I have a better tool set. It's how I wield those tools, the results I produce with my tools, which impresses my clients.

One of the reasons I've been thinking about how we perceive our skills is that I've been looking at resumes lately, and I must admit that I'm hard-pressed to find resumes that reflect the writing skills people claim they have. After all, what faith do I have that candidates can articulate the features of a product when their resumes don't reflect the skill sets they claim to have?

Some of the give-aways are easy. "Development of new user guides"—this distinguishes between the work from "development of old user guides"?

"Research of new and exiting [sic] software features, functionality, and troubleshooting issues for inclusion in new user guides"—why someone would troubleshoot the issues to be included in a user guide is beyond me, unless these were to accompany the "exiting" features. Semantics, perhaps, but shouldn't our self-marketing pieces reflect how we use the tools of our trade?

Some of the give-aways aren't as immediately apparent. It's the portfolio pieces that look fine at a glance, but once you start reading, there are obvious gaps in logic, or the style inconsistencies are glaring. In the elaborate online portfolio, describing one's

company as a "loosely knitted group of writers and editors" or having worked in "a number of primary industries" (well, I *suppose* fishing and trapping could use technical communicators) are immediate red flags for me. At the risk of mixing my metaphors, the musician may own a great violin, but shouldn't apply to the symphony just quite yet.

To come back to the importance of writing, we want our skills to be at symphony level. The employer or client won't be as interested by the writing tools you bring, but what you can do with those tools to create value for the company.

We can demonstrate our worth to employers or clients by determining what results they consider to be of value—Reduced support calls through better instructions? More clarity on a brand new process? Decreased liability through accuracy of content? Better usability for a software product? Better task paths on a Web site?—and then illustrate how your services can create that value. Doing this makes the case for hiring you in two distinct ways. First, you've made the connection between the desired results and how you contribute toward those results. And second, you can use your writing tool to make your presentation, thereby showcasing your work as part of the process of making the sale.

A quick Internet search located the following resources about showing the value of technical communication. Putting good writing into practice isn't something we can look up; it's only something we can practice.

Saul Carliner's article on demonstrating effectiveness and value of technical communication products:

<http://www.docntrain.com/libdn1d/carliner04.html>

The ROI of usability from the Usability Professionals' Association:

[http://www.upassoc.org/usability\\_resources/usability\\_in\\_the\\_real\\_world/roi\\_of\\_usability.html](http://www.upassoc.org/usability_resources/usability_in_the_real_world/roi_of_usability.html)

Mikes Hughes' article on identifying the value proposition of technical communication:

<http://www.mindspring.com/~mikehughes/files/Knowledge%20Creation.pdf>

◀ Back

[Technicalities home](#)

Next ▶

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[◀ Back](#) [Next ▶](#)

[Technicalities home](#)

[Chapter news](#)

[From our Director-Sponsor](#)

[President's corner](#)

[Message from the editor](#)

[Tips from the trenches](#)

[February chapter meeting review](#)

[STC's Honorary Fellow for 2004](#)

[2003-2004 Technical Communication Competition results](#)

[TS's fourth annual Worst Manual Contest](#)

[Think weird and prosper](#)

[A model for transforming STC](#)

[Chapter support is good for all](#)

## Chapter news

### Rocky Mountain Chapter honored at the STC International Public Relations Competition

Congratulations to Carla Mead and the Publicity committee for winning an Award of Excellence at the STC International Public Relations Competition!

### Congratulations to our new Associate Fellows!

The board of directors of the Society for Technical Communication has recently announced the addition of two new associate fellows within the Rocky Mountain Chapter.

The Rocky Mountain Chapter congratulates Nancy E. Walters and Barbara J. Miller on their achievement of this honorary rank within the Society.

Nancy and Barbara are outstanding members of our chapter and have served the chapter and the Society in countless ways. Both have been president of this chapter, have mentored many members throughout the years, and have contributed to the overall health and stability of this chapter. They have also made exceptional contributions to both the Society and the profession.

The Society recognizes and honors deserving senior members by conferring upon them the rank of associate fellow. Those selected as associate fellows are exceptional individuals who have demonstrated a consistent pattern of meaningful contributions to the Society over a period of years. The rank of associate fellow is elective and honorary and is based on the recommendations of a committee of fellows and associate fellows. The honor is conferred by a two-thirds vote of the entire board of directors.

Nancy and Barbara join Patty J. Gillespie as our chapter's associate fellows. In addition to these associate fellows, the chapter also has five members conferred as fellows, the highest rank in the Society. These members are Art Elser, George Hoerter, William Horton, JoAnn Hackos, and Don Zimmerman.

While it has been many years since we have had members conferred as associate fellows, there are a number of senior members of this chapter that should be considered for nominations next year. Any chapter or member can recommend a senior member for associate fellow. The associate fellows nominating committee reviews candidate biographies and then nominates from the submitted biographies. The associate fellows are then elected by the STC board each year in January. It is not too early to start considering who might be associate fellow candidates for next year. Candidates must meet minimum requirements. If you know of a worthy senior member, please email [Frank Tagader](#) or [Martha Sippel](#).

[STC RMC home](#)

[STC International home](#)

## George E. Hoerter Scholarship winners announced

The Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is pleased to announce this year's recipients of the George E. Hoerter Scholarship program.

This year we are providing scholarships to two graduate students: Kathryn Recchiuti of Centennial and Bridget Julian of Fort Collins.

Kathryn is pursuing a post-graduate degree at the University of Colorado at Denver in the technical communication program. She is in the second year of the program. She maintains a 3.96 grade-point average and is anticipating graduating in May of 2006.

Bridget is anticipating receiving her graduate degree this May from Colorado State University's journalism and technical communication program. Bridget maintains a 4.0 grade-point average.

The RMC gives up to two scholarships each year to technical communication students attending college or university within our geographic area. The scholarship program is named for George Hoerter, a fellow of the Society and a member of the Rocky Mountain Chapter for many years. George has mentored many technical communicators over a few decades. Through this scholarship program, his commitment to education continues to be passed on.

Details of the scholarship program can be found at: <http://www.stcrmc.org/chapter/scholar.htm>.

## Welcome our chapter's new members!

New members for the months of January and February, 2004:

January 2004	February 2004
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Richard Foye</li><li>• Mindy Jamiel</li><li>• Peter Probeck</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Catherine Brosseau</li><li>• Eric Merges</li><li>• Richard Morrison</li><li>• Robin Parks</li><li>• Kathy Recchiuti</li><li>• Robert Smith</li><li>• Dave Sweetser</li><li>• Chris Thomas</li><li>• Katrina Wiese</li></ul>

## It's election time!

You don't have to wait until November to cast your ballot in an important election! This month we elect the officers who will provide leadership for the chapter during the 2004-2005 STC RMC year. We will be using Survey Monkey again, so expect an email soon that will give you the link to the ballot. Don't miss this important opportunity to be part of the electoral process-every vote counts!

## Salary survey results

Our intrepid salary survey team has posted the results of our latest biennial survey to

the site at [http://www.stcrmc.org/salary/2003/salary\\_2003.htm](http://www.stcrmc.org/salary/2003/salary_2003.htm). This is valuable information. It shows the effect of our sluggish economy on the profession and the net results for you and your fellow technical communicators. You can see where you stand in respect to your peers and you might want to pass information on to your employer. Who knows, it may get a bump in pay. Congratulations to Molly Malsam and her team for putting together a fine survey and compiling the results.

### **In memory...**

Tina-Marie Leja, 41, of 1205 Clark St., Fort Collins, Colo., formerly of North Adams, died January 31, 2004, as the result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident in Fort Collins.

Born in North Adams on April 1, 1962, daughter of Bernard V. and Mary Florini Germanowski of North Adams, she graduated as salutatorian from Drury High School in 1980 and with honors from Smith College in Northampton in 1984, receiving a bachelor of arts in English.

Ms. Leja had been employed as a learning system architect by Hewlett-Packard Corp. for 19 years. She was a communicant of St. Elizabeth's Church in Fort Collins, where she taught Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. While in North Adams, she was a communicant of St. Anthony's Church. She was a member of the Rocky Mountain Society for Technical Communications and the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Association of Computing Machines' Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction.

Besides her parents, she leaves a brother, John B. Germanowski of Lenox. Survivors include a sister-in-law, Deborah Bourquard Germanowski, and a nephew, Matthew J. Germanowski, both of Lenox.

◀ Back

[Technicalities home](#)

Next ▶

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