



# Technicalities



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April/May 2005

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## Technicalities

This site is best viewed with Internet Explorer 5x or newer.

### Editorial Staff

Managing Editor: Ron Arner

Assistant Editor: Kristy Lantz Astry

Article Editors: Bridget Julian, Jay Mead, Lynnette Reveling

Newsletter Staff: Deb Lockwood

Newsletter design by Steve Kavalec and Ron Arner

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.

**Note:** *By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.*

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, by e-mail at [news@stcrmc.org](mailto:news@stcrmc.org), and by postal mail at 820 S. Monaco Pkwy. #286, Denver, CO 80224. 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).

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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 2004-2005 Officers**

### **Administrative Council**

President: [Marc Lee](#), 303.460.8391  
Vice President: [Marella Colyvas](#), 303.763.4044  
Secretary: [Ruth Gaulke](#), 720.851.9737  
Treasurer: [Lynnette Reveling](#), 303.768.1253  
Past President: [Frank Tagader](#), 303.758.2285

### **Region 7 Director-Sponsor:**

[Rahel Anne Bailie](#)

## **STC RMC Committee Managers**

Competitions (all): Marella Colyvas  
Database: Karen Kraft-Miller  
Education: Donald Zimmerman  
Jobs/Professionalism: Anne Halsey  
List Server: Currently vacant  
Membership: Helen Tuttle  
Mentoring: Deb Lockwood  
Nominating Committee: [Cathy Barnes](#), [Eileen Thornir](#)  
Programs: Michael Livsey  
Publicity: Carla Mead  
Seminars: Julie Welander  
Volunteers: Kim Bell  
Web site: Anne Halsey

## **STC RMC SIG Managers**

Contractors and Independent Consultants: Linda Gallagher  
FrameMaker: Larry Prado, Terese St. Jacques  
Information Design and Usability: Laurie Lamar  
Northern Colorado: Ralph Towers  
Online and Multimedia: Marella Colyvas and Kathy Ramsey  
Western Slope: Victoria Thomas

## **Society for Technical Communication, Rocky Mountain Chapter**

### **General Chapter Business**

Rocky Mountain Chapter  
Society for Technical Communication  
820 S. Monaco Pkwy. #286  
Denver, CO 80224

[info@stcrmc.org](mailto:info@stcrmc.org)

### Job Postings

Send job postings to [jobs@stcrmc.org](mailto:jobs@stcrmc.org)

Jobs are posted on the chapter website ([http://www.stcrmc.org/jobs\\_freelance.jobs.htm](http://www.stcrmc.org/jobs_freelance.jobs.htm)), and are emailed to the techcomm-discuss mailing list.

### Chapter website

<http://www.stcrmc.org>

### STC International Office

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904  
Arlington, VA 22203-1822  
703.522.4114

[stc@stc.org](mailto:stc@stc.org)

<http://www.stc.org>



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## Chapter News

### Martha Sippel Wins Nominating Committee Position

Martha Sippel, past president of STCRMCMC, has won a position on STC international's Nominating Committee.

More details will appear in the next edition of *Technicalities*. [Click here](#) for a complete listing of the election results.

Congratulations, Martha!

### Welcome Our New and Returning Members

New and returning members for the months of February and March:

#### February 2005

- Jason M. Arnsperger
- Janice K. Calm
- Chris T. DeMink
- Leif K. Hanson
- Karen L. Nicoulin

#### March 2005

- Erin Beaver
- Thomas A. Brugger
- Larissa P. Carroll
- David R. Kapp
- Kent D. Lister
- Audrey J. Verdos

## Senior Members

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Congratulations to the following new and/or returning Senior Members of the Rocky Mountain Chapter:

- Pamela J. Cecil
- Kristine E. Demarest
- Angela Estes-Rank
- Constance Fabian-Isaacs
- Jeanie M. Fogwell
- Alida L. Franco
- Karen L. Godshalk
- Karla J. Griffin
- A.J. Herran
- Charles S. Hogeman
- Apryl Vance Johnson
- John M. Lahr
- Michael D. Livsey
- James A. Malone
- Lisa Metzgar
- Jeffrey D. Newsom
- Frank E. Nowell
- Claire D. Schram
- Ken R. Tilley
- Emily K. Wagner

## Instructional Design Seminars

STC RMC is sponsoring two instructional design seminars in May, both presented by Performance Technologist Jane Smith. Registration is now open to both members and non-members.

Registered seminar attendees: If you have chosen to pay by check, your check must be received at the address given in the registration form by May 15, 2005. If we do not receive your check by then, we will open your space to another registrant.

Due to the seminars' interactive nature, attendance is limited to 20 participants for each session.

- **The ABCs of Instructional Design**, May 20, 8:30 am - 4 pm, CSU Denver Center  
As of May 2, 2005, 13 seats remain - 11 member, 2 student
- **E-learning: What's Different**, May 21, 8:30 am - 4 pm, CSU Denver Center  
As of May 2, 2005, 7 seats remain - 5 member, 2 student

Visit the [seminar announcement page](#) for details. To register now, click [here](#).



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## Solutions, Inc.

by [Ron Arner](#)

Some recent tips, how-to's, and advice from the Rocky Mountain Chapter Listserve:

### Thread #1: Adobe to Acquire Macromedia:

Well, we already know that RoboHelp was twilighted by Macromedia when they bought eHelp, now, Adobe buys Macromedia - should be interesting: <http://www.adobe.com/aboutadobe/invrelations/adobeandmacromedia.html>

### Thread #2: Imaging Outsourcing/Technology?:

Members:

I have a paper-only source document of about 300 pages that I need to get into an online form so that I can post it to an intranet site. I don't need to be able to modify the document (online access is sufficient), but it is important for the image to be identical to the original.

Scanning is an obvious solution, but the file size would be prohibitive. Does anyone know of another technology that might accomplish the same thing or, even better, someone who might provide such a service?

Thanks, in advance, for your thoughts and advice.

---

This sounds like a job for Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software, which converts a scanned image into a smaller Word or PDF file. The downside is that these programs are not all that good at converting tables, columns and other tricky layouts. You may have to do a lot of reformatting, and smell-checking (sic) is a must to avoid painful errors. The most popular programs for Windows are Scansoft OmniPage and ABBYY FineReader. You can download a free trial of FineReader ([www.abbyyusa.com](http://www.abbyyusa.com)) to see if it meets your needs.

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My guess is that a 300-page PDF would be about 2.5 MB. I don't think you'll be able to do much better than that if you need the image to be exactly like the original. You should be able to scan direct-to-PDF (or use a fax-to-PDF service such as Maxemail) If that's too big, then you might have to re-evaluate your requirements and consider HTML.

### **Thread #3: Database Interface:**

STC'ers,

I've learned that a potential upcoming project for me is to re-design a Webpage that interfaces with an SQL database. The Webpage re-design part doesn't bother me, but I don't know where to begin as far as interaction with the database is concerned. I'm inexperienced at writing scripts of this kind. The page will need to include a search function, the ability for members of the committee to login to the database, and the ability for these same members to post new contributions/reviews to the site.

Can anyone recommend good resources that would lead me in the right direction? If so, I would greatly appreciate it!

---

I'm a novice myself so I don't have a specific reference for you - look at Amazon for books about creating .asp pages (active server pages). Here's one possible link that may get you up to speed quickly...

[ASP.NET for Dummies](#) (for beginning to intermediate users, includes CD-ROM w/ sample database)

*ASP.NET For Dummies* gets you going in a hurry. Instead of having to wade through pages of theory before you can actually play with the technology, you get to jump in and create your first ASP.NET page in the very first chapter! Find out how to

- Understand ASP.NET and Visual Basic .NET terms and languages
- Create cool elements with ASP.NET's built-in objects
- Discover ways to let Web site users enter information and get responses
- Validate user input
- Use the .NET Framework Class Library to teach your applications new tricks
- Enable users to access information from a database and keep the information up to date
- Combine ASP.NET with other technologies to create more exciting Web applications

---

You'll have to interface between the webpages and the database with some middleware. There are lots of kinds but they all basically work the same....

some sort of scripting to get the data and put it in the database or pull it out. One thing, you'll probably have to learn some SQL, which is the language to talk to a SQL database. Normally you just embed your SQL commands right into the middleware scripts.

Give me a call if you want to talk about it. Incidentally, I highly recommend that you learn to do this. Technical communicators that can do some (or much) of their own scripting code are much more in demand than those who don't. There are many, many, many websites devoted to helping people do this type of work....most of them are specific to a type of middleware language such as perl, ASP, mySql, ColdFusion, etc.. etc.

One other thing...you should learn as much as possible about how the website will be hosted. Depending on the hosting software such as Microsoft, Solaris, Linux, etc., this will dictate a lot about the database tools and the middleware tools that you'll want to use.

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If you like, subscribe to the STC Webmasters list and post your question there. When you complete the form to subscribe, please put Rocky Mountain with your name.

The URL is: <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcwebmaster-l>.

The Online Information SIG is being reactivated, and if you join you can also use the mailing list of that SIG.



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## Tips from the Trenches

by [Deb Lockwood](#)

Blogs seem to be all rage these days. Although blogs—as a recognized standard of communication—are still in their infancy, they are now ubiquitous.

For anyone who doesn't know, a blog (short for weblog) is a "personal journal that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or reflect the purpose of the Web site that hosts the blog. The essential characteristics of the blog are its journal form, typically a new entry each day, and its informal style." (courtesy [www.whatis.com](http://www.whatis.com))

Because of the popularity of blogs and the prevalence of the word in recent conversations I've had with people, I was curious to see what technical communicators had to say in this community. Therefore, I went on a search for blogs that were about technical communication. I found several, and have listed them here.

My list is by no means fully inclusive of the blogs that are available on the Web, but it is indicative of the technical communication blogger community. I've listed these blogs in alphabetical order by page title. Editor's Note: The following links were active at the time this issue of *Technicalities* was published.

- Bob Caron's Blog: Technical Writing <http://blogs.msdn.com/robcaron/archive/category/5241.aspx>
- Creative Tech Writer <http://www.creativetechwriter.com/>
- Document Hack: A Technical Writer's Journal <http://www.poewar.com/archives/category/about-writing/technical-writing/>
- Epic Trends <http://www.epictrends.com/usability-technical-writing-copywriting-multimedia/index.shtml>
- Guys Blog Some Thoughts on Communication [http://swexegete.typepad.com/GuysBlog/technical\\_communication/](http://swexegete.typepad.com/GuysBlog/technical_communication/)
- IDblog: An Information Design Web Log <http://www.idblog.org/>
- Idiotprogrammer <http://www.imaginaryplanet.net/weblogs/idiotprogrammer/index.php?cat=28>
- Keyboard Hack [http://inkywretch.typepad.com/keyboard\\_hack/](http://inkywretch.typepad.com/keyboard_hack/)

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- Rick Henkel - FrameMaker Stuff <http://frameuser.blogspot.com/>
- Ryan Moore's Weblog <http://www.rymoore.com/weblog/>
- Scott on Writing <http://scottonwriting.com/sowblog/>
- Software Documentation Weblog <http://weblogs.goshaky.com/weblogs/page/lars>
- Technical Writing Blog <http://techwriting.blogdrive.com/>
- Technical Writing Blog <http://www.aztec-it.com.au/twblog/>
- Technical Writing Resources <http://technicalwriting.blogspot.com/>
- Usable Help <http://www.g2meyer.com/usablehelp/>
- Will Kelly [http://willkelly.typepad.com/will\\_kelly/](http://willkelly.typepad.com/will_kelly/)
- Wing Group's Technical Writing Blog <http://www.wing-group.com/blog.asp>
- Writer's Blog <http://www.writerswrite.com/writersblog/>
- Writers India Blog on Tech Writing <http://tw-india.blogspot.com/>

Finally, for a list of blogs that are written by all varieties of published authors, go to Author Blogs at About.com. <http://weblogs.about.com/od/authorblogs/>

If you have any personal-favorite technical communications blogs that don't appear in my list, please send me an e-mail message at [deb\\_lockwood@csgsystems.com](mailto:deb_lockwood@csgsystems.com). I'll include yours in our next edition.



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## President's Corner

by [Marc Lee](#), STCRMC President

One of the little-known features of chapter presidency is that you receive the emails that are mailed to [info@stcrmc.org](mailto:info@stcrmc.org). Many that I have received are from people who are in the process of transforming or choosing careers, or are considering a career in technical communication. Their inquiries to 'info' request information and advice about whether they should make this decision or, having made it, how to secure that first job or a better job.

When I respond my inclination is to encourage people; 1) because I believe it can be a good decision for a certain type of person, 2) because I think that the people writing at least partly have already made up their minds and I don't want to discourage them, and 3) I just want to see people enter this profession.

Here's a typical response:

If you have the ability to learn and understand information, and to communicate it clearly and accurately, and actually like to do it, you might have the sort of mind that can enjoy and prosper in this industry. However, I do caution people that they must have a curiosity about technical subjects—how a telephone call works, how a browser works, how anything works from the inside. It is not enough to like to write or illustrate, though those things are important in themselves. I finally add that, as important as the first two traits are, you should also be willing to learn some technical skills such as building a database, writing html/Javascript from Notepad, programming a multimedia tool such as Flash or Authorware, operating one of the help creation tools at an advanced level, or coding a dynamic Webpage linking to a database. These basic skills are the connective tissue of our industry today and give you the ability to conceive and execute an information product on your own. This becomes useful when you are (in an attempt to advance yourself) working on a prototype of an idea of your own, persuading a manager about a concept, and so on. As you rise in the profession you may only be supervising people with those skills, but even there it really helps to be able to do it yourself. Of course, the skills I'm talking about would be over and above ability to use the basic desktop products such as Word, Excel and even Acrobat (the latter, a bit more than basic, of course).

It has occurred to me that it would be good for people making this inquiry to hear the opinions of more than one person, especially since the person in the

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president's role may be no more qualified to respond than dozens of other people in the chapter (that's the case currently to be sure). The chapter represents well over 1,000 years of cumulative experience in technical communication. Maybe these inquirers would profit from that reservoir of knowledge.

Therefore, I'm requesting that, if you're reading this, you're probably as qualified as I am or the next president is to answer this question. Maybe more so. I challenge/solicit you to respond with a one-two paragraph answer to this question of your own. Think how you would respond if you were in the position of president. If you choose to respond, state your honest opinion (in temperate language of course), even if you would not recommend the profession. Then when I receive a half-dozen or so, I'll ask our webstaff to post them (with names attached) in some corner of the chapter website—kind of like a blog. Then I can just refer the people looking to our chapter for career advice to a link rather than opining personally. It will be a much more well-rounded, balanced response than just hearing the advice of one person. I hope you take five or ten minutes and think how you'd respond. It will be a big help to potential technical communicators. Oh yes...just send your response to [info@stcrmc.org](mailto:info@stcrmc.org).

Here's an interesting potential by-product: Putting your thoughts into words might even prove an interesting exercise in your own career navigation as well.

### **Finally...A Note On The Recent Election of Officers**

The election of officers concluded on May 5, 2005. The incoming elected officers for 2005-2005 are:

President	Marella Colyvas
Vice-President	Deb Lockwood
Secretary	Kathy Ramsey
Treasurer	Jessica Betterly
Nominating Committee	Tammy Von Boening and Ron Arner

Congratulations to this excellent slate of new officers. They are extremely well-qualified to serve you and our community for the upcoming year. They will take office over the summer.

All the best,  
Marc Lee  
President STC RMC  
[info@stcrmc.org](mailto:info@stcrmc.org)



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## A Long Time Ago, in a Galaxy Far, Far, Away...

 by [Ron Arner](#)

I have a suggestion for higher education institutions: be more usable. By this, I mean think about your students the way technical communicators are supposed to think about their audience.

I recently finished the M.S. in Technical Communications program at CU Denver, and, since I was going to go through the graduation ceremony, had to pick up my cap and gown on the Friday afternoon before the ceremony. (\$100 for 25 graduation announcements and cap and gown rental. Ouch!) What ensued was very typical of several miscommunications I've had with the university over the past four years. For some strange reason, they couldn't find *my* cap and gown. My name was on the list, so they knew I'd paid, but my rental robes were no where to be found. Everyone else's robes seemed to be nicely marked with their names and a copy of their receipt. Luckily, they had extra clothing on hand because they sell used caps and gowns to students who want them. *Used* caps and gowns? I paid \$75 to wear used clothing for three hours?

There was supposed to be free parking in the Tivoli lot during cap and gown pickup. I had a bad feeling when the gown rental lady said "The validation stamp hasn't arrived yet, so I'll just sign your ticket and that will be good enough." Have you tried to park on any college campus for free recently? I think Regis University extends that luxury to its visitors, but on the Auraria campus you can only park free on Sundays. I was in a hurry, so I didn't question my validation by autograph.

You guessed it. "Two dollars and fifty cents, please." I know that \$2.50 is not that much money, but by this point in time, I **honestly** felt that it was the principle of the thing. After several minutes of trying to make the parking attendant and her supervisor understand the situation, (I pointed out that my cap and gown were visible in the back seat of my car), I was allowed to leave the lot with a very stern warning: "The next time you park here, you will have to pay." "Ok," I said, "I'll remember that." I flashed a sarcastic smile and drove away.

I know that we don't live in a perfect world by any stretch of the imagination. I know the *Star Wars* films are just movies. What I haven't figured out is where all the technical communicators are in the *Star Wars* films, and how

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everyone seems to understand robot and spaceship technology without the help of a user guide. My theory is, (and I think this holds true for the *Star Trek* series as well), the training academies in these high-tech worlds do such a good job that their graduates never have to refer to another manual or help file in their lives. Highly unrealistic, I'm sure, but is such a thing be possible?

What would be the secret of such high-tech academies? Free parking? I think the worlds depicted in these films imply that any training received is straightforward, no-nonsense, instruction. The facts needed to carry out specific duties are not jumbled or confused by extraneous, petty details. I imagine CU (and most higher education institutions today) would make the ever pervasive argument that there's no way for things to be any different due to budgetary constraints. The age-old argument that if only we had more money, things would be different.

Have you heard of the College Opportunity Fund? (<https://cof.college-access.net/cofapp/index.jsp>) The Colorado Legislature established the fund last year to decrease the amount of money spent to subsidize in-state tuition at Colorado colleges and Universities. Students now need to complete their undergraduate degrees in 145 hours or less, or else they may have to pay out-of-state tuition rates. The goal of the program is to encourage under-represented populations to attend college. I'm anxious to see if this new spending model will solve the problem of quantity vs. quality education, but doubtful that it will have much affect in that respect. I'm just hoping that m, my diploma doesn't get lost in the mail or sent to the wrong address.



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## Letter to the Editor: New Search Engine has "Grouping" Feature

I noticed your search-related information on your page [http://www.stcrmc.org/technicalities/june\\_july\\_2004/tips.htm](http://www.stcrmc.org/technicalities/june_july_2004/tips.htm). I was hoping you would consider mentioning our search engine, All4One.SearchAllInOne.com. It has been gaining a lot of popularity lately. I think our new "grouping" feature makes finding what you want VERY easy.

You can find our search engine at: <http://all4one.searchallinone.com>.

Thanks in advance,  
James  
[searchallinone.com](http://searchallinone.com)



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## STC RMC *Technicalities* Wins Award of Excellence

by [Martha Sippel](#)

Congratulations—the Rocky Mountain Chapter's newsletter, *Technicalities*, received an Award of Excellence in the 2004-2005 STC Newsletter Competition. From highest to lowest achievement, STC presents the following awards: Distinguished, Excellence, and Merit. You can view the STC newsletter competition results at: [http://www.stc.org/chapterCompetitions\\_NEWS\\_winners.asp](http://www.stc.org/chapterCompetitions_NEWS_winners.asp).

Thirty-eight chapters and special interest groups (SIGs) entered this year's competition. Judges classify the three levels of award winners according to the chapter, SIG, and student chapter entrant categories. The judges also identify *Most Improved* awards.

This year's newsletter competition included 20 judges from 3 countries. A team of up to five judges—one or two statistical judges and up to three qualitative judges—evaluated newsletters in each category. All award-winning newsletters will be on display in the STC Newsletter Competition traveling exhibit.

*Technicalities* was cited for its Features page that caught the judges' attention and enticed them to read the complete newsletter. Judges also rewarded the editorial quality in the articles selected for each issue and the choice of STC-related news. One judge indicated that the "news is timely and provides the membership with enough information about the current events within the Society."

In the statistical evaluation, the judges pointed out that the newsletter team satisfied all of the functional elements and met the required number of recommended topics. Areas of Excellence included the following:

- Left navigation
- Back and Next arrows to continue through the newsletter
- Well-designed layout
- Chunking information that keeps scrolling to a minimum and makes reading each issue enjoyable
- Active hyperlinks to jump to specific areas in each issue
- The use of white space around lists and tables that enhances readability

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One area for improvement is adding the recommended topic of "Employment News" and including hyperlinks to area job boards and the STC job bank to assist newcomers who may download the PDF to read later. Other areas identified for improvement are to avoid using slang words, including more images in the newsletter (mostly photographs), and improving the PDF version of the newsletter.

The following people are members of the winning newsletter team:

Managing Editor: Ron Arner

Assistant Editor: Kristy Lantz Astry

Article Editors: Bridget Julian, Jay Mead, Lynnette Reveling

Newsletter Staff: Deb Lockwood

Congratulations to the team for winning this STC Award of Excellence. While STC RMC members who read the newsletter are aware of each issue's quality, it is now apparent to all STC members that we have an excellent newsletter.

If you see an article that you think might interest other STC RMC members, please recommend that the [editor](#) request permission to reprint it in *Technicalities*. Or better yet, write your own article to add to this award-winning newsletter! It is your newsletter and you can make it even better by contributing your ideas and articles.



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## Transformation in Your Life: Senior Member Awards Celebration/March Chapter Meeting Review

 by [Martha Sippel](#)

Delving into her own life experiences and changes within our profession, Mary Jo Stark, Principal Information Developer for Halliburton Services, Inc., demonstrated how STC members must remain flexible and adapt to whatever life brings. She discussed volunteering, transformation, and personal lessons she learned along the way.

Stark, the current treasurer of STC as well as past treasurer of the STCRM Chapter, addressed a large group of RMC senior members at a special meeting held in March. Stark's speech addressed how STC was confronting current issues like outsourcing, declining membership, and an outdated financial model. She described STC's transformation process, which included aligning the presidents, developing a roadmap, and defining timelines. Successes and failures will be outlined in the next Transformation Newsletter (<http://www.stc.org/transformation>, scroll down to the bottom to see Transformation Newsletters).

### Transformation

Stark addressed reasons the transformation would provide a better future for communities, senior members, and the global community. Stark also discussed how she changed in her life through formal education in home economics, geophysics, and then technical communication. This transformation allowed her to become a technical communicator for a geophysical software company. She suggested that her life had required her to adapt to both personal and professional changes.

### Transitions

Stark candidly talked about her early experiences in the oil industry. She briefly described returning to school for her technical communication degree in her 40s, becoming involved in an STC student chapter, and finding her dream job at her first STC conference in Minneapolis in 1994. She has been with the same company (though it has changed hands three times in 10 years) and enjoys her work.

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## Lessons Learned

Stark wanted to increase her management skills, so serving on the Board for STC was a place where she could gain these skills by volunteering. After serving as Transformation team lead, she realized that she had a good management skill set. However, she also learned that she really did not want to move into management. She is now at peace in her role at work and is climbing the technical ladder instead of the management ladder. She also has additional respect for the company's management staff. The company's industry is always changing and she now has a better understanding of how hard it is to keep a company on course.

## Volunteer to Help your Career

Stark showed that volunteering was not only rewarding, but it opened doors for you as well. She suggested that you should volunteer for something you felt strongly about. Volunteering introduces you to people that can help you down the road. For example, if she wants to write grants, she knows exactly whom she can contact because of her volunteer experiences with the Sand Creek Trail System. Or if she wants to change careers, she has met people that have asked her to interview with their company. Even during the worst of times, Stark said, she had headhunters contacting her when she served on the STC Board.

## Why Volunteer for STC

Stark believes that the best feedback you can receive is from your peers. Active members of STC are rewarded with support and feedback from a talented group of peers. Our monthly meetings allow members the opportunity to discuss projects, issues, and concerns in a protected environment, she said.

She went on to say that STC also provided many services to its members. Our local chapter provides monthly meetings with educational programs, seminars, and Special Interest Group (SIG) meetings. By taking advantage of these offerings as well as the international conference, she said, you can keep your skills up to date and learn about new technologies in the field of technical communication.



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## An Overview of Trends, Tools, and Technologies in Software User Assistance: February Chapter Meeting Review

by [Ruth Gaulke](#)

Technical communicators evolve as the needs and goals of our clients change. With the dawn and emergence of user assistance, we once again must tone our skills to create the most effective user experience for the applications under our charge.

To the 60+ attendees at the February Chapter Meeting, Joe Welinske, president of WritersUA (formerly known as WinWriters), provided a cutting-edge overview of the latest trends in software user assistance and highlighted the most important technologies and approaches technical communicators could use in their jobs today.

Creating user assistance for all applications encompasses skills from writing, editing, and indexing to coding and programming. When addressing the content and direction for application screens, our jobs must include helping the clients design the most effective and user-friendly applications. With a simple example of horrific Web text, Welinske engaged the audience by pointing out that with just a few text changes, the user would have a much easier time of accessing the information they needed.

Welinske also presented a few snapshots of the new Windows Help that will present active content within the help panes. He also briefly covered the other forms of help available—Oracle Help, Apple Help, and Java Help.

Today, a presentation on user assistance would not be complete without addressing the Web. With most, if not all, companies providing some type of Web application to their customers, user assistance has become a necessity. However, the major platforms do not have a Web Help solution nor are there standards for this area. Therefore, technical communicators do their own thing depending on the need, size, and type of Web application. Welinske suggested an alternative to winging it with Web user assistance: a new author paradigm called embedded user assistance. This approach uses helpful text on the Web screens to guide users in entering and selecting information so that they do not have to "click on" the help button or call the helpdesk. For example, on a payment screen instead of naming a screen field "Type", a

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technical communicator could use text similar to "How do you want to identify this payment type?" (e.g. "My Visa card") Embedded user assistance combines both helpful text with user interface and technical communication design skills.

To close his presentation, Welinske listed a few skills and areas that technical communicators should invest in and learn more about:

- JavaScript
- Support for Linux
- Support for PDA devices
- ASP, JSP
- Voice Help

"Technical communicators need to watch the horizon and keep pace with emerging technologies and future opportunities," said Welinske. "We need to suggest ideas to clients and management and keep our field alive."

To find out more about WritersUA, visit [www.writersua.com](http://www.writersua.com).



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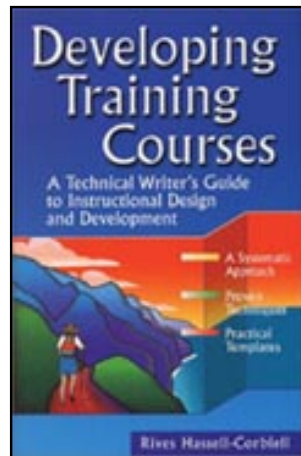
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## **Book Review: *Developing Training Courses: A Technical Writer's Guide to Instructional Design and Development***

by [Deb Lockwood](#)



### ***Developing Training Courses: A Technical Writer's Guide to Instructional Design and Development***

Rives Hassell-Corbiell. 2001. Tacoma: Learning Edge Publishing. [ISBN: 0970145403. 252 pages. \$29.95 (paperback).] <http://www.lepublishing.com>

As most of you already know, technical communicators are always learning and changing. If it's not us having to learn new techniques or new processes, then it's our clients, our products, our industries, or the tools we use to perform our jobs. As Rosanne Rosanna Danna used to say on *Saturday Night Live*: "It's always somethin'."

Well, wouldn't you know it? Just as soon as things started settling down here at work, it turns out that we content developers (who used to be called writers) are going to have to learn how to write training materials using actual training development theory. Oh boy...something else new. But—on the other hand—I've always wanted to learn about learning theory! And this gives me a great excuse.

In order to prepare me for what lies ahead, my manager suggested that I read *Developing Training Courses: A Technical Writer's Guide to Instructional Design and Development* by Rives Hassell-Corbiell. Instead of just borrowing a copy, I bought my own and I'm very glad that I did. I am going to keep this practical resource handy.

Hassell-Corbiell is an author, technical writer, corporate educator, and consultant. She is the principal officer for Learning Edge Consulting, Inc., Learning Edge Publishing, and Catalytic Training and Consulting, LLC. She is a member of the Puget Sound Chapter of STC and a member of the ASTD (American Society for Training & Development). She holds the Certified

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Professional Consultant to Management (CPCM) designation for professional accomplishment, Certified Management Consultant designation with the Institute of Management Consultants, and is certified at the Practitioner level for Neuro-Linguistic Programming. Her internationally sold book *Developing Training Courses: A Technical Writer's Guide to Instructional Design and Development* has won the Ben Franklin Gold award for best Education, Academic, and Teaching book, Ben Franklin Silver award for best Business and Reference book, and the STC Award of Merit award. She lives with her husband in Tacoma, Washington, USA.

Her book is full of real-world advice from someone who obviously knows her subject very well. In eight easy-to-understand steps, she tells the reader how to create effective training courses. I really like the following testimonial that is in the book: "This is the first book I recommend if you don't have time to make mistakes." Clare Petrich, Owner, Petrich Marine Dock. Enough said.

This book is separated into the following sections and chapters:

#### Section 1: Foundation

Chapter 1: Skill Sets for the Future

Chapter 2: Quick Start

Chapter 3: Assess Your Training Development Skills

Chapter 4: Forecasting Stormy Conditions

Chapter 5: Adult Learners

#### Section 2: What to Do and How

Chapter 6: Overview of Systematic Training Development

Chapter 7: Step 1 - Project Plan

Chapter 8: Step 2 - Analysis

Chapter 9: Step 3 - Objectives

Chapter 10: Step 4 - Criterion Tests

Chapter 11: Step 5 - Course Design

Chapter 12: Step 6 - Content Development

Chapter 13: Step 7 - Pilot and Verify

Chapter 14: Step 8 - Evaluate and Revise

Chapter 15: The Finished Product

#### Section 3: Manage and Customize

Chapter 16: Managing the Training Development Process

Chapter 17: Customizing Off-the-Shelf Courses

Chapter 18: Writing for International Markets

Chapter 19: Repurposing Documentation to Training

Chapter 20: Ready-to-Use Scripts

#### Section 4: Appendices

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The author has laid out this book very well, making it very easy to read, and it is chock full of references and resources of where you can go to get more information. The book is broken into smaller sections that are easily digestible, even for someone like me who is totally new to this subject.

If you have always wanted to know more about developing training courses, or if—like me—you know that training material development is in your future, consider obtaining a copy of this practical book. You can purchase a copy through the eStore at [www.lepublishing.com](http://www.lepublishing.com) or through other book dealers.



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## Strengthening Our Core Competencies

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

Recently, my business grew to the point where I have had a couple of subcontractors working on client projects at any given time. This has been an illuminating experience for me—and I'm sure for some of the contractors—as I connect client to contractor, trying to make the fit as neatly interlocked as puzzle pieces. There is always that sigh of relief when I've made a good match and both the client and the contractor agree that they enjoy working together on a project.

The task is certainly easier when all the factors are known: a client needs a help system, and I know a contractor or two who can structure help files in their sleep and make the software do things we didn't think possible; or a client needs some usability work done, and I remember someone who would be super at just that type of project. The match gets trickier in situations where I must use a new contractor, or the client wants industry-specific knowledge as well as core technical communication skills. I look over portfolio pieces and talk through the client requirements, hoping that I'll be able to tell whether the contractor has what the client wants and what I want: core competencies of our craft.

Most times I get it right, but the odd time I end up with a contractor who can make a piece of software sing, yet has no clue how to structure the content. I remember that another local business owner used to make every applicant—it didn't matter how experienced or how good their reputation—take a writing test; she explained that it weeded out those with poor base skills. This makes me wonder: What are core competencies in today's technical communication world? Have the core competencies changed from, say, ten years ago? How can we ensure that we get, and retain, our core competencies while building out our specialties?

The core competencies in today's marketplace begin with the same basic skills (learned) and abilities (innate) that technical communicators (TC) have used for many years, but the definition of those core competencies have changed with the times. From a business owner's perspective, then, here are the competencies that I consider critical.

**Excellent writing and editing abilities.**

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This competency is a deal-breaker. If a TC has all the other competencies, but cannot write, then there is a competence deficiency. To paraphrase the saying that perfection is achieved when nothing can be taken away, writing excellence is achieved when nothing can be taken away, when the writing is complete, correct, clear, and concise.

### **Structuring information.**

In the context of core competencies for TCs, writing means far more than proficiency with spelling and grammar, more than the 4Cs of good writing. Much of this begins with ability, but must certainly be supplemented with skills gained by learning the theory the craft. Competency means being able to write to genre, whether that genre is hardware guide, user guide, reference guide, help system, software development kit, policies and procedures, training materials, or a user interface. You must know the forms of writing appropriate to each genre, and be able to create content accordingly.

### **Conducting thorough research.**

Competent TCs know how to get the information they need from subject matter experts, end users, and other project stakeholders. This requires a contextual understanding of the business paradigm in which the product or service exists, and the ability to grasp new paradigms. To communicate the feature, benefit, or function of a product to an audience, you must be able to investigate and then parse, not simply regurgitate in a new form, the information gathered through interviews or background documents. Some might say this is an ability—either you have the talent or you don't—but I believe that this is a skill that can be acquired through learning and experience.

### **Grasp complex material quickly.**

Successful TCs have the ability to learn through trial and error, under sometimes chaotic circumstances, and without the benefit of training. (After all, it's TCs who create the training materials.) TCs who become competent in this area are those who can sit down in front of an undocumented piece of hardware, software, or process and fearlessly tackle it until they understand it, and can explain it in the context of the industry of use. I once discarded the resume of a candidate who listed training on email as professional development; someone who can't figure out simple email software probably wouldn't survive a typical technical communication project.

### **Skill with industry tools.**

*Own*ing carpentry tools does not make a good carpenter, but without knowing how to use the tools properly, one cannot become a good carpenter. To put theoretical knowledge to use, TCs must have mastered the appropriate tools, know which tools are appropriate to use in various situations, and use them with above-average skill. Rusty skills on outdated tools does not contribute to core competency.

One of my favorite university professors taught: Your world is limited by your

vocabulary. The richness of your vocabulary is an indicator of the breadth and depth of concepts you can articulate. This principle certainly applies to the competencies of technical communication professionals. The competence of a decade past is not the competence of today. To remain competent, we can't be complacent, let our skills lapse, or ignore trends. We need to keep our professional vocabulary—our concepts—current. This list of competencies is by no means the definitive word on the topic. I don't mean it to be. However, none of us can go wrong by working toward these competencies and committing to continuous improvement of them.



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