

The Quill



The Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication
October 2003 (Volume 15 Number 2) [About the Quill](#)

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Find out what the world of technical writing looks like to someone who is new to the profession. [More](#)

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One of our members is currently living in England. Read about her experiences with both the people and the language. [More](#)

Technical Writing in the Insurance Industry

Not all technical writing jobs are for software companies to send with their products. Even in the insurance, the type of writing is still very different. Find out how "Finance and insurance put a twist on the technical writing

The Editor's Message:

It's hard to believe that this is already the second issue of The Quill. I have a whole new appreciation for how much effort it takes to put a newsletter together.

Congratulations to everyone who has gone through this process in the past. It's a time consuming, but very worthwhile experience.

For this issue, I wanted to highlight some special features in The Quill.

New Feature Columns

This issue features the first installment of two new series -- one about living in England and the other about writing in different industries. While Nancy Halverson will be writing regular articles about England, I need writers from different industries -- for example, pharmaceutical, government, manufacturing, industrial -- to write articles about their industry.

Ability to Print

In a recent meeting, there was a discussion about being able to print the newsletter. The print graphic in the top right corner of each article enables you to print just that article. To print the

field" at Manulife. [More](#)

Get the inside details on how "Insurance got her hooked" at Sun Life. [More](#)

The Consulting and Independent Contracting Corner

Consulting and Independent Contracting (CIC) is a Special Interest Group (SIG). In the second installment of her column, CIC-SIG Manager, Elaine Garnet, helps those considering contract work determine if they have the right stuff. [More](#)

Meeting Recaps

Read about what happened at our September general meeting that celebrated the STCs 50th anniversary. [More](#)

See what attendees at this Contractors and Independent Consultants meeting learned about keeping a business growing. [More](#)

Upcoming Meetings

There's lots to see and do in our chapter. Find out what upcoming meetings might interest you. Plan to attend our chapter's November meeting. [More](#)

The Management SIG is holding its first meeting. [More](#)

The CIC SIG has a great October meeting planned. [More](#)

Banner Competition

If you missed the deadline for entering the contest to create a new banner for this newsletter, you're in luck. Encourage those members with graphic abilities to enter this competition. [More](#)

STC Head Office

Find out about prorated fees for new members. [More](#)

Word Origins

In keeping with our general meeting about résumés, find out about the origins of words that relate to working or finding a job. [More](#)



[Print the entire Quill](#)

entire Quill, click on the PDF graphic in the bottom left corner on the first page of the newsletter. We didn't want you to go from paper to online cold turkey.

Word Origins and Acronyms

As communicators, we are interested in the English language. That's why we have included word origins and acronyms. Whenever possible, the word origins will be connected to the general meeting for that month. Acronyms are something new to The Quill, but they are not new in job situations, so we might as well start learning some new ones.

About The Quill

To enable you to find out information about The Quill, there's a new *About The Quill* link on the first page of the newsletter.

This link will enable you to access administrative information like, contact information, copyright restrictions, reprint requirements, and submission deadlines. Having common information in one location makes it easier to find.

I hope you like what you see. I want to hear more from you -- both your suggestions and story ideas. I also want you to be part of The Quill by submitting something like an article, a word origin, or an acronym.

You can contact me, Debbie, at quill@stc-soc.org

About The Quill



The Quill is the monthly newsletter of the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC, which is a Canadian chapter in Region 1.

The Quill History

In October 1989, the first edition of the The Goose was launched by editor Rick Martin, who immediately announced a contest for a new name. The winning entry was, of course, The Quill. Within two years, The Quill earned an Achievement Award for small chapter newsletters, followed by back-to-back Merit Awards in **1993** and **1994**. **1992** and **2001** saw Awards of Excellence. In **1996**, we were awarded not only the Distinguished Award, but the Best of Show for all chapter newsletters.

Submission Deadlines

August 25	September Issue
September 19	October Issue
October 17	November Issue
November 14	December Issue
No Quill	January Issue
January 16	February Issue
February 13	March Issue
March 19	April Issue
April 16	May Issue
May 14	June Issue
No Quill	July or August Issues

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When you submit an article, you give the editor and the newsletter staff the right to edit your article for clarity and to ensure that it adheres to the newsletter's style and standards. All articles

are edited, copy edited, and proofed prior to publication.

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Reprint Policy

Articles contained in this newsletter may be reprinted if credit is given to The Quill and the author of the article. You must also submit an electronic copy of the article to The Quill Editor at quill@stc-soc.org OR mail two paper copies to the mailing address below.

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STC Head Office

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It's All About the People



by Heidi Marr

I've always been called a "people person", which I normally take as a compliment. On the first day of Kindergarten, I told my mom to go home as soon as we walked into the classroom -- there were 25 new people to meet and I didn't want her holding me back.

In university, when we declared our majors, I declared two -- English and Political Science. In the small town where I grew up, if you could write and you were a decent public speaker, you became either a teacher or a lawyer. Teaching didn't interest me so I thought I'd go the lawyer route. My love of the law lasted less than a school year, but it didn't matter because in that time, I had discovered a new, more exciting career opportunity -- technical writing.

I was so excited when I learned that I could get paid for writing. Writing! And, through Waterloo's Rhetoric and Professional Writing degree, I could not only study the theory behind writing, but I could dabble in some of its more interesting variations. Advertising and page layout courses quickly became favourites, and coupled with a minor in Speech Communication, I was able to fill my days with courses I loved.

Then, I heard about this group of people who met at the university on the first Tuesday of every month. This Society for Technical Communication sounded alright on paper, so I thought I'd check it out. After my first meeting, I was hooked and became a student member immediately. I wanted to get more involved but I wasn't really sure how. After a few years, I made the leap and joined the council as Employment Manager.

Today, I'm the chapter president. I've come a long way from that first year student who thought she would become a trial lawyer. Instead of wowing the court room with fact and wit, I get to stand up in front of you, my fellow technical communicators, and share information about our profession and our chapter.

In fact, one of the best aspects of being your president is that I get to know many of you on a personal level. I love putting names to faces -- and faces to names -- and I especially enjoy hearing your unique stories.

Recently, I've heard your various reasons for joining the STC; I've heard about one member's struggle for finding a first job in technical communication and how her career is soaring now; and I've heard more than a few fantasies of becoming contractors and working from home. Whatever your story, I'm all ears. If our paths haven't crossed at a general meeting or chapter event, please flag me down and introduce yourself!

Not only do I get to talk to many of you in person, but I also receive dozens of email messages each week from members asking important questions, providing valuable ideas, and volunteering their many services. Earlier this month, one of our members provided not only a fantastic idea for

a general meeting topic but a potential qualified speaker to boot. Through that contact, we've booked our April meeting on Information Mapping. Thanks, Peter!

One of the most common questions I hear from our membership is this: "I want to get involved in the chapter but I just don't know what I can do."

If this sounds like something you've ever thought to yourself, you're not alone! But, never fear. Your chapter council consists of a great group of individuals who would all love a helping hand. Volunteering at the chapter level doesn't necessarily mean taking on a portfolio position -- our chapter has many "one-off" volunteering opportunities available for the taking. And, the time commitment doesn't have to be large.

If you want to add a unique piece to your writing portfolio, you can volunteer to write a Quill article. If you spend a lot of time at one of the universities, you can volunteer to hang posters or drop material off in professor mailboxes. If you have an evening to spare, you can lend a helping hand at a career fair we are attending. If we put our heads together, we can find a niche you can fill.

So, please don't hesitate to contact any council member if you would like to get involved but just don't know how. Let us know if you've been harbouring a secret desire to chair a general meeting. Or, if you've always wanted to head up a PR campaign. Or, if you'd like to distribute STC brochures to Employment Centres, High Schools, Colleges, and Universities.

Every volunteering idea is a good one and we'd love to hear yours!

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This Month in History



by Carol Lawless, Chapter Treasurer

Autumn and October traditionally signal endings. But for many organizations, fall is a time for new beginnings -- a rebirth after a summer of rest. Looking back at our chapter's past Octobers affirms that we've always looked to start the "new year" off with a bang.

Over the years, some of our fall announcements have included:

- The start of the FrameMakers Users Network (FUN) in **1997**
- The start of the Online SIG in **2001**
- The SigDoc at Kitchener's Valhalla Inn in October **1993**
- Our first workshop in October **1991**. This workshop was held in conjunction with the University of Waterloo's Centre for Professional Writing Conference, which was about Quality Documentation. Guest speakers included Ginny Redish, Don Freeman and Karen Shriver. This workshop marked the beginning of our tradition of offering workshops each year.
- Our biggest October achievement in **1989**. The Goose took flight! Our fledgling newsletter was launched by editor Rick Martin, who immediately announced a contest for a new name. The winning entry was, of course, The Quill. Within two years, The Quill earned an Achievement Award for small chapter newsletters, followed by back-to-back Merit Awards in **1993** and **1994**. **1992** and **2001** saw Awards of Excellence. In **1996**, we were awarded not only the Distinguished Award, but the Best of Show for all chapter newsletters.

Each time you try something new you make history. What fall memories do you have of the STC? Often, you cannot appreciate how far you have come until you see where you have been. Why not take this opportunity to share some of your stories that show the changes in the communication profession over the years? Submit your ideas and stories to quill@stc-soc.org.

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From the Outside Looking in: Becoming a Technical Writer



by Stephen Neville

Editor's Note: Stephen contacted me about writing an article for The Quill. Since many of us have been in the Technical Writing field for a long time, and Stephen is new to the field, it was the perfect opportunity to get a new perspective.

Starting at the Beginning

I didn't always want to be a technical writer, unless you consider Spiderman a technical writer. As a matter of fact, until a few months ago, I didn't even know there was such a person as a technical writer. I was unhappy with my own career, and I was looking for a change. In my research, I found this intriguing career -- technical writing. At first I had no clue what it was, but I knew it involved writing and that was all I needed.

After some exploration, I had only a notion of what a technical writer was. I didn't know anyone who actually did this mysterious job. I had a general idea of what they did and how they did it, but I still had a lot of questions. My thoughts churned out like a Dr. Seuss poem. Do they write in their home? Do they write when they roam? Do they do it for banks? Do they do it for the thanks? Common sense, which I seemed to be suddenly lacking, told me to give this up. But I was addicted. So many aspects about this profession told me that this was the right career for me, despite what I didn't know.

I made a choice. Aided by some timely company downsizing, I decided to leave my career in television and pursue technical writing.

Explaining Technical Writing to Friends and Family

Telling people about my choice seemed far more tedious than I had envisioned. When I told people what I wanted to do I encountered a lot of odd definitions from my friends and family. They thought I was going to be a "person who writes the notes on blueprints with a technical pencil."

I also remember having the same inane conversation over and over again:

"I'm going to be a Technical Writer!" I would proudly exclaim.

"A what?" I don't know if this reply was due to disbelief or from those hard of hearing.

Either way I would answer, "A Technical Writer."

"What's that?" This was really the standard question asked.

"Well, you make up manuals and documents for hi-tech stuff." Sadly, that was the best I had to

offer.

Amazingly, I heard this often: "They have a whole job for that?"

And I, of course, would get defensive. "Yeah! Do you think the manuals write themselves?"

"Uh...I never thought about it," was their reply, and that was the end of it.

That felt like a kick in the ribs. I was going into a career that, I admit, I hadn't thought about. I was deflated. To a certain extent I didn't expect people to know about my new career choice but, even at this point, I couldn't properly explain that choice to them.

Getting Clarity From Those in the Profession

I obviously needed a more educated view. I began to take a course and immediately asked my professor, Chris Coleman, what it meant to be a technical writer. Like any good teacher, I received a very philosophical, "teach a man to fish", answer. He pointed me in the right direction and off I went with my proverbial rod and reel.

Still, I had no "fish." I needed something more substantial -- something from actual people in this profession. So, in my quest to find out what exactly I was getting myself into, I naturally joined the STC. At one of my first meetings I was inundated with information, but what I received still skirted my question. Still, I received a new term for technical writing -- technical communication. This new development warranted more investigation.

I thought, "Who better to ask about technical communication than the chapter president?", so I asked Heidi Marr for her definition of a technical communicator. She replied, "A technical communicator bridges the gap between technology and user understanding. Working as a user advocate, the technical communicator uses language, images, and multimedia to enable a user to understand a concept or perform a task."

This was a great start, but I still needed more, so I contacted Past President, Ted Edwins. Ted seemed to have technical communications in his soul. From what I understood, he had held a lot of different council positions. He had to have some wise, sage-like advice for me.

Ted was more focused on the term technical communicator. He explained that by using writing skills you can be involved in technical products or services, such as software, and you can use your skills to introduce these products and services to the public. He also added that effective communication skills can enhance the usability, design, and promotion of those products and services.

Trying to Get a Mental Image of the Profession

This was great. I had definitions. I had an idea of a technical communicator's daily role. The problem was solved. Or was it? Mulling it over, I realized the real question was not, "What is a Technical Writer?" The question was, "Why didn't I know what a Technical Writer was?" Until very recently, I didn't, nor did anyone I know, have an image come to mind when someone said the words, "Technical Writer."

When I think of a baker, I think of a fat guy baking muffins. Don't ask me why. Maybe it's because I have a natural weakness for muffins. Who knows? The point is, when you hear someone mention a policeman you understand what they do, and you even generate a picture in your head of what one looks like. The same applies to a doctor, or a lawyer, or even a computer programmer. But even at this point, armed with as much information as I had, I still couldn't generate a real picture in my head of a technical writer. And that was the real problem.

Reaching Conclusions

I was about to enter a career that, in everything I read, is a great profession full of worthwhile attributes: noble and helpful goals, creativity, and reasoning. Technical writing contains a blend of so many positive career aspects, yet no one knows about it. It's easy to think in terms of this profession doing something for me: providing me with a living, helping me hone my skills, and even fulfilling some of my dreams. Through this whole journey, however, I now realize that, as much as I need to understand the technical writing profession, the profession needs me to understand it as well.

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From Writer to Illustrator



Applying Technical Writing Theory to Visual Information

by Patrick Hofmann

For technical authors, writers, and developers of hardcopy and online information, one persistent challenge is to augment and balance the textual information with meaningful visuals.

Unfortunately, not all technical writers have a graphic artist or technical illustrator on their teams. If they do, the artist or illustrator is often either:

- a draftsman or engineer who produces complex technical illustrations, schematics, or exact representations of physical objects
- a graphic artist who produces stylized conceptual graphics that meet the requirements of the corporate style guide.

Either way, the result is often the same: the visuals do not meet the requirements of the user or reader. As technical authors, writers, we invest considerable time and effort in crafting instructions and information so that they are meaningful and memorable to the reader. Why do we not do the same for visual information?

To address this question, one could recruit a technical illustrator or graphic artist and teach them the values and virtues of technical writing: to optimise the visual information so that finding, reading, absorbing, digesting, and learning is maximised. Conversely, as technical authors and writers, we could learn the skills of basic illustration and visual design.

Whatever the approach, the mission is identical: by applying our values and virtues to visuals, we become the architects of both the textual and visual information in our documents.

But what values and virtues of technical writing can we apply to visuals? To find out more, plan on attending the following workshop.

A One-day Workshop with Patrick Hofmann

Polishing Your Pictures: Getting Graphic with Technical Information

by Elaine Ruddock, Education Manager

When: Wednesday, October 29, 2003

Where: The Pines Banquet Facility (formerly the Knotty Pine Restaurant)
115 Fountain Street, South
Cambridge, ON
Check out The Pines at www.pinesbanquetfacility.com

Schedule: Continental Breakfast -- 8:30 a.m.
Workshop -- 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. (lunch included)

Cost: \$165.00/ members
\$225.00/ non-members

Contact Information: For more information, please contact Elaine Ruddock at 519-239-3382 or education@stc-soc.org.

To register, please contact Carol Lawless at 519-888-3900 ext. 3776 or treasurer@stc-soc.org, with:

- Name
- Mailing address
- Member/non-member
- Phone/Fax numbers
- Email address

About the Presenter: As a Visual Interaction Designer, Patrick Hofmann is "a man of few words." At Quarry Integrated Communications in Waterloo, he builds award-winning visual design strategies to improve online, hardcopy, and interface information.

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Calling All Communicators!



If you just got excited because you saw a spelling mistake in the title, ask yourself these questions:

- Do you ever read someone else's work and think, "I could have said that better?"
- Do you ever find yourself drawing pictures when you explain something so that you can make your point?
- When you listen to people explain things, do you think, "Why didn't they just say...?"
- When you are using software, do you think of ways that the designers could have made it more user friendly?

If you answered yes to any one of these questions, or you spotted the typo in the title, you may want to consider a career in the communications field.

What is the connection between communications and the STC?

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is an organization that has chapters around the world. Members are usually in the communications field -- technical writers, editors, graphic artists, trainers, analysts, and students. Each chapter has monthly meetings that provide insight into topics that communicators would find interesting. One month the topic might be about using humour to reduce stress and promote creativity; the next month the topic might be about using a particular software package to create an online help system.

In addition to these meetings, the STC further enhances its members' learning experience by providing monthly and quarterly magazines. There is also an annual STC conference where you can choose which sessions you want to attend. Chapters can also create their own learning experience by organizing their own workshops. The Southwestern Ontario Chapter has a workshop each year in February. They also have telephone seminars, and, in some cases, an additional workshop.

What's in it for you?

Does it interest you to make connections with potential employers? Would you like to meet other communicators with similar interests? Are you interested in learning from others' experiences? Do you have experiences that could be useful to others? You have so much to gain and nothing to lose.

Where do you go from here?

You can attend our general meetings, which are usually held the first Tuesday of every month in Waterloo. These meetings are free and open to the public. From there, you may decide to

become a member. Your level of involvement is up to you. Just remember, the more you are involved, the more you learn.

How do you find out more?

To find out about meeting topics and locations, go to our chapter's website at www.stc-soc.org. The website also provides answers to Frequently Asked Questions and contact information for our chapter's council members. You may also want to attend the November General Meeting, because you will have the opportunity to win your membership.

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View From the Other Side -- Other side of the world, that is



by Nancy Halverson

As some of you know, my family moved to Sheffield, England in July 2002.

Progress so far has been slow. It's a large enough city -- claims to be the fourth largest in England -- but that doesn't necessarily give me a solid base to work from. There isn't much life in IT here in this part of England. The majority of work in software and communications seems to be in "The South".

Where?

Okay, a little [geography lesson](#) - Sheffield is in Yorkshire, which is about a four-hour drive from London (two-and-a-half hours by direct train if, if, and if.) Anything around London is considered to be "The South". London itself is just called "The City", quite amusing really, since most English houses prefer to be huddled up close together, so that even small rural towns have about the same density as a city. Yorkshire is rolling hills and moors (scrubby land covered with heather and sheep) with a rebellious reputation and many ancient castles, people and industry.

Results of War

Ironically, there seems to be so much that our profession could do for English life in general. Basic communications are bad. My personal theory is that the culture never recovered from the threat of German invasion in World War II, and they therefore like to keep knowledge closely held that might help an outsider to appear as an insider. Famously, all the street signs were torn down, and maps were destroyed during the war, and, I figure, they've never been recreated.

Well, okay, so there are some street signs, but they hide them.

Acronyms

It's also acronym-mania here. And unfortunately, it's always assumed that everyone knows what the acronyms stand for. Even in newspapers and advertisements, the acronyms are rarely defined. I figure that it might be helpful in their national fundraising campaigns if people understood that the NSPCC means National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. That definition, by the way, is buried on the "about us" page of their website. I've never seen it defined in any of their ads. And, believe me, there are so many other examples.

Being an Outsider

My conclusion is that direct language scares people. I've been told by some that the idea of

'belonging to the club' is very important, and, I must agree, that's the communications principle I see the most. Something like, "if you understand it, the club will be cheapened by you, since you're an outsider." It's not an overt xenophobia, but it's so deep in the communications psyche that it's quite effective. Newcomers must ask questions and take nothing for granted.

The STC's Presence

As for the STC, its presence is negligible outside London. There's a website, apparently a newsletter (which I've never received) and a quiet discussion list. Even in London, there's not much apparent activity in the group. STC meetings are quarterly, held in a pub, over lunch, and sometimes include a speaker. I have yet to get to a meeting.

My suggestion of trying to put together a meeting here in Sheffield for the writers of the North (Manchester, Leeds, Scotland and Ireland) got a lukewarm response. I might be able to pull off something of a meeting, but it'll just be a poor shadow compared to what you've got in Waterloo.

Without the networking of an active group, it's a tough grind finding work. There are courses, mostly distance education, for technical writers, usability, or Web work.

Another group is the ISTC (Institute for Scientific and Technical Communication), which offers a different perspective, and may be a larger group. I'm currently looking into it.

Recruitment Agencies

It may just be my circumstances, but from what I hear, most information about new jobs comes from specialized recruitment agencies. There are also specialist job boards on the Internet, which is a central location where recruiters post jobs.

From my experience, these recruitment agents are mythical -- I've spoken to just two in over a year. E-mails and phone messages go unanswered. Walking into offices might work, but usually, you can't see anyone in this country without making an appointment to make an appointment.

New Identification With Immigrants

Moving to a new country isn't easy -- there are always new things to get used to and new ideas. It's one of the reasons why we wanted to leave Canada for a bit. However, I now identify so much more with all immigrants to anywhere -- language barriers exist and prejudices get in the way. Everyone should learn to include outsiders whenever they meet them, and find out what barriers might exist in their own little worlds, which keep outsiders feeling like outsiders.

Language Barriers

You may be surprised to know that Canadian English isn't the same as UK English. Okay, not so surprising, but the reality is quite different than what you might expect. After reading many English books, and seeing television and films, I'm hit almost daily by expressions that are common, but I've never heard before.

Did you know that here in England horns don't honk - they hoot? "Phwaor" is the sound you make when you see something you really lust after. No one sorts anything out - it just gets "sorted". A "bog" isn't swampy land, but a toilet. If plans start to come undone, "it all goes pear-shaped". One really good expression is "spat the dummy" - to flip out on someone. You need to be careful with the word "pants" - you need to say trousers, unless you're talking about your underwear. And the perennial "chips" vs "crisps" vs "French fries" conundrum confuses many North Americans. "Tea" can be a meal in the evening, or a cuppa (you can never be sure). "Sick" is barf, and you're "poorly" when you're ill. Someone from the Indian region is referred to as "Asian" and Chinese/Japanese as "Orientals". Oh, and if you make a V for victory sign with your fingers, and then turn it around, showing the back of your hand to the opposite person, you're swearing at them.

And when you greet someone, you don't say "Hi, how are you?" you say "Y'alright?" For the first little while, I always thought that someone was recovering from something whenever I'd hear this exchange.

Accents

I dare anyone to comprehend the South Yorkshire accent (yes, it's different from the West Yorkshire (Leeds, Bradford) - or the North Yorkshire (York) - less than 20 miles apart.) But I'm proud to say that I now understand all the dialogue in "[The Full Monty](#)".

The Grammar

The accepted grammar in this country would amaze you. For instance, "I were sat at table, when I heard a hoot. A dust-lorrie blocked road and motors driving down pavement!" Translation: "I was sitting at the table when I heard a honk. A garbage truck was blocking the street and the cars were driving on the sidewalk."

Even BBC types (although naturally, not those educated at Oxbridge) will say "I was stood at..." and drop articles where we'd never dream of it.

I'm convinced that English is different in every culture where it's used, and it's just not as universal as we thought. However, it's truly an amazingly robust language, which never seems to be broken, but always needs to be fixed.



Nancy Halverson (English STC-SOC correspondent) and her family in sunny London, England

Contact Information

If you want to reach me, e-mail me at nancy.halverson@btopenworld.com.

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Finance and Insurance Put a Twist on the Technical Writing Field



by Elenor Robins

If you think writing a software guide is the definition of technical writing, think again. How about twisting that idea into something new and very different? Consider technical writing in a financial world, where tax-advantaged investing, managed funds and dividend scales are just the beginning.

A technical writer at Manulife Financial may help develop a software guide or help files, but that's not the norm -- even though Manulife does develop its own software and online applications. Most technical writing pieces that cross our desks don't relate to software.

Plain Language

Insurance is an ethereal product that is essentially a financial promise on a piece of paper -- a *lot* of very technical pieces of paper. Insurance products are now so robust that they require technical writers to present them to customers in plain language. Not only must the language be simple, it must be in a language that a lawyer can sanction, an actuary can find accountable, and a marketing manager can spin.

Consider this example:

- On the date at or nearest the policy monthliversary, payment must be made in full or part or the coverage(s) will lapse and enter a grace period before terminating.
- A technical writer at Manulife would change that to say, "You need to pay your premium on the due date or your coverage will end."

A Range of Duties

In the insurance industry, technical writers might work on:

- a life insurance contract
- annual statements and other client notices or updates
- a 150-page technical product guide
- content for Web sites
- an individualized client letter

- a templated mass-mailed letter
- annual reports
- quick reference cards
- forms, forms and more forms

This is far from an all-encompassing list. The list of possible technical writing duties continues to change and grow all the time.

A Variety of Work on a Variety of Systems

As a technical writer in the Individual Life Centre (ILC), I am one of a team of writers. We supply the wording for the insurance contracts that are generated on several different types of mainframe computers. After the painstaking drafting and signoff process, we test and retest the output. The constraints of each computer system mean we may have to creatively shorten our ideal wording into something that will fit the character or font restrictions of a particular system.

We create forms in different software on a yet another system. If we don't get the form right, the information requested on the form won't be correct, and clients will become frustrated.

We may also draft wording for our internal and external Web sites or edit 100-page technical product manuals. We may draft warm and fuzzy letters to clients explaining how their policy works or coach our Call Centre staff on writing easy to understand letters. We may even act as consultants on brochures for clients or insurance advisors. We have to understand the content on two different levels, because these audiences have two very different levels of technical understanding. We may edit 25-page "quick" reference cards and compile annual reports that provincial regulators approve.

Our Knowledge Requirements

We need to understand tax legislation, privacy and confidentiality laws, technical product specifications, investment theory and then make all of this information easy for our customers to understand. We need to understand how a number of complex software systems work and what they can and can't do. We need to manage all of our writing in French and English, and sometimes Chinese. We work with project managers, product managers, lawyers, programmers and call centre staff.

Our Customers

Amid the deadlines, system constraints and comments from non-writers on our drafts, we remember our customers, and their need to understand this technical information. Insurance is a valuable part of their financial foundation -- and that's the most important twist of all.

Acronyms at Manulife

How insurance savvy are you? Do these acronyms mean anything to you?

- GIR/GIO
- WEI/WED/WEP
- ADB
- BVP
- CPR
- GIA
- WOD
- ACB
- COI
- CDAM
- CRR
- PIR
- TIR

To find out what these acronyms stand for, go to the [answer page](#).

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Insurance Got Her Hooked



by Carol Lawless, Chapter Treasurer

Hello, my name is Carol and I work for an insurance company. It all seemed innocent enough -- an article here, a communication there, a little editing on the side. Then I turned to user documentation and training material. That wasn't enough. I started the downward slide into the hard stuff -- writing for developers in Information Technology (IT), and it has left me hooked.

A Variety of Roles

Okay, so maybe writing for an insurance company isn't quite an addiction. But the depth and breadth of job possibilities in a diverse company appeals to any writer who likes variety. At Sun Life, technical writers span many departments and locations. In total, we have a community of over 40 whose job duties include technical writing to some degree. Lone writers, or small teams have tasks that include policies and procedures, Web writing and editing both for the Internet and intranet, installation procedures, call centre documentation and help desk solutions. As you can imagine the breadth of information spans business knowledge about insurance, mutual funds, investments, health and pension benefits. Expect to never be bored!

Traditional Roles

Larger teams write more traditional software documentation. One team of eight produces training material, user guides and help files for our sales force. Since the software they document is largely developed in-house, they also have the opportunity to influence screen design and usability. Working closely with the training department, development teams and the sales force's technology hotline has given writers an insight into their audience that most other writers would envy.

Technical Roles

We also have a team of writers that produces system documentation for the developers, business analysts and other IT staff. This documentation is very technical in nature and emphasizes the two-fold meaning behind "technical" and "writer". We've relied on staff with expertise on one side or the other (fondly referred to as the light-side and the dark-side) to work together cooperatively. Each has learned from the other's strengths and we've formed a team who not only translate techno-geek into concise documentation and diagrams that our business partners understand, but also read the code to write screen specifications for undocumented legacy systems. We can't jump high buildings in a single bound, but we're working on it!

Communication Requirements

With so many far-flung teams, we have long relied on a Community of Practice (CoP) to keep in touch with each other. We come together monthly (as projects and deadlines permit) for networking, training and support. Last year we presented a business case to management that allowed us to bring local industry experts into the building for a series of training sessions. That experience helped us to create some common bonds and understand one another's viewpoints as well as nudging us along the technical communication path.

A Common Front

This year Sun Life and Clarica have joined forces. Our CoP members have supported each other through the changes and challenges. We are now in the process of redefining our CoP to become a force to be reckoned with. One member suggested our mission should be to "instill good communication practices and take over the world." Hmmm -- I wonder if there's a 12-step program for that?

Acronyms at Sunlife

How insurance savvy are you? Do these acronyms mean anything to you?

- ACP
- CP
- DOB
- DOS
- GI
- IIP
- LTC
- LTD
- PAP
- PPP
- PAC

To find out what these acronyms stand for, go to the [answer page](#).

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Recap of September General Meeting



by Christy Simard, Student Awards Manager

September 9th, 2003 marked our first general meeting of the new season and a celebration of our chapter. Founding members, past influences, and present friends turned out for the party. Inspired by the STC's 50th anniversary, we reveled in our history, celebrated chapter successes, and looked to the future.

After a little noisy mingling, three past presidents shared their stories...

Jack McFadden was the first spark plug in the engine, so to speak. He described how in 1989, a group of talented individuals got the chapter off the ground. He also described publishing the chapter's first newsletter named *The Goose*. For the next issue, they plucked a feather from the tail and published *The Quill*.

Deb Maskens shed light on council's inner workings as she described the middle years. Remember education programs with Jared Spool and JoAnn Hakos? Well, as Deb put it, "they didn't always look at the rule book first" to bring world-class speakers to town.

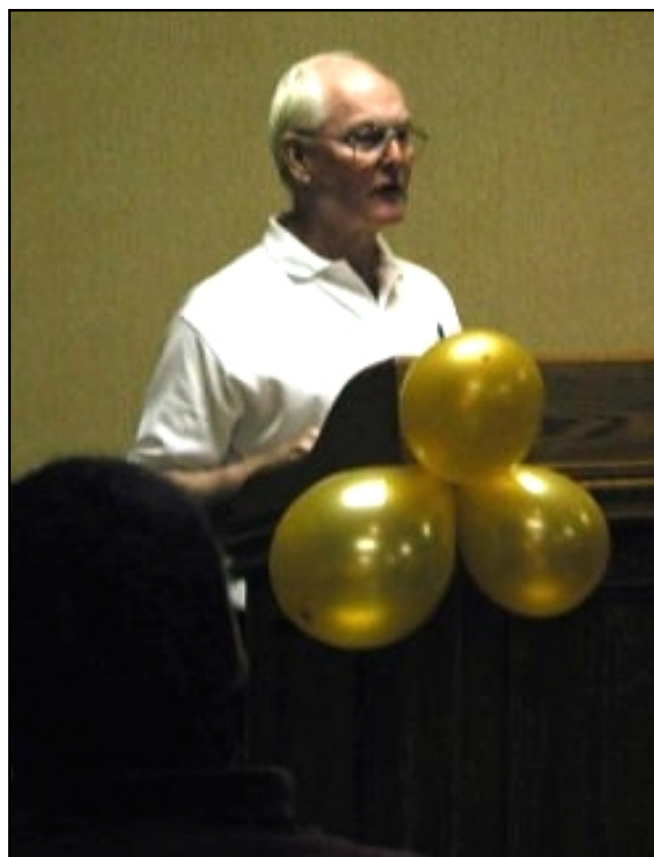
Past President Ted Edwins reminded us of recent success. In 2002, we won the Chapter Pacesetter Award, largely for our support of the new Digital Arts Communications program at UW. He also pointed to the standards of excellence we uphold: our regional competition winners do extremely well in the international arena; and the society has recognized our judging practices.

To move us closer to cake-cutting time, current

President Heidi Marr introduced this year's council and gave a quick recap of a recent strategic planning session. The results of that session, Heidi explained, helped council to zero in on the priorities: our society members, our community, programming, and communications.

With that, we went back to noisy mingling and ate cake. We also enjoyed a variety of displays that portrayed our roots and captured many artifacts from the last 14 years. These displays were the innovative creations of official Treasurer and unofficial chapter archivist, Carol Lawless.

There won't be any cake at the October general meeting. However, it will be a great chance to get feedback on your resume and dish out some yourself. Come and see what other writers are



Jack McFadden gives an inspiring talk about our chapter's early history

doing to look great on paper!

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November General Meeting -- Digital Design: From Student to Research to Professional



Please join us **Tuesday, November 4th** for a sneak preview of the new Digital Arts Communication (DAC) program at the University of Waterloo.

Professor David Goodwin and colleagues will showcase the new Digital Arts Communication classroom and the newly-founded Canadian Centre for Arts and Technology (CCAT). See for yourself how the STC-funded equipment is helping students and professors engage in enhanced levels of learning and teaching.

Demonstrations will illustrate how the DAC program and the students/professors and STC equipment fit into the larger research mandate of CCAT, including how multi-point videoconferencing, data logging, multimedia editing, storage, streaming, and real-time observation allow us to connect with the people for whom we want to design.

Location

Modern Languages Building, Room 117 at the University of Waterloo

Map

<http://www.uwaterloo.ca/map/map.html>

Parking

\$3 coin entry parking is available in Lot C (across University Ave) or Lot H (inside ring road)

Special Prizes

You can win your 2004 STC membership fee. We will be giving away one regular membership (\$140 US dollars) and one student membership (\$50 US dollars). Round up your friends and colleagues who are interested in the technical communication field. Attend this meeting and be rewarded with everything the STC has to offer.

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First Meeting of the Year for the Management SIG



by Holly Curtis, Management SIG Manager

Our first Management (Mgmt) special interest group (SIG) meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, October 14th at 12:00 p.m. at Campana Systems (99 Randall Drive, Waterloo). Bring your lunch, and come join this introductory meeting to help plan the direction for our SIG.

The Mgmt SIG meets every few months (or more often, if necessary) and exchanges e-mails occasionally. By sharing experiences and lending advice, we help each other find answers and solve problems in a confidential environment. As a minority group within the larger technical communicator community, this is a great way to develop good peer relationships and build a network of reliable and trustworthy contacts.

To join the Management SIG e-mail list, visit http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mgmt_sig.

If you have any questions about the Management SIG or want to contribute in any way, please contact the Mgmt SIG Manager, Holly Curtis at mgt-sig@stc-soc.org.

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The Consulting and Independent Contracting Corner



Starting a Business 101 -- Do You Have the Right Stuff?

by Elaine Garnet, Consulting and Independent Contracting (CIC) SIG Manager

Dear Entrepreneurial Spirit:

Since my last letter, I have anguished about giving you advice on how to start a business when I'm moving into my fourth year, and I am still learning new things. At least I have given the following assessment questions some consideration. You need to be honest in your self-assessment, something that I tended to gloss over, and which has resulted in some painful sessions with my conscience.

If you have a good business idea, and you are not expecting to get rich quick by owning a small business, ask yourself these questions to see if you have the right stuff.

Do you have the stamina?

Are you willing to work long hours? You know how long it takes to write a manual or develop a help project. That's called working 'in' the business. You will need to work extra hours 'on' the business to develop new business and maintain existing business. It's all about sales and marketing. Then, there's the grunt work of filing, accounting, answering e-mails, etc. I found that at the beginning of my venture, 'on' the business outweighed 'in' the business. Now, that I have clients, I have to juggle both aspects.

Do you have the discipline?

Most contractors and independent consultants work in their home office with outside time spent visiting clients, networking and solving other business issues, such as banking, dealing with printers, etc. Can you get up in the morning and go to the home office as if you are going to a workplace office? Can you resist the temptation to watch TV, chat with friends or play Solitaire? It requires discipline to treat the home office as a place of business.

Do you have the self-confidence?

You will have to deal with sales and marketing, customer service, networking and all aspects of business. These require interpersonal skills and face-to-face contact. If you can promote yourself with confidence, you probably can promote your business just as well. If you are a shrinking violet, don't fret. You may choose to partner with a more self-confident person or subcontract your sales and marketing function. This question requires a little personality assessment. For example, I am an introvert who can masquerade as an extrovert when essential. I wouldn't let being an introvert hold you back.

Can you cope with uncertainty?

Be honest. Uncertainty causes me a great deal of anxiety. Determine if you can deal with not knowing what next month will bring. If you can't, don't be discouraged. You might try to find some stress relievers or fall back on your natural optimism. I have supportive colleagues with whom I can share my concerns. After all, as business owners, they have the same worries.

Are you willing to take risks?

Starting a business is a moderate to huge personal and financial risk. If you simply must have a regular paycheck, you may want to consider part-time employment or good line of credit to bridge the initial gap. Having a supportive significant other or family is also a big help.

Can you be persistent?

I have seen a lot of small businesses cave in during the first year. Some had financial issues; others had personal issues. I believe the key is persistence. If you can think outside the box, there is a solution to most problems. Synchronicity plays a big part in business, just like life, and doors can open at the most unexpected time.

Conclusion

Factors such as age, gender, marital status or life stage should make no difference in making a decision to start your own business. All entrepreneurs tend to share the same attitudes and these attitudes spell success. If you have answered 'yes' or 'maybe' to any of these questions, you might have the right stuff. The next step is up to you.

I hope this letter will help you make an honest decision.

Sincerely,

Elaine Garnet

CIC-SIG Manager

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September's Presentation Sponsored by the Contracting and Independent Consultants (CIC) SIG



by Sylvia Forbes

Build it and they will come...

On September 10, 2003, this was the main essence of the discussion led by our guest speaker Laurie Soper, president of 'Precise Communications', and her own company. Laurie's company helps other companies win BIG sales deals, just by getting the point across in plain language.

Laurie had just completed her first book entitled, "Red Wine and Popcorn -- Doing Business the Bohemian Way" and is awaiting publishing, hopefully before the end of the year.

The main idea behind the title of her book is basically her unconventional way of doing business in the 21st century!

Laurie is a firm believer in NOT doing things the *old-fashioned way* in order to get clients. She does not drum up business the traditional ways; she says NO to telemarketing, networking, lunches, schmoosing, golfing, websites, newspaper articles and so on. As a matter of fact, Laurie says, "Why break your neck when you don't have to?" Your next client will come.

So how does Laurie do it? She shows a whole lot of self-confidence, but is humble at the same time. She does a whole lot of listening and being sincere, (*talk little-listen a lot*). She also asks a whole lot of *good* meaningful probing questions and always gets the customer involved in the conversation.

Laurie likes to just *drop in and hang around* with her new and old clients. She says it is a very good way to get yourself the next client as well an opportunity to build good rapport with the existing one -- because you never know the source of your next job!

And there's always the next client.

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Cultivating the Habit of Conscious-Constructive Thinking



A Free Workshop Presented by Hardy Premasukh and the STC CIC-SIG

Hardy will share with you the power of your thoughts (thinking). He will present a systematic way of altering your automatic thinking to become more conscious of your thoughts. As a result, he will demonstrate how your thoughts affect your emotions and subsequently transform your choices and how your choices modify your habits and ultimately how your habits concern the quality of your life. Bottom line, Hardy will show you how to cultivate a Constructive Positive Attitude (CPA) that you can utilize in all areas of your life.

Hardy Premasukh is a visionary entrepreneur and professional presenter whose success is related to the energy and charismatic approach he places on any life situation. His natural motivational talent has been the portal for others to approach any professional and life predicament with a confident, successful attitude.

Currently, Hardy is in the process of authoring his first book, *Reaching Your Pinnacle: A Comprehensive Program to Help You Achieve Genuine Success*. His book is based on proven psychological principles in the area of motivation, self-esteem, psychological well being, emotional intelligence, conscious-constructive thinking, and achievement.

After years of research and development, he recently initiated the Institute for Maximum Success (IMS).

This free workshop will be held on October 22nd, 2003. Watch the STC Web page for the time and location.

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Getting Graphic for the Newsletter Banner Competition



While being graphic can have negative connotations, in this case, being graphic, or at least a graphic artist, is just what we need. The Quill's newsletter committee is having a competition to find a new banner for the HTML version of our newsletter. And, because we are eager to use it as soon as possible, we would like your submissions by **October 23rd**.

Don't let the "technical" in technical communication keep you from using your creative side. Think of how great it would be to add being the winner of this competition to your résumé and the banner you created to your portfolio. Show us your skill and get the recognition you deserve.

Content of the Banner

The banner must include the words, "The Quill" and "The Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication". Information like the date, volume and number will have to be changed each month, so they should not be included. You have the option of including the Southwestern Ontario Chapter's logo, but it is not required. There are no colour restrictions because we can adjust the current colours in The Quill to suit the banner.

File Requirements

The banner that you submit must be:

- in a jpg, gif, or png format
- 700 pixels wide, but the height is at your discretion
- small enough to load quickly, keeping in mind that some people still have dial-up connections

If you are including the STC logo, ensure that it adheres to the [STC guidelines for logo use](#).

Where to Submit Entries

Submit entries to quill@stc-soc.org by **October 23, 2003**. Dial-up access will be used to download the submission (and verify the load time).

Selecting a Winner

All entries will be judged by a panel of your peers (fellow communicators--yet another volunteer opportunity). Although we did receive some entries, we would like to receive more before we make a decision. For this reason, we have extended the submission deadline.

Questions

Email any questions to quill@stc-soc.org.

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STC Prorated Dues Explained



The following article appeared in both the September and October 2003 issues of *Tieline*, which is an STC leadership newsletter.

According to the prorating schedule for STC annual dues, new members joining in 2003 pay full dues (\$125 USD), and their memberships extend to December 31. During the first renewal period, prorated "credit" is extended to all *new members* based on the month they joined the Society. For example, members who joined in February will receive a 10 percent (or \$12.50 USD) credit on their first renewal, members who joined in March will receive a 20 percent (\$25 USD) credit, and so on. These credits will be deducted from the 2004 dues invoice.

The credits will appear on new members' renewal invoices, which will be mailed in late November. The table lists monthly credits and renewal rates for new members.

Note: The STC office will apply all credits at the time of renewal. New members should **not** adjust their initial dues payment of \$125 by the amount of credit they anticipate receiving.

Renewal Credits for New STC Members (in USD)	
<i>Month Joined</i>	<i>Credit Toward 2004 Dues</i>
January '03	0.00
February '03	12.50
March '03	25.00
April '03	37.50
May '03	50.00
June '03	62.50
July '03	75.00
August '03	87.50
September '03	100.00
October '03	112.50
November '03	125.00
December '03	125.00

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Word Origins



by Stephen Neville

In keeping with the topic of October's general meeting, this month's Word Origins are themed around working and looking for work:

Résumé

Noun. A résumé is a brief account, or summary, of one's professional or work experience and qualifications, often for the purpose of seeking work. Résumé originates, as would be expected, from the French language. It is the past participle of *résumer*: to summarize. It is also probably influenced by the Old French *sommer*: to find the sum of.

Salary

Noun. Salary goes back to the Latin word *salarium*, a derivative of *sal* or salt, which originally denoted an "allowance given to a Roman soldier for buying salt." Salt was, in former times, a valued commodity over which wars were fought, rather than taken for granted as it is today. It soon broadened out to mean "fixed periodic payment for work done," and passed in this sense via Anglo-Norman *salarie* into English.

Consult

Verb. The word consult, meaning "to confer or deliberate together," comes directly from the Latin *consultare*, which means "to discuss." Possibly the original sense of the word meant to call a body of people (such as the Roman Senate) together. Consult first appeared in English around 1565, and the same path of linguistic evolution also produced our modern "consul" and "counsel."

GIG

Noun. Gig first appeared as a slang term among jazz musicians in the mid-1920's. Although mostly used as a noun, gig also has a verb form used in the uncommon word "gigging." The word itself connotes a short-term "one-night stand." Appearing in English in the 15th century, "gig" meant something spinning, like a "whirligig." Derived from that is a meaning of dancing, and since playing at parties and dances is every musician's meal ticket early in their career, it's easy to see how "gig" became generalized to mean any paying job.

Work Cut Out for You

The phrase, "to have your work cut out for you," means to be facing an obviously difficult task, and as much as an individual could handle. The history of the phrase referred to sewing. Someone else would cut out the pattern of a jacket for example, but the hardest part of the job

would be to sew those pieces together. Therefore the person sewing would have his or her "work cut out for them." Today the phrase can be applied to any sort of work or effort, not only means to have a difficult challenge, but also implies that the challenge can be seen ahead and anticipated. "To have your work cut out for you" is a remarkably old phrase, dating back to around 1600, and occurs in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

Sources of Information

The following is a list of the sources used to obtain the above information:

- The Merriam-Webster Dictionary
- Collins Dictionary
- Encarta Encyclopedia
- www.word-detective.com
- www.wordwizard.com
- www.dictionary.com
- www.askoxford.com
- [A Word A Day newsletter](#) (Highly Recommended)

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Acronym Answers



Manulife Acronyms

The following are some of the acronyms that are used at Manulife.

- GIR/GIO = Guaranteed Insurability Rider / Guaranteed Insurability Option
- WEI/WED/WEP = Wealth Enhancer Increases, Wealth Enhancer Increases & Decreases, Wealth Enhancer Plus
- ADB = Accidental Death Benefit
- BVP = Business Value Protector
- CPR = Child Protection Rider
- GIA = Guaranteed Investment Account
- WOD = Waiver of Monthly Deductions/Payor waiver of Monthly Deductions
- ACB = Adjusted Cost Basis
- COI = Cost of Insurance
- CDAM = Capital Dividend Account Maximizer
- CRR = Cost Recovery Rider
- PIR = Protection Indexor
- TIR = Term Insurance Rider

Sun Life Acronyms

The following are some of the acronyms that are used at Sun Life.

- ACP = Automatic Chequing Plan
- CP = Child Protection
- DOB = Date of Birth
- DOS = Date of Service - the date a service took place, not the date we received or paid a claim
- GI = Guaranteed Insurability Rider
- IIP = Interim Insurance Provision
- LTC = Long Term Care

- LTD = Long-term Disability
- PAP = Pre-authorized Payment
- PPP = Pre-authorized Payment Plan
- PAC = Pre-authorized Cheque.

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