

TECH comments

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

September/October 1999

Volume 9, Issue 1

Developing Expertise in Information Design: A Toolkit for the Professional Communicator

STC/SM's Fall Seminar Features Karen Schriver

KAREN A. SCHRIVER, Ph.D., internationally recognized expert in information design and the winner of five national awards for her research, will lead our chapter's Fall Seminar on Saturday, November 6, 1999 at the Halle Library on the campus of Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

In this seminar, participants will learn what the experts do to develop their expertise in information design and will apply that knowledge to their own development of expertise in that area. The seminar will present guidelines for information design with emphasis on how people react to documents from cognitive and emotional perspectives. The seminar stresses that if professional communicators are to develop expertise in information design, they must go beyond "keeping up with change" to developing a particular mindset. The seminar will help participants evaluate where they are on their journeys.

Dr. Schriver has been a Professor of Rhetoric and Document Design at Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, and the University of Washington, and now heads her own company, KSA Document Design and Research. She is author of "Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Texts for Readers" (John Wiley, 1997), a book that has received praise from reviewers around the world.

Advance registration and payment are required for the seminar. The **deadline for registration and receipt of check is Friday, October 29, 1999**. Continental breakfast and a bag lunch are included in the cost of the seminar.

Date & Time: Saturday, November 6, 1999, 9 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Check-in starts at 8 a.m. outside Room 300

Fees	<u>By Oct. 29</u>	<u>After Oct.30</u>
STC Member:	\$75.	\$85.
Student:	\$20.	\$25.
Non-member:	\$100	\$110

Register

Online: <http://stc.org/region4/smc>
By e-mail to Nancy Rozum: nrozum@globalbiz.net
By telephone with Nancy Rozum: (248)-360-7113

Coming Events

Chapter Competition Entry Deadline

Friday, October 22
Southeastern Michigan Chapter
Online Communications Competition

Ann Arbor Newtworking Luncheon

Thursday, October 28
11:30 a.m.–1:00 p.m.
Outback Steakhouse
I-94 and Ann Arbor-Saline Road

Fall Seminar

Saturday, November 6
Information Design
Speaker, Karen Schriver
Eastern Michigan University

November Program Meeting

Tuesday, November 16
6:30 Social Hour with snack
7:30–9:00 Program
Speaker: Kathleen Wyrwas
Unisys Corporation
13100 Haggerty Road North
Plymouth, Michigan

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Chapter Board Members

President

Michael Dailey
734.930.7893 mdailey@tir.com

Vice President

Paul Sisler
517.485.4693 paul@sisler.com

Employment Referral Service

Becky R. Palmer-Scott
517.485.2975 bscott@voyager.net

Membership

Jill Bornemeier
734.332.5571
jbornemeier@availnetworks.com

Programs

Mary Hayes
810.497.0115 MAH13@chrysler.com

Web Master

Renka Gesing
519.254.5015 renka@windsor.igs.net

Chapter Web Page

<http://stc.org/region4/smc>

Publication and Reprint Policies

TECH comments is published monthly September through June for members and friends of the Southeast Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. We welcome feature articles; letters to the editor; and information about meetings, courses, and workshops. We accept manuscripts in both hardcopy and electronic format with MS Word or ASCII text. Submissions will be edited.

Reprints from TECH comments are permitted if credit is given and a copy is sent to the managing editor.

Send submissions to:

Sarah Ann Margulies
Managing Editor
35759 Glenwood Road
Wayne, MI 48184-1122
samargu@a1access.net

Letter from the President

By Michael J. Dailey, President, STC/SM

What a great time to be a Technical Communicator and in STC! The world is moving so fast that we can hardly keep up. Change is everywhere. No sooner do we learn HTML when XML replaces it as the new standard. The 200 Mhz microprocessors in our two- and three-year-old computers are like quills and parchment compared to the computers on the market today. There are times I am so far behind that I think I am in first place!

And yet, it is this very element that makes our profession so exciting and so necessary. We have so many opportunities to stretch our minds, skills, and talents. I'll wager that few of us work on the same products, use the same tools, or even use the same language that we did five years ago.

We here in the Southeastern Michigan Chapter of the STC are also changing. Our meetings will have a different format this year. We are going to meet at more corporate and academic sites, rather than at hotels. We expect to serve light refreshments during the networking mixer, then move right to the program. This all means that our meetings will be about 1 hour shorter. I am sure more of us will be able to attend the programs as a result.

We also plan to publish more of our Chapter-related information electronically, using the list server, our website, and E-mail as our primary means of distribution. I encourage anyone who has not yet signed onto our list server to do so. Look on the website or in this newsletter for instructions on signing up. If you don't, you might miss out on some great opportunities!

This year marks the return of competitions to our Chapter. In keeping with the times, the competition this year is for electronic media. We expect to add additional competitions in the years to come. Working with the Competitions Team is an excellent way to learn about publishing information electronically and to meet some experts in the field.

We are also working to broaden the awareness of STC in the Southeastern Michigan area through increased publicity and improved communications with other related organizations. Our profession and organization will benefit as more people learn about what we do.

I am excited about serving as the Chapter President and about working with so many high-caliber people. Our plates are full of opportunities to learn and to join in the fun. So come on in and have a bite. As my Grandmother used to say, "If you don't get enough to eat, it's your own darn fault!"

About the Author

Steven Fraiberg, the author of *Can You Teach Someone To Write* on the facing page, has taught technical writing and composition at several colleges and universities in the Washington, DC, area. He has an M.S. in Technical Communication from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY.

Can You Teach Someone To Write?

By Steve Fraiberg

The Million Dollar Question

In a recent conversation with the publications manager of a large software company, I was asked a question about my profession—teaching writing—that is often raised when I tell people that I teach: “Can you really teach someone to write?”

Yes, writing can be taught.

The Writing Process

Many people believe that writing ability is a gift. They see writing as a mysterious process that cannot be understood. However, we can understand a good deal about what happens when people write. In the picture below, point A is the time that you begin writing and point B is the time that you finish. All the decisions that you make between point A and point B are known as the writing process.



In the classroom, I teach students to observe their own process. They look at what they do when they write. Once writers understand how they are currently working, they can decide what to keep and what to change.

Try the following two methods to study your writing process:

Think aloud. Tape record yourself thinking aloud as you write. Later transcribe the tape and identify patterns and strategies that you are using.

Keep a journal. Use a journal to record how you go about writing. Select something that you are working on—preferably an assignment that you are starting—and reflect on decisions that you make. The purpose is to gather data on your writing process so that you can look for patterns and strategies that you are using. Include thoughts, feelings, stuck points, conversations with other colleagues or your boss, and anything else that affects the writing. Record the dates and times of your journal entries.

Understanding Readers

In order to learn to write, you also need to understand how people read. Once writers have an understanding of how people read then the writing falls into place. Similar to the writing process, the reading process is not as automatic as you might think. You can observe what readers do. In the classroom, I teach students a variety of ways to observe readers.

The following are some methods that you can use:

Test your writing. Test your writing on a real reader. During the test, have your reader say out loud everything that they are thinking. The purpose of “thinking aloud” is to make your reader’s thinking visible so that you can understand what is happening to them as they read. You can hear your reader think.

Get reader feedback. Ask your reader for feedback. For instance, ask your reader to summarize what you have written, point to places that they notice, or explain questions that were raised. Once you understand what happens to your reader, you can determine what does and doesn’t work—then decide what to change.

Guidelines for Feedback - For Writers:

Don’t argue with your reader. When receiving feedback, you should remain silent and listen. Resist the temptation to explain “this is what I meant.” The point is to capture the experience of someone reading alone so that you can determine how well you are communicating your message. If your reader’s interpretation is different than the one you intended—the feedback is working.

Guidelines for Feedback – For Readers:

No advice. When giving feedback, you should provide as much information as you can about what happens to you as a reader—without giving advice. By refraining from advice you leave the writer in control of their writing; they decide what to change.

For example, do not tell the writer to “be consistent.” Instead, explain that you expected to read about “x” and were surprised to discover that the topic was actually about “y.”

Use “I” statements. When giving feedback, you should begin sentences with “I” to help you focus on your specific reactions. For instance, instead of saying that “you need to be more clear,” say that “I don’t understand section x.” “I” statements are less judgmental because they help you avoid talking about the writing as if your observations were fact.

Summary

In summary, teaching writing consists of two parts. The first part is teaching students to examine what writers do: to learn about the writing process. The second part is helping students to understand readers. Nothing improves writing faster than understanding what is happening to someone who is reading your words.

Welcome New Members!

Shelle Parsons

Shelle works for Sage Software in Troy

Edward Penet

Edward has his own consulting firm in Ann Arbor

Christine Sheffler

Christine works for Sage Software in Troy

And Transferring in are:

Kristin Johnson

Brenda J. Polk

Quote of the Month

Knowledge doesn't pay—it's what you do with it.

—Arnold Glasow

Employment Opportunities

Contract or Part Time

Create documentation for health care organizations.

Short term contract.

Contact Toni Pollock

Jawood Management Associates

Phone: 248.269.9988

Email: tpoll14901@aol.com

Assist with Y2K projects by recording and documenting activities during facilitated sessions. Also complete research on processes.

Duration: 6 Months

Location: Bloomington, Illinois

Contact Dawn M. Calloway

RCM Technologies Inc.

Phone: 248.350.3300 x223

Email: dawn.calloway@rcmt.com

Produce online manuals and online help in support of enterprise software.

Requires 3–5 years experience producing online documentation,

and ability to produce such documentation without benefit of a help-authoring tool. Must provide a writing sample.

Duration: 3 months

Contact Michael Tomlinson

AppNet, Inc.

Phone: 734.996.3636

Email:

michael.tomlinson@appnet.com

Write Y2K test plans, documentation of functionality and processes.

Requires proficiency in flowcharting in Visio; good knowledge of IT processes in a mainframe and client server environment.

Location: Ann Arbor, MI

Maxim Group

Contact Daryl Dexter

Phone: 1-800-517-9395 x3906

Email: ddexter@maximgroup.com

Information Architecture Topic at October Program Meeting

PETER MORVILLE, Chief Operating Officer of Argus Associates, an information-architecture consulting firm in Ann Arbor, was the speaker at the October program meeting. He spoke on the principles of information architecture and their application in the design of information environments.

Peter defined information architecture as the design of systems of organization and navigation to help people find and manage information, not simply data. Designing such systems is difficult because the purposes, users,

and content of a system are often diverse, and the designer has to deal with the ambiguity of synonyms and near-synonyms, context dependent associations, and categories that may be neither clearly defined nor mutually exclusive.

The types of organizational structures that Peter described are **hierarchy**, which supports a mental model, provides exact answers, and is easy to create and maintain; **database**, which has homogeneous content and predictable relationships; **hypertext**, which is cross-

referencing and contextual, tends to be messy and full of overlap, and can be hard to create and maintain; and **combinations** of those types, which often prove to be the best choice.

Web sites are increasingly more content rich and are used more and more to interact with customers and non-technical staff, so designs must be both user centered with an emphasis on presentation and usability, and content centered, with an emphasis on content reuse and maintenance.

Employment Opportunities

Permanent Full Time

Develop manuals and communications to the provider community for a leading managed care organization. Requires expertise in document layout and page design. Familiarity with managed care and medical terminology a plus.

Select Care, Troy, MI
Contact Deborah Spencer
Phone: 248.637.5322
Email: caspalin@selectcare.com

Develop and update information products for measurement and CAD/CAM software.

Requires 2–3 years tech writing experience, knowledge of RoboHTML, RoboHELP, or similar product. FrameMaker a plus.
SDRC/Imageware, Ann Arbor, MI
Contact Chris Rau
Phone: 734.994.7300
Email: chris.rau@sdrc.com

Write, produce technical/marketing information for print and new media for a manufacturer of natural gas controls. Experience with desktop publishing and graphics strongly preferred.

Will consider position on contract basis.
Maxitrol Company, Southfield, MI
Contact Patrick Bubin, Communications Manager
P.O. Box 2230, Southfield, MI 48037-2230
No phone calls, please
Email for questions only:
pbubin@maxitrol.com

Develop documentation for databases used in healthcare-decision support.

Requires 3–5 years tech writing, strong knowledge of Microsoft Office products. Desired: experience with Web development using FrontPage, performance support, knowledge-management systems, instructional design methodologies.
The MEDSTAT Group, Ann Arbor, MI
Contact HR Recruiting
777 E. Eisenhower Parkway
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
Email: Recruiting@medstat.com

Create printed and online documentation throughout the software development process.

Requires 3+ years tech writing experience, familiarity with software documentation standards, strong online help production skills.
Altair Engineering, Inc., Allen Park, MI
Contact James Ureel
Phone: 313.240.6807 x238
Email: aju@altair.com

Create software, reference, and technical manuals for a maker of factory automation equipment.

Contribute to training, marketing and video production.
Requires DTP software experience and proficiency with FrameMaker and Adobe Illustrator.
Adept Technology, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio
Contact Larry Cartolano
Phone: 513.792-0266
Email: larry.cartolano@adept.com

Create documentation in both online and printed formats for Livelink Suite of products.

Requires 3–7 years of tech writing, experience with Windows online help, writing in HTML, general Web knowledge/experience.
Open Text Corporation, Livonia, MI
Contact Carissa Coulson
Phone: 734.542.5955 x6682
Email: ccoulson@opentext.com

Managing editor for automotive book publisher.

Requires 2 or more years experience as a manager or supervisor in similar environment. SGML publishing systems a plus.
Job Reference # 10333
Job Location: Detroit area
Contact Doreen Kephart
Professional Resource Associates, Inc.
Phone: 810.765.1181 x103
Email: dkephart@prausa.com

Create documentation for financial software company for both hard copy and online.

Requires 3 or more years experience writing end-user documentation. Skill in designing relational databases and knowledge of mortgage servicing and basic data processing a plus.
Job Reference # 10283
Job Location: Northern Indiana
Contact Dan Trudeau
Professional Resource Associates, Inc.
Phone: 810.765.1181
Email: dtrudeau@prausa.com

New Forum for Online Information Formed

STC/SM members Paul Sisler and Catherine Titta have co-founded the Digital Design Institute of Michigan. It was formed as a community of information technology professionals to exchange technical and creative expertise for developing online information.

The members come from a variety of disciplines. They are instructional designers, application developers, graphic artists, multimedia developers, information architects, usability specialists, quality assurance professionals, marketing specialists, and technical communicators.

Face-to-face discussion forums and training sessions are supplemented by computer-assisted virtual events to give these IT professionals multiple opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge—and multiple ways to exchange their technical and creative expertise.

The institute has already held a seminar on web-based applications for e-commerce, and will hold another session on usability on Saturday, October 30th. For more information, visit their web site at www.DigitalDesignInstitute.org, or send email to info@DigitalDesignInstitute.org.

Chapter Listserve Available to All Members

Our chapter maintains an email listserv (also known as an email mailing list) via which we distribute job postings, announce upcoming events, and communicate other chapter news and information.

The listserv isn't limited to just chapter business. It is available to let members network with each other on topics related to our profession. The forum for discussion is wide open—but please limit your messages and discussions to professional topics.

To Join

If you have not received postings from the listserv, you are not a member. To join, go to the web site <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcsems-l>, choose "Join stcsems-l," and follow the directions. Your information will be forwarded to Becky Palmer-Scott, our ERS chair, and she will add you to the list.

To Post a Message

To post a message, go to the same web site, <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcsems-l>, enter your email address, and choose "Click here to enter stcsems-l." On the next screen, you will find options to

Read messages

Create a new message

Your Settings

Leave (unsubscribe).

Choose "Create a new message" and follow the directions.

Guidelines for Posting Messages

We encourage you to use the listserv to network with other chapter members. However, we ask that you follow a few guidelines before sending messages.

Do not endorse or promote companies, political parties, or religious groups. Offering your opinion on products or services is fine; advertising them is not.

Do not provide personal information about members without their express permission. If you need to forward an email address, phone number, or other personal information to another member, be sure to send a message directly to that member.

Be judicious in what you post to the listserv. Messages and discussions should enhance, not erode, the value of STC membership. When you reply to a listserv message, *everyone* in the listserv mailing group receives your response.

Remove your email address from the listserv if your address changes, then subscribe with your new email address.

STC Region 8 Conference Announced

The Los Angeles chapter of STC will host the 1999 STC Region 8 Annual Conference, "Driving Forces in Technical Communication." The conference will be held November 11–14, 1999 at the Long Beach Hilton Hotel in Long Beach, California.

For more information, visit the conference web site at <http://stc.org/region8/conferences/www/index.html>.

Message from Our Director-Sponsor

By Thea Teich, Region 4 Director-Sponsor



I'm writing this column in mid-August for publication in Region 4 newsletters in September and October. It's somewhat of a challenge because I'm still immersed in projects with early September deadlines, dealing with garden vegetables (e.g., contemplating making sauerkraut, because all the cabbages are ripe at once; blanching and freezing tomatoes for fall sauce production; canning pears – one tree was loaded this year), and collecting information from chapter presidents for the mid-September STC board meeting.

However, I would like to bring to your attention the STC Technical Communications Competition of the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF), to be held May 7–13, 2000 in Detroit—which is, of course, in Region 4 and covered by the Southeastern Michigan Chapter. ISEF is the world's only project competition open to students in grades 9–12. STC grants awards for top reports and displays, *i.e.*, communications about projects, to students who have entered science and engineering projects in the Fair. As Maria Barchilon, STC ISEF Manager and STC Associate Fellow, says, "Of the 3 to 5 million students who complete science projects each year, about 1,000 make it to ISEF." Awards include tuition grants, internships, equipment, and field trips.

May, 2000 may seem like a long time in the future, but, as all of you who submitted proposals by August 1, 1999 for the 47th Annual STC Conference in Orlando (May, 2000) know, planning starts early. Schools in your area may already be organizing local science fairs and are usually in need of judges. A really important community-oriented project for an STC chapter is helping to judge local science fairs. We've all recognized how important it is to encourage interest

among students in science and engineering subjects. Many of us have expressed frustration about finding employees with knowledge and training in these areas.

Coupled with this knowledge must be the capability to express, describe, and convey technical information clearly to both technical and non-technical audiences. This is where STC assists the International Science and Engineering Fair—and this is where local STC chapters can assist and influence local, state, and regional fairs leading up to the ISEF.

The ISEF has been administered by Science Service, a non-profit, Washington, DC-based organization, since 1950. Science Service was actually established in 1921 by E.W. Scripps, founder of United Press and Scripps-Howard Newspapers. The concept was aimed at popularizing science through non-sensational, accurate, well-written, and fascinating reporting of scientific information. Today, you can check out a major publication of Science Service through <http://www.sciencenews.org>

ISEF is the world's only project competition open to students in grades 9–12. STC grants awards for top reports and displays, *i.e.*, communications about projects, to students who have entered science and engineering projects in the Fair.

In 1942, the Science Service established the Science Talent Search in cooperation with the Westinghouse Foundation, and in 1950, the first National Science Fair was held in Philadelphia. In 1999, the 75th anniversary of Science Service was celebrated in Philadelphia at the ISEF, and the STC Philadelphia Metro Chapter provided volunteers for that event. For the 2000 Detroit ISEF, the Southeastern Michigan chapter is being asked to assist. For more information about ISEF and STC's involvement in it, check <http://www.sciserv.org> or contact Marian Barchilon at barchilon@asu.edu.

You can reach Thea Teich at:

Phone: 513.521.8102

Fax: 513.521.8139

TeichTMC@aol.com

STC/SM Holds Online Competition

The Southeastern Michigan chapter invites participation in the 1999 Online Communications Competition. This is a rare opportunity to have work reviewed by peers. The competition is open to STC members and nonmembers. All forms of online communication qualify, including tutorials, online help systems, demonstrations, reference materials, computer-based training, and web pages.

Entry guidelines, rules, fees, and entry forms are available on the chapter web site at <http://es54198.easystreet.com/region4/smc/events/competitions.htm>.

Entry deadline is October 22, 1999.



society for technical communication

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904

Arlington, VA 22203-1854

703.522.4114

stc@stc-va.org

www.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.

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P.O.Box 128

Ann Arbor, MI 48106

