



# Technicalities

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Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication.

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## Technicalities

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

### Editorial Staff

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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.

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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 303.956.1906, 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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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**

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Arlington, VA 22203-1822  
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[stc@stc.org](mailto:stc@stc.org)

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## Chapter News

### Welcome to Our New Members

New, transferred, or returning members for the months of October and November, 2005:

#### October 2005

- Toshen Golias
- Amy M. Gregory
- Kimberly A. McClintock

#### November 2005

- Benjamin N. Cape
- Laura Larson
- Marisol E. Lopez
- Thomas S. Sajbel
- Valerie Singer
- Julie B. Walker
- Kim S. Weathersby



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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: Good example of SKD/API doc on the Web

I've suddenly been asked to document an SDK/API for a client, something I don't typically do. I've read the info from a recent summary on CIC SIG list about this, which was helpful. Unfortunately, the one example cited is not in my local library and I have to discuss this with my client tomorrow.

<http://www.stcsig.org/cic/pages/summaries.htm#DocTypes>

Can anyone point me to a good example or two on the Web? I did a couple of Google searches, but nothing struck me as great. I'll summarize and we can add the info to the existing summary.

Thanks much!!!

Try these two sites. I have had luck at both of them:

[http://www.iturls.com/English/SoftwareEngineering/SE\\_11.asp](http://www.iturls.com/English/SoftwareEngineering/SE_11.asp)

[http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/internet/ininfodev.nsf/en/h\\_00157e.html](http://strategis.ic.gc.ca/epic/internet/ininfodev.nsf/en/h_00157e.html)

I haven't kept up with the latest techniques for documenting programs. The last time I documented a function (routine, API, etc.) library was in 1999.

The classic program function documentation is the set of Unix man pages. I found sample man pages at <http://bama.ua.edu/cgi-bin/man-cgi>

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My experience from 1984 through 1999 is that there are two levels at which you can document programs.

At the first and more superficial level, you can take comment information from the source file and reformat it. Depending on time and money constraints, that may be all you can do. If you have a bit more time and money, you can interview the developers and capture more information.

At the second and more comprehensive level, you review the comments in the source code and then you write the function documentation from scratch. That involves lengthy discussions with programmers and some basic knowledge about how the functions work.

In other words, function documentation is whatever you and the client want it to be. I've seen function documentation that writers produced in next to no time by having the developers strip out their comments from the source files and reformat them for input to Word or FrameMaker. Usually, that documentation is useless for learning. It simply provides a list of command syntax, options, values, returns, etc.

Occasionally, I see really good function documentation that people can actually use to learn how the functions work.

All the above is a long-winded way of saying that if I were talking with a prospect about documenting APIs, I would want to see the source code and any prior attempts at documentation, I would want to know a bit about the audience (senior programmers? highly skilled technicians?), and I would want to know about the prospect's goals. Do they just want a manual? Is it critical that the audience can use the function documentation? You might also ask what kind of training and support the client provides for the APIs. Training documentation can be a good source for example API calls, etc.

Program documentation can be fun (in a techie sort of way), but it's a different world from user guides!

## **Thread #2: Recommendations for antivirus?**

Norton Antivirus, while reliable in preventing infections to my PC, seems to make it run a little slower each year.

Can anyone recommend a good replacement for Norton, one that doesn't bog down my PC? I've read several online reviews of various products, but I'd like to get some real-world feedback.

Thanks, and happy holidays!

---

AVG anti-virus is lightweight, and you can get it for free at [free.grisoft.com](http://free.grisoft.com). The subscription version is a little more robust.

---

I use Avast! 4 Home Edition, which works pretty well, as far as I can tell so far. It is free for home users. You can learn more about this product at [www.avast.com](http://www.avast.com).

### **Thread #3: Wacky Warning Labels**

As a sort of belated follow-up to ...'s post last week, here's the flip side of writing on technology...

<http://www.wackywarnings.com/>

This year's winner: "A heat gun and paint remover that produces temperatures of 1,000 degrees and warns users, 'Do not use this tool as a hair dryer.'"

It does not top my all-time favorite (click "Past Winners"): A smoke detector with this warning "Do not use the Silence Feature in emergency situations. It will not extinguish a fire."



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## Tips from the Trenches

by [Deb Lockwood](#)

You may have noticed a recent change to the STC Rocky Mountain Chapter's Web site. In fact, it's the same change that is happening all over the Internet. It's the addition of an RSS feed. Just what is RSS?

RSS is known by many names including RDF Site Summary, Rich Site Summary, Real Simple Syndication, and Really Simple Syndication. Currently, the most prominent name seems to be the first: RDF (Resource Description Framework) Site Summary.

Webopedia's ([www.webopedia.com](http://www.webopedia.com)) definition of RSS is "an XML format for syndicating Web content." That Web content can include news feeds, news stories, headlines, discussion forums, and personal Web logs (blogs).

To see an example of an RSS feed, go to [www.stcrmc.org](http://www.stcrmc.org), and click the RSS feed link on the home page. After you click this link, you see information that the STC international Web site has automatically fed to the Rocky Mountain chapter's Web site.



An RSS aggregator takes the RSS feed process a step further by aggregating

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information from various sources on the Web. For example, an RSS aggregator is available on the Denver Post newspaper Web site at [www.denverpost.com](http://www.denverpost.com). If you scroll about half-way down the home page, you will see an orange RSS button on the left. Click that button, and a "DenverPost.com RSS feeds" page appears. This page explains that you can subscribe to their RSS reader, News Hound. Once you download and install News Hound, you can register to receive news on various topics, written by certain authors, or posted on specific blogs. News Hound "sniffs" out the information from the various Web sites and retrieves it for your perusal.

During his presentation in the October chapter meeting, Dave Taylor talked a bit about RSS and said it was an XML format that is easier for programs to parse. He subscribes to an RSS aggregator (Newsgator) that creates a personalized newspaper for him containing articles for topics he selected. The aggregator sends him an e-mail message that contains all of the news articles that relate to his selected keywords. (See the October meeting report in this issue of Technicalities for more information about Dave's experiences.)

To find out more information about RSS feeds, try signing up for one yourself. Go to your favorite online news provider's Web site and look for the orange RSS button. Click the RSS button, download and install the applicable RSS reader software, and select your keywords or topics. Then enjoy reading your personalized news service!



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## STC RMC's Annual Salary Survey

 by [Steve Wertzbaugher](#)

Survey. The word strikes terror and loathing in all of us. Why? Because we are inundated by surveys. We receive them in our mail, through the Internet, in our e-mail, in the malls and stores we visit, even in our places of employment, disguised as the dreaded employee satisfaction survey. The list is endless. It's enough to send even the most courageous into an insane frenzy from which none could ever hope to recover. Why are there so many surveys? The answer is simple, of course; surveys gather information about people or groups that organizations use to focus their efforts to either provide information or sell something, like the ubiquitous all-expense paid vacation to a small Latin American country not presently involved in a civil war.

There are as many different kinds of surveys as there are species of insect inhabiting our planet. Most surveys simply try to wheedle information from you in order to sell you something. Such Surveys ask questions about our spending habits; where you spend your money, what you buy, how much money you spend on certain items, how likely are you to buy these items in the next few minutes, and of course how much money you make. We've all seen this type of survey and if you are like me, you set land speed records pressing the Delete key, or enter Bonzai Benny's Bouncing Baby Emporium in the mall in order to avoid the man or woman charging you with clipboard and No. 2 pencil in hand.

Occasionally, however, we receive a survey that actually tries to help us. This survey, while still gathering information from us, tries to give us something back that will aid us in some way, whether in our personal lives, spending habits, or professional lives. And while we still tend to cringe and moan when we receive such a survey, we take it anyway because in the end, any momentary pain we might feel is insignificant compared to the benefits we receive

The STC RMC salary survey is one of these.

I have to admit, that in almost all cases, I'd rather experience a root canal without anesthesia than take a survey, which is why I avoid them like the

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plague. In fact, I've trained my attack Beagle to shred anything even remotely resembling a survey that finds its way into my mailbox or e-mail. But not so with the STC RMC salary survey. This survey I take. And in fact, I look forward to it every year. Why? Because unlike almost every survey ever conceived by the diabolical forces of evil, the STC RMC salary survey exists to help me in my career as a technical communicator. That's right, you heard me; the STC RMC salary survey helps me with my career. And not just me, but everyone who belongs to our chapter: self-employed, gainfully employed, or currently unemployed.

It doesn't matter where you are in your career, entry-level, junior-level, senior-level, management, slave driver, independent, or hope to be independent; taking the salary survey will help you. There, I said it. I'll repeat it for those of you who couldn't believe your eyes; the salary survey will help you. How? Simple. The information you provide for the survey creates a snapshot of what's going on in our local market. Using this information will help you make sound, informed decisions about your present career. Should I go back to school for that technical communication degree? Am I earning enough as an independent writer? Do I want to take the plunge into independent life? Am I earning enough compared to other technical communicators at my professional level? Should I reach for that promotion, or even management? What are my chances of finding a job if I am currently unemployed? The questions are endless as are the possible answers. So take the survey. You'll be glad you did.

There is one question, however, that might leave you shaking in your shoes and spouting curses upon the first born of those who conceived it. It's the "how much do you earn" question. I know what you're thinking; I will never answer such a spurious and obviously evil question designed to expose my most private information to the universe at large and make me look foolish because instead of dollars I'm paid with chickens and cows. I too usually avoid this question when I take a survey. Whose business is it anyway how much I earn and in what currency I'm paid? The audacity! The arrogance! I will not be party to such outrageous behavior! After you calm down, ask yourself how this information is used. It's used to help our fellow chapter members and technical communicators make informed decisions about their careers. You can use the information yourself to see where you stand in your own career. And best of all, it's completely confidential. No one will ever know that your salary consists of chickens and cows instead of dollars. I answer the salary question and I ask you to do so as well, because the more people who answer the salary question the more accurate our survey will be.

So, what are you waiting for? As soon as you receive the salary survey in your e-mail fill it out and return. You'll be glad you did.



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## Writing for the Blogging World: October Chapter Meeting Review

 by [Deb Lockwood](#)

In October, Dave Taylor, owner of Intuitive Systems ([www.intuitive.com](http://www.intuitive.com)) in Boulder, Colorado, told us everything we would want to know about extending our influence into the wild world of blogs and online discussion groups. Not only did we discover how to do so, but Dave was very clear about *why* we should do so...to increase our visibility on the Internet thereby increasing profits for our companies, and so that we will be considered the influencers in our fields of expertise!

Mr. Taylor has been involved with the Internet since 1980 and is widely recognized as an expert on both technical and business issues. He manages seven different Web sites, including three blogs. One of his blogs is a question and answer Web log called "Ask Dave Taylor." It contains answers he sends to e-mailed questions. (Google really likes Q&A formats.)

### What is a Blog?

According to [Webopedia.com](http://Webopedia.com), a blog (short for Web log) is "a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual." When they originally appeared, blogs were personal logs chronicling an author's daily experiences. Now that blogs are becoming ubiquitous on the Web, their use is expanding into business applications.

Almost all blogs include a content management system. Blog articles exist on the main index page, and can be published individually by RSS (Real Simple Syndication, an XML format).

### Why Should We Care About Blogs?

More and more people are using the Internet to search for goods and services. These days, about 60% of people buy products in person at a store after doing research about the products online. Therefore, it is critical that your customers be able to find you on the Web. In order for them to find you, Internet browser search engines must first find you.

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How do search engines find you? Dave relayed information specific to Google's search engine criteria. When compiling search results for a query, Google doesn't look at Web sites. Rather, it goes to specific pages within the Web site. It looks for the number of occurrences of a particular keyword within the page. (The keyword is what the online searcher types in query's search field.)

Dave suggested that we be cautious when using search engine optimization experts because they can steer us wrong. If you try to get "tricky" with your Web site to increase your search result ranking, trying to get around the rules, Google or Yahoo can block your company from their search results all together.

Blogging is free market data just sitting out there on the Web. People could be writing about your company and your competitors. And all you have to do to listen in on their thoughts is to run a query using your company name and read what people are writing about you.

Reporters use the Web for research, and they are some of the world's thought leaders. As a blog author, you can be an influencer, even influencing the thought leaders themselves. The key is that your company must be highly findable in order for them to find you.

## **What Do Search Engines Like?**

What is it that search engines really like and that will increase your chances of appearing in the search results? They like content that changes frequently, and that is keyword rich.

The optimal frequency for change is daily. The more often your content changes, the higher your ranking in the search results.

Keyword rich means that your content pages contain multiple instances of the term your customers use in the search engine query text box. For instance, if you work for TechSmith, and you are responsible for the Web content for their SnagIt screen capture product, you should mention "screen capture" at least six times in the text on your product page. The more times the keyword is mentioned on the page, the more relevant the search results, and the closer it is to the top of the query result list.

## **Having Trouble Staying Current?**

Dave asked us if we ever had trouble staying on top of producing fresh content. Search engines love blogs because the content changes quite often. A blog is effectively a content management system, and does all the heavy lifting of updating the index. Blogs are also very easy to update.

How does Google determine if content is current? Dave told us that the Google bot spiders the Web, looking for recently changed content. When you first post your Web site, the Google bot searches and logs the site. If after 90-days you haven't changed the site, the bot won't come back for another 90 days. After 90- days the bot returns to the site every 90-days to see if

content has changed. If, however, you have content that changes within the first 90 days, the bot keeps coming back.

The author of a blog has the option to allow readers to write and submit comments. And a blog entry, whether it is one the author posts or one a reader posts, is viewed by search engines as new content! In that way, a blog helps you keep your Web site current.

## How Do I Create a Blog?

Dave recommended using a blog-creation application to create your blog. He uses a down-loadable application called Moveable Type ([www.sixapart.com/moveabletype/](http://www.sixapart.com/moveabletype/)).

Server-side software is available also, such as Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)), TypePad ([www.typepad.com](http://www.typepad.com)), and WordPress ([www.wordpress.com](http://www.wordpress.com)). Wordpress.com is open source.

To see what kinds of applications are available, go to your favorite Web browser and search for "blog creation software."

These applications make authoring and maintaining a blog about as easy as typing an e-mail message. With most applications, the author has the choice to allow all comments, to edit comments, or to delete comments. In some cases, Dave has had to delete or edit comments, depending on their content. You can liken the process to the editor of the New York Times. That editor doesn't automatically publish letters to the editor as they were written. Letters go through a review process.

Once you have the software, think of an applicable topic. To see what is out there already, go to a blog search engine. (See "How Do I Find Blogs?")

## How Do You Build Traffic and Gain Recognition?

The people who are writing blogs are the thought leaders of our day. That blogging community writes about other people's blogs in their articles. Early adopters to the Internet used to do the same sort of thing by including links to their favorite Web sites.

You can gain traffic to your site and recognition as an expert by going to other sites and posting interesting, considered, and well-written responses to a blog article.

Dave shared one story of how an attorney in upstate New York responded to one of Dave's postings with a very well considered reply. Not too long afterward a reporter for a national newspaper was searching online for exactly the type of information that the attorney included in his reply. The reporter contacted the attorney, and—after a brief discussion—the attorney found himself quoted as a recognized expert in the reporter's story that appeared in a well-known national newspaper.

## How Do I Find Blogs?

You can find blogs by using a blog search engine like [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com). On this particular site, you can search blogs by keyword, Website URL, or tag.

Google has a blog search engine that is currently in beta ([www.blogsearch.google.com](http://www.blogsearch.google.com)). This search engine is more discriminating in that it indexes only good sites. These results will include a smaller, higher quality group of blogs.

### Tips

Google's search engine really likes question and answer formats.

When you build your Web site, remember that search engines like Google search individual Web pages. When the searcher clicks the link in Google's search results, the appropriate Web page appears. This page is most commonly not the site's home page. Therefore, you need to include navigation tools (e.g., back, next, home) on every page in your site so people can get to your home page from any subpage.

Dave recommended that we read *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. It is about influencing thought in a group. (See the [book review of this book](#), which is also in this issue of *Technicalities*.)

You might want to consider retaining copyright of blog comments because you may one day want to create a book or write articles on these topics. (You can retain copyright by including a standard copyright statement on the blog's posting form. See an attorney to work out the appropriate language.)

Blogs may eventually supplant some Web sites. Plan now for future eventualities by creating one common look for your blog and your Web site.

So, how does Dave make money from his online work? He runs Google ads on his pages. After you build up an audience, these ads can be quite profitable.

Most blog creation software allows for RSS (RDF [Resource Description Framework] Site Summary) feeds. Readers can then subscribe to the RSS feed, and the application will automatically send the reader an e-mail of the content that is new.

Dave subscribes to Newsgator ([www.newsgator.com](http://www.newsgator.com)), which is a currently free RSS aggregator service. Through it, he picks every news wire and writer he wants to read, and Newsgator sends him an e-mail message once a day with the compiled content. In this way, RSS aggregators are acting as today's news clipping services.



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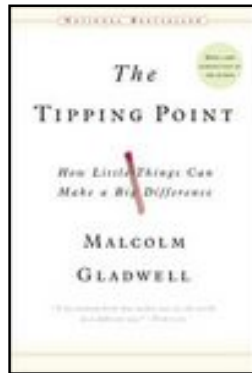
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## ***The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference***

by [Evan Lockwood](#)



### ***The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference***

Malcolm Gladwell. 2000. New York: Back Bay Books. [ISBN: 0-316-31696-2. 301 pages. \$14.95 (paperback).] [www.gladwell.com](http://www.gladwell.com)

How do we define insanity in the workplace? Roger Milliken put it this way: "Insanity is doing the same thing you've always done and expecting different results." We've all repeated this phrase and laughed at the sad reality it characterizes. We usually recognize the need for change, but we are often frustrated by not knowing how to create the change. Is there a secret to creating change?

Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, reveals how change happens. From his insights about epidemics, fashion, social change, and education, we can learn to locate the key components and the key people so that we can create much needed change.

What is the main idea behind the tipping point? The following description appears on the book's back cover: "The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire."

I love this book because it challenged my thinking. I'll be reading and re-reading this book for a long, long time. I use the concepts at work as a corporate trainer as we revise our training materials (especially from Chapter 3 "The Stickiness Factor") and when I'm home.

The contents of *The Tipping Point*, which was Gladwell's first book, are divided into the following chapters:

- Introduction
- The Three Rules of Epidemics
- The Law of the Few: Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen

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- The Stickiness Factor: Sesame Street, Blue's Clues, and the Educational Virus
- The Power of Context (Part One): Bernie Goetz and the Rise and Fall of New York City Crime
- The Power of Context (Part Two): The Magic Number One Hundred and Fifty
- Case Study: Rumors, Sneakers, and the Power of Translation
- Case Study: Suicide, Smoking, and the Search for the Unsticky Cigarette
- Conclusion: Focus, Test, and Believe
- Afterword: Tipping Point Lessons from the Real World
- Endnotes
- Acknowledgements
- Index

Although Gladwell's book may not relate directly to the nuts and bolts of technical communication, it does present us with a new way of thinking about sharing our ideas. Reading this book is guaranteed to rev up your mind, but I'd advise not reading it before you go to bed. Your mind will be working so hard that it won't allow you to sleep!



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## Ready, Fire, Aim!: November Chapter Meeting Review

by [Kathy Ramsey](#)

Larry Marine was the speaker at our November meeting, held at the Tivoli Student Center on the Auraria campus. Larry's business, Intuitive Design, helps clients identify and develop recognizable and trusted interaction patterns for their products that increase usage, self-discovery of new features, and acceptance of new products.



Marella Colyvas, STC RMC President, gives a couple of announcements at the beginning of the November chapter meeting.

### AIM First

While many folks still think of "usability" as an afterthought, Larry has a different approach that brings usability stakeholders to the requirements-gathering and product-direction decision stages. One way to achieve this is to separate the traditional User-Centered Design (UCD) process into two distinct phases: problem definition, and solution creation. The modified process looks

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like this:

#### Problem Definition:

1. Clarify business and marketing objectives.
2. Conduct initial user research (requirements gathering).
3. Prioritize based on user needs and business objectives.

#### Solution Creation:

1. Conduct detailed user research focusing on the prioritized tasks.
2. Design to the established objectives.
3. Test and refine.

The key difference of this approach from traditional UCD is that it identifies the product direction based on user needs and business objectives, as opposed to the more common "build it and they will come" approach, or Ready, Fire, Aim. This new, re-ordered UCD approach is more like Ready, Aim, Fire, and Larry calls it AIM First. Larry stated that his company's AIM First methodology is 100% successful!



Larry Marine prepares to give his presentation at the November chapter meeting.

### Typical Project Problems

Here are some common problems that Larry sees in his customers' projects:

- Unclear objectives
- Vague requirements
- Inconsistent agendas
- Assumptions, opinions, and cultures

- Poor communication across departments
- Emotionally biased design ideas

Intuitive Design (Larry's company) begins each AIM First project by clarifying and setting the objectives. He then measures success by how well he achieves those objectives. In every case where Intuitive Design was allowed to follow the process to a reasonable degree, they exceeded the stated metrics. Note: They either measured success with usability testing, or with real market success.

Larry admits that not every product he consulted for ultimately succeeded in the marketplace, but in those cases where it didn't, it had nothing to do with the design and everything to do with the business management, marketing, or sales approach used. Sometimes, a product is designed well, but isn't managed well, which of course, is something that is out of Larry's control.

Case in point. He designed an infomediary product for the petroleum industry that competed against a product that had held a 100% monopoly for over 10 years. The product he designed saved users an average of 3 hours of work per day. The product quickly gained 30% market share in 4 months, which incidentally, was the 5-year goal. Meanwhile however, the developers overspent their budget by trying to add too many new features before they had finished working all the bugs out of the first version. In the end, the company ran out of money.

## People Purchase Things They Like

Every product evokes an emotion as the user uses it. The emotional response is an integral part of the user experience. The success of a product depends on the users experiencing positive emotions that are appropriate for your product and your business objectives.

Some common user-experience objectives are:

- Trust - Users must feel that you are "on their side."
- Comfort - Users must feel familiar with your product, especially the first time they use it.
- Confidence - Users must have confidence that they can succeed with your product more than they could without it.
- Fun - Users don't want to have to work to enjoy themselves. Fun designs are typically more interactive and less informational.

These are just some of the user experiences that your e-commerce or brand message site might try to achieve. Usually, a design should emphasize just one emotion or one objective. For example, a site advertising a medical product might need to exude confidence more than anything else. The user must feel like they can perform their task(s) without error.

Consider these ideas:

- Familiarity and trust increase the likelihood of purchase, especially when comparing similar products from different vendors.

- If your users can't use your basic features, they aren't going to need or want the advanced ones.
- If they can't learn to use your existing product, they won't upgrade to the new one, regardless of whether it has more/better features.
- If they experience difficulties with one product of yours, they won't consider other products you sell.

## Delivering Value

The user's experience sets an expectation for other features or products you offer. Managing those expectations is the goal of good design. Users should be surprised by your product's effectiveness, not by their experience with the user interface.

Avoid the off-the-shelf "cookie cutter" approach to product design. Focus your efforts on achieving your business and marketing objectives, which also dovetails with achieving your customers' objectives. By proving to your customers that you truly understand their needs—in the form of appropriate product designs—you earn their trust and loyalty for subsequent product versions.

The website for Larry's business is [www.intuitivedesign.com](http://www.intuitivedesign.com); his email address is [LMarine@intuitivedesign.com](mailto:LMarine@intuitivedesign.com).



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## STC RMC President to Co-Present Telephone Seminar

by [Marella Colyvas](#)

Free-writing! Character interviews! Hooks! What do these creative writing techniques have to do with technical writing? More than you may think.

This seminar will help you improve your technical communication skills by teaching you how to jump-start your writing with creative writing tools, use character interview techniques to elicit information from various sources, build personas to facilitate product development, and capture the end users' attention using opening hooks and design structures.

On February 22, 2006, STC RMC's president Marella Colyvas will co-present an STC Telephone Seminar entitled "Improve Your Technical Communication Skills through Creative Writing Techniques." Marella co-presented the basic content of this seminar at a two-part workshop entitled "Creative Writing for Technical Communicators" at the 52nd STC International Conference in May, 2005. Her co-presenters were Susan Haire of Canada, Amy Himes of TX, and Ron Bliq of the island of Guernsey. The first part of the workshop focused on tapping into your inherent creativity to jump-start your writing (Marella) and using character study techniques to improve your interviewing skills (Amy). The second part focused on dialog (Ron) and how to write hooks to keep your audience interested (Susan).

For the telephone seminar, Marella will present with Amy and Susan. They will narrow the scope of their workshop considerably, while focusing on the essential message. Marella will talk about how free-writing jump-starts any writer, and how using creativity exercises opens the right side of the brain so technical communicators can better see the big picture of whatever work they are producing. Amy will again work with characters, and Susan will wrap up with how to keep an audience, any audience, interested.

Please join Marella and the others for an exciting telephone seminar on February 22, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m., EST.

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## STC's Honorary Fellows for 2006

*Reprinted from [Tieline](#)*

STC is pleased to announce that Vinton G. Cerf and Robert E. Kahn, two of the "Fathers of the Internet," are the Society's honorary fellows for 2006. Cerf and Kahn will accept their award and address attendees at the opening session of STC's 53rd Annual Conference, May 7-10, 2006, in Las Vegas, Nevada.

In the early 1970s, Cerf and Kahn worked together on a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) project to connect independent computer networks. Their work led them to describe what have become the standard protocols for communication between computers on the Internet: transmission control protocol (TCP), which breaks data into pieces or "packets" and routes them to host computers, and Internet protocol (IP), which addresses and forwards the packets.

For their contributions to the development of the Internet Cerf and Kahn have received many honors, most notably the U.S. National Medal of Technology in 1997; the Alan M. Turing award from the Association of Computing Machinery in 2004, considered to be the "Nobel Prize of computing"; and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005, the highest civilian award given by the United States to its citizens.

As vice president and chief Internet evangelist for Google, Vinton Cerf is responsible for identifying new technologies to support the development of advanced, Internet-based products and services and for encouraging the spread of Internet capacity around the world. He is also distinguished visiting scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, where he is working on designing an interplanetary Internet, and chairman of the board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. His previous positions included senior vice president of technology strategy for MCI and vice president of the Corporation for National Research Initiatives (CNRI), a not-for-profit organization founded by Kahn that fosters research and development in network-based information technology.

Currently chairman and CEO of CNRI, Robert Kahn previously worked on the technical staff at Bell Laboratories and as an assistant professor of electrical engineering at MIT. In the mid-1980s he coined the term "national information infrastructure," a term more widely known as the "information

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super highway." He is a co-inventor of Knowbot programs, mobile software agents in the network environment.

The Society bestows honorary fellowships on non-members who have made exceptional contributions to the field of technical communication. Honorary fellowships include lifetime membership in STC. Please join us in welcoming Vinton Cerf and Robert Kahn to STC.



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## Stuck in Traffic

 by [Ron Arner](#)

What's the best way to begin a New Year? Is it to make resolutions, start an exercise routine, or make a list of goals for 2006? I think it's a combination of these things, as long as your heart is in the right place. Believe it or not, one helpful way that "right place" is to drive in rush hour traffic.

My new job requires a much longer commute than my last one did. It didn't take me long to find the thought of all this "wasted time" very stressful. I tried several different routes, convinced that one would yield that golden 10-minute faster driving time, but was unsuccessful in my quest. And then there are all of those maniac drivers to worry about. Public transportation would not be practical at this time (too many transfers), so the only other option I am faced with is moving AGAIN, which I don't want to do.

Audiobooks have become a way of life for me (as they have for many), and since Yoga is my favorite hobby, I usually listen to tapes that talk about living a lifestyle very different than the hustle and bustle world of rush hour traffic. Fortunately, I've recently found several such tapes that deal more with the journey to a simpler lifestyle than what to do once you're there. By listening to these tapes, I've come to realize that worrying about my commute time is not only counterproductive, but is also detrimental to my health. This is common sense of course, but sometimes it's nice to hear it presented in a new light, a new variation on an old theme. It never ceases to amaze me how improving one aspect of my life also improves others. Overcoming my dislike of my commute has made my job performance better, my energy level at home much higher, and my free time more enjoyable, rather than just an opportunity for lazy recuperation in front of a TV.

One particularly poignant recording I've recently listened to is *The Energy of Money: A Spiritual Guide to Financial and Personal Fulfillment*, by Maria Nemeth, Phd. Nemeth attacks the yuppie lifestyle head on in her book, explaining in a very clear and straightforward manner why a society of overachievers is not a good thing. The interesting thing is that Nemeth doesn't discourage money management, frugality, or a successful career, but simply points out ways to avoid letting such things overtake your life. Another good book I can recommend (I've actually both read and listened to this one) is *Positive Energy : 10 Extraordinary Prescriptions for Transforming Fatigue, Stress, and Fear into Vibrance, Strength, and Love*, by Judith Orloff, MD.

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Orloff takes more of a new age/intuitive approach to energy management, and introduces the idea of "energy vampires" to describe people who drain your energy. (How many Marketing Directors and unsympathetic bosses fit into this category?) One last recording I'll mention is Pema Chodron's *Getting Unstuck: Breaking Your Habitual Patterns & Encountering Naked Reality*. You don't really need to listen to the material in this recording to get something out of it; the author's calm and soothing voice has benefits all its own and can make the atmosphere in your car as pleasant as if your favorite music is playing in the background.

My new found perspective on driving in rush hour traffic has made my commute tolerable for now, although I still hope that once the T-Rex Light Rail line is completed I'll be able to use it several times a week. I must admit that I still honk when someone cuts me off in traffic as well, but it doesn't carry the same significance as it did before. I hope you all have a stress free and productive 2006.



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## The Holidays, Our Skills, and Slowing Down

 by [Marella Colyvas](#), STC RMC President

It is December 28, 2005, a day which falls in that rather strange, quiet in-between time that isn't quite Christmas or New Year's, but is still the holiday season. This year I decided to deliberately slow down for the holidays; I wanted to savor the time with my family and not let myself be lured into a frenzy of party-going and buying gifts. Paring activities was difficult, but gave me the reward of time to reflect on the past year. I also decided not to make the traditional dozen or so "resolutions" for the new year; instead, I contemplated and planned for activities that, I hope, will make my professional and personal life more rewarding, all the while fulfilling obligations. During my planning, I reached an "ah-ha!" moment and came up with three "non-resolutions" that will be useful for all technical communicators.

The first is to keep our skills up-to-date. Over this past year, many interesting topics have come across the STC RMC discussion list. Here are some sample topics: FrameMaker questions that ranged from licensing recovery to how to do tab stops in auto-numbered format and in tables; grammar and usage problems in marketing materials; PDF in A4 format; corrupted Word templates; embedded font issues; document numbering schema and naming conventions; and consulting contracts. Our discussion list is a great asset to our community and allows us to really reach out and help each other. It is also a testimony on how important it is to:

- Give ourselves skill refreshers, even in those areas where we excel; we never know when we might be called on to help. And besides, it will help us professionally.
- Share our knowledge. Everywhere, companies and agencies are having to do more with less. This means that often we do not have time to learn everything we may need to know for a particular solution; if technical communicators can rely on each other, it ultimately means more respect for the profession, because a greater body of knowledge is had by all.
- Learn from others. Even when we think we know the answer and that our answer is "best," allowing ourselves to be open to the possibility that someone else might have a better answer teaches us to think outside our own box and improve our creativity. We might be surprised at how much we can learn from another's response to a question.

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The second item is to actively engage in some activity to explicitly improve your writing. No matter if you are working in user assistance (help files) documentation, medical writing, standards documentation, technical marketing, program (SDK/API) documentation, policies and procedures, or any variety of web content, it is vital to keep up your writing skills. I think many of us are so engaged in understanding the tools of our trade or doing other aspects of our jobs that we don't actually write as much as we once did. I find myself organizing, eliciting, and editing information, or facilitating group documentation projects much more than actually writing. If you still harbor the love of writing (and I'll bet most technical communicators do), why not try your hand at a creative writing class? Or at tutoring young adults with their English class writing assignments? Both do wonders for your self-esteem, and improve your writing skills to boot.

The third item is to keep an active eye on the economy and job market. With the ever-present threat of downsizing, off-shoring, and old-fashioned layoffs, most technical communicators have to scramble to find that next assignment, next contract, or next job. Read the business pages, listen to the market reports on NPR, and tap into your fearless STC RMC for local job leads and new trends via our fabulous speakers. Also, don't be afraid to look at other professional organizations. Transitioning skills is something that every technical communicator should think about and plan for as job markets change. Last spring we had a very successful seminar on transitioning from technical writing to technical training. That is only one example.

**Note:** If anyone has a particular skill set they have used successfully to transition to another area of technical communication, please offer to write about it in the next edition of the newsletter.

I hope these three "non-resolutions" have given you something to think about for the upcoming year. I think there's a fourth item: slow down. Take time for yourself, your life, your hopes, and your dreams. Focus on what is happening now and less on what is going to be. There is never a time like now to live your life - in fact, it's all you've got.



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