STC/SM

Society for Technical Communication
Southeastern Michigan Chapter

TECH*comments*

Inside This Issue

Letter From the Editor
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar

Well, summer will be upon us quickly, and the STC year is drawing to a close. For those going to the international conference in Minneapolis, please take notes and join us in September for a set of progressions on the conference.

Also, mark your calendar for our yearly show-and-tell dinner on June 5 at George Murphy's in Livonia. This is your chance to bring the projects most near and dear to your heart and tell us all about them.

We are looking for volunteers for next year. Volunteer positions open for the following year include:

Programs Manager

The programs manager contacts potential speakers and coordinates the efforts of everyone else on the programs team (venue coordinator, postcard designer and greeters).

Venue Coordinator

The venue coordinator contacts venues and caterers and sets up programs.

Postcard Designer/Mailer

The postcard designer/mailer creates postcards to advertise programs and sends them to members. This is a great job for someone who would like to help out but can't make it to programs.

Registration/Greeters

Greeters register program participants at programs. Members often greet only at those programs that are located near their work/home. This is a great job for someone who attends the programs near them.

Newsletter Reporter

Newsletter reporters write articles about programs, events, members, or their tech writing work projects. This can be a great job for someone who would like to help out but can't make it to programs.

Hosts for Local Networking Lunches

Hosts for networking lunches choose a restaurant, a date, and a time for a networking lunch. Hosts advertise the lunch on the listserv and arrive 15 minutes early to welcome members. We've had networking luncheons in Ann Arbor and downtown Detroit, but any location may have the potential to be a great networking lunch area (for example, the Troy or Novi areas).

Publicity Manager

The publicity manager creates fliers and press releases about programs and sends them to local news agencies and schools. This can be a great job for someone who would like to help out but can't make it to programs.

If you would like to learn more about any of these positions, please contact me at president@stc-sm.org and check out our Web site:

http://www.stc-sm.org/volunteerOpportunities.htm

Cool Tools
by Mary Jo David, Programs Co-Chair

One common thread seems to run through my "Cool Tools" column, and that is: The Internet is the coolest tool of them all.

This issue I share with you yet another Internet site for writers. This time, the site is *Fifty Writing Tools: The Workbench of Roy Peter Clark,* which is archived on PoynterOnline.org, the Web site of The Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida. Clark is a vice president at the Institute. According to PoynterOnline, the site provides "everything you need to be a better journalist." But let's face it, regardless of the genre, writers of every ilk can benefit from good writing technique. And that's what Roy Peter Clark's *Fifty Writing Tools* is all about—strengthening writing technique.

It's ironic that when I was surfing for material for this column, the site I found plugging Clark's tools was very poorly written. At first, I made the mistake of thinking, "Hmmm…maybe this guy should apply some of his own tools." But then I realized the site was referencing the tools; it was not the home site for the tools. Despite the problems I noticed on the site, it did provide a handy list of links to all 50 tools, so I stopped criticizing and started reviewing. What I found was a box of 50 useful tools focusing on different aspects of writing.

Some tools, like the following, contain tips that are perfectly applicable to technical communication:

- Writing Tool #1: Branch to the Right
- Writing Tool #9: Prefer Simple to Technical
- Writing Tool #26: Fear Not the Long Sentence

Other tools aren't quite as helpful when applied to technical communication; but they're interesting to read, all the same:

- Writing Tool #14: Interesting Names
- Writing Tool #18: Internal Cliffhangers
- Writing Tool #28: Writing Cinematically

Clark has kept each of his tools to a manageable length; they're easy to read and experiment with on your lunch hour or during a much-needed break. He finishes off each tool with a section called "Workbench," or in some cases "Workshop," where he suggests some simple exercises you can use to reinforce the lesson you've just learned. If you're a fairly new writer, Clark gives you plenty of food for thought. If you're an experienced writer, it never hurts to refresh your skills.

Frankly, the toughest thing about using Clark's tools is finding them without going through other sites that are just referencing his tools. If you want to go directly to where the tools are stored on PoynterOnline's site, try typing in this mile-long URL string:
http://web.archive.org/web/20060426003003/www.poynter.org/content/content_view.asp?id=61811. On the other hand, if you want to save the typing for a writing lesson or two, simply use Google to search for "writing tool #1," and from the first link Google provides, you'll have access to each of the 50 tools.

Clark's tips are also available in book form: *Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*, published by Little, Brown and Company, 2006.

Editor's note: Live and learn. Apparently Clark recognizes that if you want to improve your writing, you need to leave yourself open to learning new things. Thus, I found that there's already a Tool #51: Too Many "ings."

Don't forget, if you know of a cool tool, write me and let me know, so we can consider sharing it with others through this column. You can reach me at maryjo@writeawayent.com.

STC/SM Leadership
2006-2007
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Member Spotlight: Erica Pilon

Why did you decide to become an STC member?

After I finished graduate school I was interested in continuing my education as a writer and technical professional. STC offers great learning and networking opportunities outside the classroom.

Why did you decide to pursue technical communication as a career?

I have always wanted to pursue a career in communication, particularly as a writer. Since I was already employed in the IT industry, technical communication seemed like a logical fit.

Where are you currently employed?

I am currently employed as a business analyst for a financial services company based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I work as part of the product development team for their business banking software division in Ann Arbor.

What are your job activities?

My job activities vary greatly from day to day. From a writing perspective, I compose quite a few functional design specifications. I also create new screens for our application using HTML and cascading style sheets. My primary responsibility is as a liaison between the technical team and the marketing team and customers. I hold presentations and facilitate status meetings and design reviews.

What are some example projects that you are particularly proud of?

I recently worked on a project to overhaul the entire user interface for our product, which involved almost 300 screens. This was a challenge to design and implement, but the positive feedback we have received has made it worth the effort.

How has your STC membership helped you with your career?

The monthly programs through STC/SM have been fabulous. Attending these has really helped to keep my skills current. Last year I attended the STC International Conference. I was able to bring back many valuable lessons to my team.

What advice do you have for students as they are entering the field of technical communication?

Technical communicators are needed in nearly every industry. Find an industry that you are passionate about. If you enjoy the subject matter, you will be a stronger communicator.

April Program Recap: CSS and Modern, Accessible Web Design

by Erin Moulton

On April 24, the STC/SM Chapter welcomed Jason Withrow, who presented the program, "CSS and Modern, Accessible Web Design."

In his presentation, Withrow explained cascading style sheets (CSS) and how to use positioning and floats to improve your Web design. He offered several advantages of using CSS. Some of these advantages include:

- easy to reuse and maintain code
- improved accessibility
- greater code portability
- improved indexing

He compared CSS with tables for Web design and discussed how CSS has become a way of creating more usable Web pages. He talked about CSS positioning (the advantages and disadvantages, absolute positioning, relative positioning, and fixed positioning).

Additionally, Withrow showed several examples of coding, such as separating structure, presentation, and behavior to:

- enhance accessibility
- reduce maintenance costs
- simplify the redesign process

Washtenaw Community College hosted the event, and 23 people attended.

Withrow teaches in the Internet Professional Program at Washtenaw Community College. Before teaching, he worked in the Web development industry for more than six years as an information architect, a usability engineer, and a business analyst. He has two master's degrees in psychology and information.

MIUPA Meeting

The Michigan Usability Professionals Association (MIUPA) is having a meeting on May 20:

The topic will be "Alarming Usability: Optimizing the Design of an Alarm Clock."

Check the MIUPA Web site for details: www.miupa.org

Card Sort Lessons Learned

by Christine Pellar-Kosbar

How should you organize your Web site or Web application so users can easily find the items they want to buy (or find the information they want to read)? You might think that there is one intuitively obvious way to organize your set of information, or you might think that every user will have a completely different idea of how items should be organized in a site's structure. In fact, if you ask a set of users, you'll most likely find a site structure that most people will recognize (but it might not be the one you found intuitively obvious).

This is what I learned at a card sort tutorial at The Internet User Experience and at a card sort I helped run at a local area hospital.

What is a Card Sort?

A card sort is an experiment that Web site and applications designers create and run in order to learn where (on a screen) people are likely to look for a product or service.

For a manual card sort, the designer prints terms on cards. The participants then sort the cards into categories and name the categories. (This is called an *open sort*.) Although each term is likely to be categorized differently by different people, usually each term will be sorted into one particular category by most people.

After the results of the card sort are analyzed and the most popular category names chosen, a new group of people are given the terms and the category names. This new group is asked to sort the terms into the given categories. (This is called a *closed sort* and is supposed to test the category names.)

A Hospital Card Sort

The company I work for is designing a Web application for use in hospitals. At the hospital, we recently ran a card sort to test how concepts should be organized on our application's user interface. First, a list of 134 terms was compiled. Each of these terms was a clinician workflow-related concept.

Open Sort

Fifteen physicians gathered and, as a group, went through the concepts and accepted those they understood. Then the physicians paired up and, with the help of a staff member to offer context, the physicians sorted the concepts into categories and named those categories.

We used Websort (www.websort.org) to organize the information the physicians gave us and came up with six categories of concepts: Clinician Information, Patient Information, Documents, Results, Orders, and Medications.

Closed Sort

We then gathered 10 more clinicians to test the categories in a closed sort. These volunteers sorted a similar set of concepts into the preselected groups.

March Meeting Recap: Creating and Evangelizing Web Standards
(Without Gnashing of Teeth, Smashed Furniture, and other Unseemly Tantrums)
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar

In March, Deb Ermiger and Pam Dearen presented a lively and very informative description of how they've implemented Web standards at EDS. A packed house of Michigan Usability Professionals' Association (MIUPA) and STC/SM members participated at EDS's Troy location.

Deb and Pam first described the issues that many large organizations face when departments have created their own Web sites and have not coordinated with other departments. Disorganized, out-of-date, and even conflicting information can make it difficult for an organization to promote a consistent and helpful message to its clients.

By providing a central online location where departments can go for help (and by keeping the tone one of helping rather than correcting), a Web standards team can provide consistent

- templates
- training
- sample code
- images

A Web standards team can help bring order to chaos by

- offering help and best practice information
- involving all departments
- showcasing successes
- measuring the return on investment
- improving the sites that need the most help first.

By showing just one instance of how an improvement to a Web site can create a better client experience, the Web standards team can help stakeholders see why standardization is so important.

Pam and Deb made it clear that all of this can be done with a sense of humor.

Thank you to Deb Ermiger and Pam Dearen and to EDS for hosting this event.

Card Sort Lessons Learned
by Christine Pellar-Kosbar (cont.)

When we analyzed the information from this second, closed, sort, we found a very high correlation—almost all of the concepts were put in the same categories by the different groups.

Results of Hospital Card Sort

We learned:

- Some of our original terminology was used differently by the users than by the developers and analysts—"reports," for example, meant "lab results" to users (but "database collections" to analysts).
- Users preferred certain terms when there were two options –"customize" won out over "configure," for example.
- Users did categorize concepts fairly consistently. Most of the terms (but not all) were categorized where analysts expected them.

This kind of experiment does put a stop to arguments that users are all so different that any organization is arbitrary so any organization is as good as any other.

It also puts a stop to arguments that analysts and Web designers know intuitively where to categorize features—sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. A card sort can confirm intuition or correct it.

More Information

If you'd like any more information about how to run a card sort or about the automated tools to run the sort and analyze the results, check out the Web site: www.websort.org

Ann Arbor ASTD Upcoming Events

The Ann Arbor Chapter of the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD) hosts monthly meetings at Washtenaw Community College.

The topic for May will be "Managing the Learning Function."

Registration information is at: www.astdannarbor.org/programs.html

STC/SM June Program
Show and Tell

Bring your best work to show what you're writing, creating, editing or building.
Particulars:

Date:	Tuesday, June 5, 6 to 9 p.m.
Time:	6:30 pm: Networking 7 pm: Dinner
Location:	George Murphy's in Livonia 36000 7 Mile Rd Livonia, MI 48152 (248) 473-1300
Price:	$15 for STC members $20 for nonmembers $10 for students belonging to STC $12 for students not belonging to STC **Add $5 for registrations postmarked after June 1 and for walk-ins**

Registration:

Preregister by Friday, June 1 for a $5 discount off the at-the-door registration price. Please register by email at register@stc-sm.org or by mail at:

Registration for June STC Program
22951 Thorncliffe
Southfield, MI 48033

If you wish to get the discounted rate, please be sure to mail your
payment so that we receive it by Friday, June 5.
Parking: Free parking available