TECH comments

The newsletter of the Southeastern Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

February's Program Meeting: Information Architecture Across Multiple Media Types

Today, at least five years into an explosion of Internet-based communication, the web is like a vast and confusing hall of mirrors. It's full of links to other links, graphic design that distorts rather than illuminates information, whiz-bang features, silly eye-candy, and dead-ends -- all of which impede progress when searching for information.

Information architecture is an emerging discipline that seeks to solve these problems for web sites. Information architects categorize, organize, and structure information online so that people can find it and understand it. Because these are the same goals of technical communicators writing online help, print manuals, and supporting web applications, we can apply the principles of information architecture to our work, solving many of our problems.

Join us at the EMU - Livonia campus (38777 W. Six Mile Rd. Suite 400) to examine the four key elements of information architecture:

- Navigation systems
- Labeling systems
- Searching systems
- Organization systems

Registration deadline is February 19, 2001. Please register by the deadline and pay in advance.

The cost is

- $15 Members

- $20 Non-members

- $5 Students

Make checks payable to STC/SM and send to:

Nancy Sock

Iris Communications PMB #235

2370 E. Stadium

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Coming Events

Chapter Board Meeting
January

Chapter Program Meeting
February 22, 2001

Networking Lunch
Wednesday, February 21, 2001
Applebee's on Green Road

Thursday, Mar 22, 2001
Gourmet Garden, W. Stadium
For more information contact:
Kathy Carter
E-mail: bluehoo@provide.net

Inside

society for technical communication
southeastern michigan chapter

Chapter Board Members

President
Paul Sisler
734.996.9006
psisler@arbor-comm.com

Vice President
Jennifer Regal
734.647.9650
jregal820@earthlink.net

Employment Referrel Service
517.485.2975
beckyrps@earthlink.net

Membership
Jill Bornemeier
734.332.5571
jbornemeier@availnetworks.com

Programs
Mary Hayes
mary.hayes@mindspring.com

Web Master
Carissa Coulson
734.542.5955 ext.6682
carissacoulson@hotmail.com

Chapter Web Page
http://www.stc.org/region4/smc

Letter from the President, Paul J. Sisler

In hard winter months, such as those we've been enjoying, when even theswiftest creeks are iced in, it's a good time to tie flies, or so I've heard. This is my first season, and the Caddis I've tied reminds me of a small dust bunny. I've made a recent inheritance of hemostats, threaders, head cement, dubbing, hooks, feathers, a nice vise, and thread. I hope my sons can enjoy this odd collection of tools someday. And I hope that they'll know what it means when I tell them this managerie of esoterica came from their mother's father, who used to fish the Big Thompson and who got up early winter mornings to tie flies and sip coffee. His handiwork is here in an Adams with gray thread and grizzly hackle.

The kit includes a collection of what I'd call technical manuals, all of them several decades old. Among them is Popular Dry Fly Patterns, a guide to tying everything from nymphs to hoppers. It includes line drawings of flies at their various stages of creation. The simple curve of a barbless hook, and the first few twists of thread are gradually transformed into something that looks bug like enough to fool me, if not a good sized brown trout. It includes brief lists of materials used for tying each pattern.

It includes steps for patient anglers who thoughtfully, meditatively turn thread, imagining a sulphur hatch early evening in May.

As I put off writing another throw away stepped procedure for yet another online help file, and lose myself in the wonder of a far too distant spring morning on the Pere Marquette with my waders on, I'm rediscovering the magic of our profession. Flyfishing is arcane, it's language, habits, and behaviors Cabalistic in nature. It is without a doubt as intimidating for me to walk into a flyshop and ask, "What's hatching?" as it is for many to walk into their local electronics super store and ask, "How much RAM do you think I need?" And sometimes I'll catch a shop keeper who speaks to me as if I know his language: "There's still a few steelies down near Gleason's.

I'd definitely be throwin' some bunnies if I were you. Might try a few big stone flies. Had luck with them yesterday. Sulphurs should rise 'bout five." Huh?

So while I'm wondering what to tie for the steelhead season in March (an elaborate procrastination device for avoiding writing procedures), I have to marvel at the work of those technical writers whose subjects are streams, trout, and flies. Here's what I've learned from them:

• Emotions count. Fly tying is a sacred art, each bit of feather holding the promise of a fighter on the line. It's often difficult to get excited about mortgage banking software or a web-based scheduling application, but each person who reads our work comes to it as a human being, with feelings and a secret desire to give a hoot about what they're doing.

Letter from the President, Paul J. Sisler, *Continued*

- The value is in knowing how to apply the technology. It doesn't do me in hard winter months, such as those we've been enjoying, when even the swiftest creeks are iced in, it's a good time to tie flies, or so I've heard. This is my first season, and the Caddis I've tied reminds me of a small dust bunny. I've made a recent inheritance of hemostats, threaders, head cement, dubbing, hooks, feathers, a nice vise, and thread. I hope my sons can enjoy this odd collection of tools someday. And I hope that they'll know what it means when I tell them this managerie of esoterica came from their mother's father, who used to fish the Big Thompson and who got up early winter mornings to tie flies and sip coffee. His handiwork is here in an Adams with gray thread and grizzly hackle.

- Goals are more important than tasks. We've spent a lot of time in our industry analyzing the tasks people complete. We rarely think about the goals they're trying to accomplish. I tie flies not to wrap thread, and feather, but to hook a lunker. This in mind, angler's volumes discuss casting techniques, methods for setting the hook, and tricks for safe release. The fly is a mere vehicle, the way setting up an appointment using my scheduling program is a simple means of reminding me to get a haircut. It is not the haircut itself.

- Language is clannish. The language of the flyshop is a cryptic tongue, a shorthand known to initiates only. It's easy to knock off screen and field descriptions for a software manual using "object-oriented", "three-tiered architecture", or "synchronous voice-data streaming". But what's easy for the writer generally means more work for the reader.

These are simple lessons. I've been lectured on their importance. I've read about them in various industry journals. But nothing is as instructive as being the consumer of technical information. I'm going to remember this the next time I write an uninspired and unhelpful 5 step procedure for adding a contact to a database. Who wants to add a contact? Perhaps one hopes to remember Rachel's phone number, the way I don't really want to tie flies, I want to stand in a cool stream, watch a heron take flight, and fight a strong brownie.

Tech comments is Available by E-mail

TECH comments is also available in pdf format and can be sent directly to your computer via e-mail. If you're interested in receiving Tech comments through e-mail, please send your request to the Newsletter Editor at Cytheria1@aol.com.

Candidate for STC 2nd Vice President

Hello. Please let me introduce myself. I'm Thea Teich, and I'm running for 2nd vice president of STC. That means a four-year commitment to Society leadership, which is something I look forward to, should I win your votes.

Who Am I?
Just a quick overview of my background: I was brought up in northern New Jersey. For those of you in the area, my high school overlooked the back side of the Statue of Liberty. Really.

I left NJ to attend the University of Michigan. Then I took a master's degree at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. I spent several summers as a park ranger in Oklahoma during this period. Yes, really.

I continued to spend my young adulthood on Big Ten campuses by working for the Ohio State University School of Natural Resources for three years. Then, I became the environmental education coordinator for the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. There I developed cooperative programs mainly for adults, trying to make complicated environmental subjects understandable and interesting so that people would be willing to take action. I didn't call it technical communication at the time, but that's what was going on.

In 1980, I moved back to Ohio, to Cincinnati, and have worked here for government agencies, private industry, and as an independent, in technical communications concerning everything from water pollution control to plastic processing methods, from pharmaceutical market research to ERP software. I also teach technical marketing communications in a local technical college program. My decision to "go independent" was a long time in the making, but my being downsized in late 1995 was a significant shove in that direction.

I've been a member of STC since 1988. I've been director-sponsor of Region 4, public relations manager for the 1999 annual conference, and a member of the academe-industry committee. I've presented at many annual and regional conferences on starting your own business, professional development, and marketing communications. For the Southwestern Ohio chapter (SWO), I was president, vice president, and competitions manager (for three years). I also served on the 1997 Region 4 conference committee and the SWO professional development committee. I regularly judge local STC competitions, have judged international competitions, and have won publications awards. I'm also a member and past officer of some other local communications organizations.

Candidate for STC 2nd Vice President , *Continued*

What Do I Bring To the Table?

First, I bring a "can-do," implementation-focused orientation. Moving ideas and plans from "ought" to "action" is one of my strengths. Determining the optimal way, which may not necessarily be the fastest or the cheapest way, to transform projects from plans to production—
and then doing it—is how I've earned my living for many years.

Second, I believe that to make good decisions, input from people who don't think exactly as I do or who have different priorities is necessary. I listen. I believe consensus leads to decisions that respond best to the issues.

Third, I bring a breadth of experience to the office. Technical communicators work in varied situations—and I've been through most of them. Independent, corporate, nonprofit, educational, downsized, upsized, over-whelmed—I've been there. As a result, I think I have more than an inkling of what many STC members face every day.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, my aim is to use the talent and capabilities we have as an organization to foresee the trends in our profession so we can plan for them and better help STC members meet the needs and opportunities presented by those trends.

Our profession's value to the world at large is being increasingly recognized. Part of the reason for that is the times we live in. But another part of the reason is that we have a professional organization that represents us as a body; we are no longer an amorphous conglomeration of easily replaced "support services." Over much of the past almost 50 years of STC's existence, the focus has been on promoting our professionalism, supporting educational programs and research, improving, and—let's face it—helping to stabilize—our places and value in corporate and other entities.

Now that we've determined "to design the future of technical communications (our new mission statement), my goals involve focusing our efforts on the professional development of our members so they can answer the classic job interview question, "where do you want to be in five years?" By exploring trends and possibilities now and helping members prepare for them, we can work toward—instead of merely respond to—what will happen five years from now. We can truly "design the future of technical communication." In other words, we can design, draw, paint, and frame *our own futures*.

I also want to promote both the profession and the organization so that that technical communicators view STC the way medical doctors view their associations and engineers view their societies—as essential elements of their professions. Our branding effort was a springboard: Let's put what we learned about ourselves to work.

In the meantime, please remember to vote in the upcoming STC elections. You can do so either on the tradi-tional paper ballot or electronically at the STC Web site this year. I hope you'll vote for me for 2nd vice president. But the important thing is to vote. You're a member of this group. Here's your chance to help design STC—as well as the future of technical communication.

For more information about me, please visit my Web site, www.TeichTMC.com. You may also contact me at

Letter from the Director-Sponsor, Thea Teich

The winter STC Board of Directors meeting was held in San Diego, California, USA, on 18-20 January 2001.

Actions Taken at the Meeting

- Formation of three new chapters was approved, bringing the total number of chapters worldwide to 153 (120 regular chapters and 33 student chapters):

  - Australia chapter, with a $350 USD start-up grant (Region 5).
  - Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute student chapter (Troy, New York, USA), with a $150 USD start-up grant (Region 1).
  - Hill Country student chapter (San Marcos, Texas, USA), with a $150 USD start-up grant (Region 5).

- The following appointments to Society-level committees were approved: Kathryn M. Poe (Manager, STC Public Relations Competition Committee) and Paula Stanzioni (Manager, Education & Research Special Interest Group).

- Fiscal year 2001 income and expenses as of 31 October 2000 were reviewed and approved. Income and expenses are well within budget. STC will be returning about two-thirds of a million dollars to chapters to support their fiscal year 2001 programs and activities.

- A merit grant of $3,000 USD was awarded to the Mercer University (Georgia) student chapter (Region 3) to build its scholarship fund.

A research grant of $10,000 USD was awarded to Eva R. Brumberger for a study entitled *The Rhetoric of Typography: A Study Investigating Typeface Personality and Its Impact on the Reading Process.*

Other Items of Interest

New STC logo. A graphic toolkit and templates for STC materials will be made available to chapters (presidents, newsletter editors, and webmasters), Society-level committees, and Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and placed on the STC Web site in March. These tools will help guide groups in implementing the new look. Work is underway to redesign the STC Web site. Watch for the first official use of the new logo in the *Preliminary Annual Conference Program* - out soon!

Elections. This year, the balloting process will include an option to vote online. The 2001 election material will contain information necessary to ensure secure online voting. Voting online will be optional - members may still choose to vote by mail.

Letter from the Director-Sponsor, Thea Teich, *Continued*

Membership. STC continues to grow at a steady rate, and membership now stands at 23,553. Total membership is projected to reach 26,000 by the end of March. Current distribution of membership: U.S. 87.2%, Canada 8.6%, other countries 4.1%. STC's annualized 10-year growth rate is 4.6%, with growth rates as follows: U.S. 3.9%, Canada 10.8%, other countries 11.7% (the greatest area of growth).

Membership directory. The STC membership directory has been placed online. It allows members to search on members' first and last names. The results display the member's name, address, phone, fax, e-mail, chapter, grade, and date joined.

Annual Conference. Preparations for the 48th Annual Conference in Chicago, Illinois, USA, in May 2001 are well underway. The conference program committee reviewed nearly 400 proposals and selected about 440 speakers for 256 sessions. About 41 booths have already been contracted for the vendor exhibit.

Technical Communication journal. Abstracts and PDFs of the 1996 and 1997 issues have now been posted on the Technical Communication Online Web site. Recommendations from usability studies performed by graduate students at Mercer University have been incorporated in the Web site. Check it out!

STC governance. This year, the STC Board of Directors is conducting a series of workshops at its regular meetings to evaluate governance. This activity is an outgrowth of STC's new mission statement: "Designing the future of technical communication." What model of governance would be most effective in leading STC into that future? Aspects being evaluated include the structure of representation, the way that decisions are made, the balance of volunteer and office staff workloads, and communication patterns. A clear picture of leadership has dominated the workshops: one that focuses on trends, vision, strategy, and best practices; that embraces outside influences; that concentrates on setting policy rather than on operational details. A concluding workshop in May will set short-term and long-term goals for meeting those objectives.

Digital Printing - What's up with that?

Within the last few years, digital printing has become one of the buzzwords of our industry. While much of traditional printing methodology has remained the same, changes in technology have created some fantastic new opportunities within the world's second largest industry, printing. The very newsletter that you are reading was printed digitally. If you are reading newsletter this on the web site, it is also being brought to you digitally. Both communication mediums utilized the same file. Amazing!

From "variable data" for affordable short run color work, these new techknowledges now allow for higher quality, personalized, affordability on your printing projects. In the not so distant past, it would have been impossible to combine these features. Using these new technologies, you can communicate much more effectively with your employees, customers, potential customers, whomever!

Some of the machines used to produce these "digitally" printed pieces include the Xerox Docutech black and white printer, the Canon CLC1000 color copier and the Heidelberg DI digital printing press. All of these machines are run from electronic files that can be e-mailed from your computer directly to your print provider. Almost all of these projects can be printed and delivered in hours or days instead of days or weeks.

If you have not yet acquainted yourself with these products, your should soon. As markets continue to segment and communication become more time sensitive and critical to your success, you need to master the vehicles that will get you there. Ready or not, here comes your digital future!!!

(Jim Laurain of Alpha Services wrote this article. Alpha Services prints and distributes our newsletter for us (248) 548-3210x25.

society for technical communication
southeastern michigan chapter

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 222031854
703.522.4114
stc@stc-va.org

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

The mission of the Southeastern Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is to:
- foster a sense of community among technical communicators and provide a forum for professional development,
- enhance the professionalism of the members and the status of the profession by promoting the technical communication profession to business, government, and academic organizations,
- provide information through publications and reports,
- promote the education of members and encourage professional and academic mentoring,
- encourage the development of university, academic, and professional courses and research activities in the field of technical communications,
- encourage professional development through competition; technical programs that provide professional education related to communication technologies, methods, and applications; and networking opportunities.

TECH comments

STC/SM
P.O. Box 128
Ann Arbor, MI 48106