



the Quill

the Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC



June 2004 (Volume 15 Number 9) [About the Quill](#)

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[President's Message](#)

President Heidi Marr recaps her year as president -- including the many strengths of our chapter. ♦

[Making Paths and Finding Niches](#)

Learn how to find a path and make a niche for yourself that will make you stand out from the others in your field. ♦

[Wonder Writer](#)

You always knew that there was nothing ordinary about being a writer. Read this creative article to find out how Paige Turner, superhero, puts Inconsistency away. ♦

[Company Recognition Award](#)

Each year we recognize a company who has gone that extra mile to recognize technical communication as a profession and the work that is done to support our chapter. Find out who is this year's winner. ♦

[Set Your Phasers on Stun -- Ants](#)

If the ants go marching one by one or even two by two, they may be walking over our CIC-SIG Coordinator's desktop in her home office. Find out how something little can go a long way. ♦

[Upcoming Events](#)

There was a time when summer marked a quiet time in our chapter. This year that is not the case. Find out what telephone seminars are available to you this summer. ♦

[Telephone Seminar Handouts](#)

Not only do we offer telephone seminars, we are also offering you the leftover handouts that were not taken at the seminars. If you couldn't attend a seminar, find out what information you missed. ♦

The Editor's Message

Recognition is not one of the reasons that I volunteered to edit The Quill, but recognition is what has occurred on many levels.

Chapter Recognition

In our first year of having an online newsletter, we have won an Award of Merit. By entering this competition, we wanted to let others outside of our chapter see the talent of the many people who have provided designs, pictures, articles, and ideas to make this newsletter something this chapter can be proud to call its own. As an editor, I coordinate submissions from a lot of people, but without those people, there would be no newsletter. This is definitely a chapter award.

Individual Recognition

Working on the newsletter has enabled me to get to know people with whom I may never have had the chance to interact. By getting involved with the newsletter, I have exchanged e-mails with a wide range of people who are in a variety of stages in their careers. This has "forced" me to talk to people, because I can no longer sit back and "watch."

Thank you to everyone who has e-mailed me to let me know when you were particularly happy with an issue. Your praise was much appreciated.

Volunteer Recognition

[Fanshawe Awards Announced](#)

This is the time of year when we announce the winner of our award to the student with the top marks in the Technical Writing program at Fanshawe College. This year, there is a special twist. ♦

[News from England](#)

If you have ever experienced the difficulty of organizing childcare, you will appreciate that childcare is even more "special" in England. Get your monthly fix of news from England. ♦

[May Meeting Recap: Translation Basics](#)

After a series of articles about translation, the May general meeting was a panel discussion that provided a lot of valuable information about getting information translated. Get the details about translation that you need. ♦

[Writers in Greece](#)

If you ever wanted to find out about writing in the old days -- the really old days -- then this is the article for you. Read the article and take a trip through Greece. Find out where technical writing skills would have come in handy. ♦

[Program Survey](#)

If you have ever commented about a meeting topic not interesting you, read this article to find out how you can make a difference about which topics you would like to see covered next year. ♦

[London's Professional Development Event](#)

The London Student Chapter held its first Annual Professional Development Event. Find out about the keynote speaker and the discussion groups. ♦

[Membership News](#)

Find out who is new to our chapter. ♦

[Online Survey Results](#)

Read all about what "your survey says!" Here is a summary of some answers to the survey questions posted on our Web Site. ♦

[STC Head Office](#)

It takes a lot of work behind the scene to keep the STC running. Find out about requests for nominations and requests for proposals. ♦

Last, and certainly not least, The Quill has put me in the enviable position of working with a great group of people:

Opal Gamble -- technical advisor (everything from designing the css to creating Web pages to talking me through processes)

Margie Yundt -- copy editor and PDF creator

Nancy Halverson -- monthly News from England articles that provide both work and personal perspectives

Carol Lawless -- monthly history articles and some creative pieces

Patrick Hofmann -- monthly articles about putting your best graphics forward

Elaine Garnet -- monthly "how to" articles about setting up and running a business

Steve Neville -- jack of all trades (writing articles, submitting banners for our competition, coming up with story ideas, and doing book reviews)

Diane Russell -- meeting recaps and other articles.

For those of you who have ever submitted an article for The Quill, my hat goes off to you. You have helped someone by sharing your knowledge. Thank you.

If you have any story ideas for next year's newsletters, send them to me, Debbie, at quill@stc-soc.org. Don't let your summer be unproductive.



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



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. In **2003**, our first year in an online format, we won a Merit Award.

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

Copyright Statement

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles within the submission deadlines

stated earlier. By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to the newsletter to run the article and to other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. When you submit an article, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.

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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A Great Year in Review

by Heidi Marr, President



Professor Dave Goodwin (our chapter's incoming UW Faculty Liaison) told me recently that time flies by quicker every year. If that's the case, I must be pushing 95 because this past STC year certainly flew by for me. It seems like just yesterday that I was lunching at The Bookshelf (Guelph) with Ted Edwins and Lynda Baxter. They were extolling the virtues of chapter presidential and vice presidential duties (read: twisting my rubber arm to consider a post) and I'm so glad our lunch meeting was successful.

Volunteers and Our Successes

We have had a great year! I cannot emphasize enough how much I value the volunteer participation our chapter enjoys. We (myself included) often take the "givens" for granted.

For example, our chapter holds free monthly meetings. Many chapters struggle to meet quarterly and most charge attendance fees. Our chapter hosted free telephone seminars this year. We have received excellent feedback about this additional benefit to our membership and hope to continue this service in the future.

Our chapter continues to support other endeavours you have come to expect. We offer a dynamic Web site. We send out a vibrant monthly newsletter. We communicate with our membership through regular e-mail announcements. We sponsor both professional and student competitions. We host annual workshops on a variety of relevant topics. We celebrate our successes at the yearly Wine & Cheese and BBQ. And, we have money in the bank!

None of these activities would be possible without our pool of dedicated volunteers. I would like to extend a huge thank you to everyone who helped out this year -- we had almost 70 volunteers (approximately half our membership)! You are responsible for making this year a success. Volunteering not only provides a sense of accomplishment, advances your career, and helps you give back, it also makes STC meetings way more fun!

Next Year's President

I'm pleased to report we have a full council lined up for next year and our chapter will be in good hands. I'm passing the baton over to Opal Gamble, a long-standing council member. I'm confident she'll be a fantastic President.

While part of me will miss hosting general and council meetings (sad, but true), I'm excited about the responsibilities I get to take on as IPP (Immediate Past President). It will be my job to round up new volunteers for the coming year (watch yourselves) and help our chapter recognize excellence by nominating individuals for awards. So, here's to another great year -- I hope 2004/2005 takes us to unprecedented levels of chapter success! ♦

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Path Finding and Niche Making

by Patrick Hofmann



My most recent speaking engagement on wordlessness -- where I ironically and endlessly babble on and on about visual language -- occurred at the [Professional Development Event](#) in London. For me, it was an inspiring day, witnessing the keenness and interest in the eyes of recent graduates of Fanshawe's technical writing program, as they embark on a new path in their career.

Possibilities and Competition

I was delighted and intrigued by their future plans, their hopes, and their questions. They are entering this industry at a time when technical communication seems utterly limitless in its responsibilities, technologies, and possibilities. However, they are also competing against countless others who eagerly seek the same career goals at precisely the same time.

As various school years draw to a close, and the STC year draws to a close, I thought I'd share one career-oriented slice of wisdom (or foolishness, depending on your point of view), and temporarily refrain from dishing out my monthly dirt on visual language and design.

My Niche as an Illustrator

For anyone contemplating or starting a new path in a technical communication career, make yourself stand out from the rest of the crowd by being unique. Create your own area of expertise, your own personal brand. In university, I took the Rhetoric and Professional Writing program along with dozens of others. Although I felt we were all equally competent in our abilities to learn and write, I felt less enthusiastic about reading and writing words than my peers, and yet I loved to illustrate. To overcome this fear of inadequacy (and imminent competition once we all graduated), I thought I'd use my doodling talents as an anchor for my "niche." I convinced some professors to offer some flexibility on my assignments, replacing the mandatory 5000-word essay with a 2500-word essay accompanied by some visual maps and breakdowns of my arguments.

From there, my niche grew, as illustration and design (and not the literal "Rhetoric" and "Professional Writing") became the focus of my studies, my co-operative work terms, and eventually my career. By developing such a disciplinary niche, you create your own personal brand, something that distinguishes you from (and hopefully

elevates you above) someone else. In the ever-competitive technical communication job market, the niche is the advantage.

Hobbies and Interests

But what if too many people out there have adopted your niche? What if everyone has the exemplary writing, illustration, design, programming, publishing, or indexing skills that our industry craves? The solution: find a niche outside of the technical writing discipline and apply it! No matter how irrelevant they may seem, there are countless extra-curricular interests and hobbies that could make you more marketable than "the next guy." Do you have a passion and talent for knitting? Then apply it! You'd be surprised to know that there are automated knitting system manufacturers seeking user interface design and technical documentation specialists for their integrated software tools. In the end, the "Hobbies and Interests" part of your c.v. is not just an interview icebreaker; it's the area that sells your niche. As we approach summer break, think of all the activities that you love to do, and see how they could apply to your personal brand and your career path.

Perhaps I could add beer consumption to my CV? Enjoy your summer, and best of luck. ♦

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Wonder Writer: Putting Inconsistency Away

by Debbie Kerr, Quill Editor



I couldn't ask members to be creative if I didn't attempt to be creative myself.

The Prologue

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. Technical writer Paige Turner was happy to find a job; the problem was that she had been brought in too late in the process. In a dream world, technical writers should be part of projects right from the beginning, but this was the real world and Paige was no ordinary writer.

The Main Character

Paige had seen a lot in her time. With over 15 years of documentation experience, she knew her way around a project. She knew the right questions and she knew how to use them. She recognized that not all Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) could be approached in the same way. They all had their own perks, and it was part of her job to learn what made them tick. If she was to get the answers she needed, she had to determine what rewards/bribes could be used to get the information she needed, when she needed it. A wrong bribe or bad timing could spell disaster for a project. She had to be the "consistency enforcer" in a world where free form and variety were encouraged at the wrong times. She had to face ridicule and resistance. She had to try and get changes made at the end of a cycle. She had to save the users from a design worse than death.

The Subject Matter Expert (SME)

Mark was no ordinary SME. He had a brain and he wasn't afraid to use it. He liked creating new screen designs. He liked the power he felt when some carefully placed code brought his ideas to life. When someone described the functionality needed, he could see that functionality in his mind and he would race to make it happen. He was confident that his code was clean and he had produced something that met all the business requirements. He had done his job and done it well.

The Timelines and the Players

Like all projects, there was a definite schedule for completing each task in the cycle -- business requirements, specifications, programming, and writing. Unfortunately, each of these deliverables was completed sequentially without any concern for

consistency. To make matters worse, each person was given a portion of the tasks to complete. A project manager controlled the process and ensured that the deliverables were completed on time, but no one was checking the deliverables for consistency.

The Rewards

When Paige started her job, it quickly became apparent that she could not document the product as it was developed. She knew she had to approach the project manager and make a case for changing the interface instead of trying to document around it. Paige knew that if she could have some design changes implemented, the end result would be a cleaner product that was much easier to use and understand. This would pay dividends down the road when decisions were made about continuing with the product or when other companies asked clients for recommendations. A poorly-designed product could ultimately mean the loss of countless clients.

The Culprit

In a world of bad documentation and corresponding bad products, it was difficult to pinpoint exactly who or what was the culprit. Paige was no stranger to this world, and she knew that while there were many possible culprits, Inconsistency was often the ringleader to this string of disorganized crime. He had many helpers like Awkward Interface and his close relative Non-intuitive Design, but Paige had discovered that once Inconsistency was removed, his partners in crime seemed to disappear.

The Secret Weapon

Although Paige was called a technical writer, she was really a user advocate in disguise. Paige had an eye for detail and she could see through inconsistencies. She could see potential problems and jumped to new heights to come up with solutions. She was the champion of consistent field names and straight-forward navigation. By being consistent, users had less to learn and could get through a lot more of the product in a shorter time. All this was done quietly and without fanfare so that users did not know who to thank for better products. So subtle was Paige's work that not even project managers were fully aware of what was happening. It turns out that Paige did not have a secret weapon. In fact, Paige was the secret weapon.

The Conclusion

To wage a war against culprits like Inconsistency, every company needs a secret weapon like a technical writer, like our heroine, Paige Turner. To keep the battle

short, it is better if companies deploy this secret weapon right from the start so that there are fewer inconsistencies and fewer casualties -- the SMEs, project managers, and users as well as the user interface and documentation. Everyone and everything gets hurt when Inconsistency is allowed free reign. Sometimes only a technical writer can put Inconsistency in its place. ♦

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Company Recognition Award

by Ted Edwins, Past-President



Each year the chapter gives the Company Recognition Award to recognize a deserving company that demonstrates their support for technical communications, our STC chapter, and their employees.

Reasons for Recognition

This year, The PEER Group Inc. is honoured for:

- paying their employees' STC membership fees
- encouraging employees to attend chapter educational events and the international Annual STC Conference
- supporting employees who volunteer with our chapter.

PEER Group is also honoured for recognizing and promoting the value of professional technical communication both within PEER Group and with its customers.

Employee Recognition

Heidi Marr, who works for PEER Group, said that when she won an award in the technical publications competition, the company made an announcement on the corporate Web site and intranet site. The award was also mentioned in meetings with information developers.

We congratulate PEER Group and thank them for their support! ♦

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Set Your Phasers on Stun -- Ants!

by Elaine Garnet, CIC-SIG Coordinator



Technical communicators are a brave bunch; they ask SMEs questions when no one else will; they attempt to make sense of things when no one else will try; in effect, they go where no one has gone before. They accept challenges and turn them into chances to do research and develop projects. They learn from their mistakes. In keeping with this theme, Elaine Garnet demonstrates that even the smallest things can bring a contractor to her knees. Nothing, no matter how small, can be taken for granted...even when those small things are ALIVE!

First Contact

Debbie Kerr called me the other day and we were bantering about a few pet peeves, enjoying ourselves as usual. I happened to glance at my document and noticed a pair of antennae waving at me from just above the Help menu. I was struck silent as I tried to decide whether to brush the beast off or do the humane thing and let it be. Since I try to adhere to the prime directive, I let it be and returned to the conversation -- well, ants now became the conversation.

Invasion

The next day, and for that matter, all the days since first contact, I have had regular visits from the black and leggy invaders. They crawl across my monitor for the entire world as if they are tiny editors; they crawl across my desk, over my keyboard, my phone and even my sedentary self. I brush them away trying not to hurt them. I admit to inadvertently killing one that scurried somewhere under the 'k' key and presumably is now pulp. I'm not worried about my computer because if the electronics don't get to the ants, the radiation surely will.

Defense Capability

The office manager who likes to curl up in my lap (he's an aged cat) will eat any crawly thing except ants. He's learned through experience that ants taste bitter. His assistant (he's a young cat) has tried once or twice to catch and eat an ant. This usually results in an unwanted deposit on the office floor. Fortunately, the dog hasn't yet noticed the ants. Either that or he considers the job description beneath him.

War Escalates

Lately the invasion has become more serious and I have been moved to research the problem. Know thine enemy! Environment Canada tells be these little 1/4-inch black-brown pests are Carpenter ants and they fit their name by building their nests in wood. My house has a lot of wood, and I'd like to keep it that way. The ants must go! I have fought battles with alien pests in the past. My son is currently waging a losing war with Pharaoh ants (the little brown ones) that are building sandy pyramids on the front lawn and in the driveway. However, I am pleased to say that the mice are gone. The fleas are gone. The bats are still in the eaves, but only because they are a protected species and eat mosquitoes. And, the Carpenter ants will soon have to raise the white flag. I have no option but to declare war, set my phaser to kill, and lay down some ant traps.

The Mission Continues

In the meantime, I continue working in my little office with all my mates -- wanted and unwanted. Who knows what tiny aliens the summer will bring? Enjoy your holidays, and beware of encounters of the antennae kind. ♦

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Upcoming Chapter Events

by Opal Gamble, Outgoing Program Manager and Peter Szabo, Incoming Program Manager



Exciting news! In an effort to give you more bang for your membership dollars, the STC is continuing WebEx seminars through the summer. Our chapter will be hosting seminars in July and August!

June 9

WebEx Seminar: 'Ready, Fire, Aim' No More - Creating Effective Documentation Specifications with Neil Perlin

As the size and complexity of online projects increase, so does the risk that they will spin out of control--especially if there's no project documentation. Without project documentation, team members often veer off in their own directions, and maintenance developers waste time trying to figure out what their predecessors did. A documentation specification minimizes such problems by providing a one-stop summary of a project. Yet many developers don't create specs on the grounds that they're too complex or too time-consuming to fit into the project schedule and budget.

This seminar takes the opposite view--projects are too complex not to have a spec. But what is a spec? It isn't a style guide. Instead, a spec is a summary of a project's design and technical aspects--the structure of the project and the rationale behind that structure, topic attributes, graphics settings, authoring tool specifications, troubleshooting tips, and so on. This seminar describes the elements of an effective spec and discusses how you can create one in just a few days. And once you do, you'll no longer be troubled by the "Ready, Fire, Aim" model of project management.

This free seminar (\$35 for non-members - bring a cheque with you to the seminar, payable to STC Southwestern Ontario Chapter) takes place at CheckFree i-Solutions, 455 Phillip Street, Waterloo, from 12:30-3:00 pm.

Please RSVP to [Peter Szabo](#) by **Monday, June 7, 2004**. In your e-mail message, please state the names of attendees and membership status.

Seating is limited to 25, so RSVP early!

July 21 Seven Ideas for Sprucing Up Help with Saul Carliner

Topic and location details to follow on stc-soc.org, but book your calendars now!

August 18 Chapter 1: Writing Effective Introductions and Overviews with Leah Guren

Topic and location details to follow on stc-soc.org, but book your calendars now!

If you have any questions about upcoming chapter events, or if you have a suggestion for a meeting topic, feel free to email [your friendly, neighbourhood program managers](mailto:your_friendly_neighbourhood_program_managers).

For details about our chapter's events for the rest of the year, as well as last minute updates or additions to the schedule, take a look at the [STC calendar](#). ♦

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Telephone Seminar Handouts

by Ted Edwins, Past-President



The chapter has some leftover handouts from telephone seminars held in 2003. These handouts are copies of PowerPoint presentations. The content of the handouts varies from talking points to detailed discussions with lists of resources.

Available Handouts

The following handouts are available:

**1. Organizing and Leading a Software User Interface Design Team, Jan 8/03.
Presented by Diane Feldman and Carla Merrill. 36 pages. Qty. 5. Detailed.**

This three-part seminar discusses the technical communicator's leadership role in user interface design. Because goal-oriented and customer-friendly design is driven by our professional skills, technical communicators are ideal candidates for leading a user interface (UI) design effort.

Part 1, "Why Should I Create a User Interface Design Team?", provides an overview of the UI design process.

Part 2, "How Do I Organize the Team?", discusses how to select team members, how to gain support from senior management, and how to set up the first UI design team meeting.

Part 3, "How Do I Lead the Team?", teaches participants how to lead core design team and extended design team meetings, and how to present and verify the design team's results.

**2. Creating Persuasive Executive Summaries, Feb 5/03.
Presented by Stacia Kelly. 30 pages. Qty. 1. Detailed.**

Do you think your executive summaries could be tighter? Cleaner? Provide a more polished view of your services to your clients? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you need to attend this seminar. You will learn how to develop a professional, persuasive Executive Summary that will get your proposals in the hands of the decision makers, and get you results. This seminar will take you through all the steps necessary in creating an effective Executive Summary in order to enhance your sales proposal.

**3. Making the Complex Clear and Pretty, Mar 12/03.
Presented by Phylise Banner. 12 pages. Qty. 4. Talking points.**

Making the complex clear is not always enough. It needs to look good, too! Basic graphic design principles are central to developing effective information design solutions. By incorporating these principles in your approach to traditional data representations, you can guide users to the information they need and prevent any potential misunderstandings.

Using examples from her experience as a Graphic Designer in the financial industry, the presenter will show why style is as important as clarity and why well-designed informational graphics are essential in fast-paced decision-making environments.

How to Obtain Handouts

We are offering the handouts free to members and require payment of \$2.00 for non-members, which will cover copying and mailing costs. Offer is good only while quantities last. First come, first served.

Members can email your address to me at tjedwins@rogers.com. Non-members should make cheques payable to "Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC" and mail them to:

21 Bishop Court
Guelph, ON
N1G 2R8 ♦

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Fanshawe Awards Announced

by Christy Simard, Student Awards Manager



Each year, this chapter awards \$500 and a free STC membership to the student with the highest marks in the Fanshawe College Technical Writing diploma program.

The Winner

I'm pleased to announce that this year's winner is Linda Longman. Linda achieved a grade point average of 4.0. Overall, her grades included a whopping eight A+s and three As. Congratulations Linda; we are impressed!

Special Runner-up

Faculty at Fanshawe also pointed out that the competition was extremely close this year. Another student in the program also achieved a grade point average of 4.0. Overall, his grades included seven A+s and four As. So let's congratulate this year's special runner up, John Morland. To recognize John's performance, we've prepared a special prize: \$50 to spend at Chapters. But we're not sure if you can use it to fill up on lattes and baked goods at Starbucks!

Presentations

We announce the winners and present the awards at our annual barbeque on June 1. Be sure to join us for some fun, networking, volunteer recognition, and exciting award presentations. ♦

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View From the Other Side...and Back Again

by Nancy Halverson



The view from my window as I write shows sunshine on green trees with flowers and blossoms everywhere. If I turn slightly, I can see the fields of the Mayfield valley -- it's like a wall of green, spotted with dry-stone fences and farm cottages. Sheep are grazing, and a few horses are out for some exercise.

England's Spring

My suburban quarters come at a high cost, but when you can enjoy looking at the world from this angle, it's worth it. Spring is a little longer season here than in Southern Ontario -- it seems to go from February until June (and sometimes right into autumn I'm told). New things constantly appear in gardens and each week the predominant flower changes. This week it's rhododendron that I'm noticing most. Unbearably light individual flowers in huge poofy clusters - their colours becoming almost fluorescent in the sunshine. Truly a sight to take your mind off the daily grind.

Childcare -- New Arrangements

My work-life balance has been keeping me pre-occupied lately. As always, childcare issues crop up and we need to make adjustments. This time though, we're going for a solution that will balance all our needs, I hope. My girls want to spend time at home (small as it is) with their own toys and cats, so we've found an after school nanny for them. Sounds expensive, and it is, but they're my children after all -- where better to spend the money, right? (At least, that's what I keep telling myself.)

The new arrangement hasn't started yet, but I'm hoping that they'll get along and get a chance to start a routine before school breaks up for the summer at the end of July. It'll be nice to just pull into my own driveway and find the kids playing in the yard or on the street, maybe with homework finished and some fresh air in their lungs.

Childcare -- Canada vs. England

Childcare is even more of an afterthought here, I find, than it was in Waterloo. Companies (and schools) in Waterloo seemed to tolerate the ideas and realities of family life with a lot more grace. My company here gives me three days for

unexpected absences -- over three years!! So, when a child is ill, it's not a simple case of calling in or working from home. I have to foist the kid on some kind victim (aka friend) and take the 'bad mom' hit. My husband's job allows him to work from home, but he sometimes has those annoying obligations like meetings or urgent deadlines that get in my way.

The government here has had to bring in legislation to force employers to consider requests from parents for flexible time. But, as far as I can see, that only means that they have to wait a day to say no. There's a grudging attitude, I feel, towards people who have family obligations. My schedule has to change quite often -- last minute things usually. Schedules seem to be flexible in theory, but inflexible in practice. It's not too bad, I guess, just a few sideways looks and explanations requested, and referrals to the company handbook. They haven't fired me yet.

Spring Cleaning at Work

The actual work has taken on a new dimension, as we're revamping a very large online help system. Cleaning up the writing, creating a consistent style, and checking the accuracy of the information. My boss is calling it our spring cleaning. We've got four writers now, all working on separate sections of the same guide. We're getting quite good at calling each other (two of us work in Sheffield, two in Leeds) so we don't all work on the same area. And of course, there are the spreadsheets to update so we know what stage each section is at, and who's responsible for what. The project originally was scheduled for about five weeks, but, as usual, I'm pretty sure that deadline will slip. There's just too much ground to cover, and nothing urgent on the horizon.

The Great Debate

And, like all tech writers, the questions turn into debates and broader questions with more debates. One interesting one last week started with a simple enough question - - do we provide the navigation for all our software's screens (reached by prompts, not menus) for every screen? Some screens would need 15 routes described. So, we went the task-based route -- let's try to predict the user's most likely routes to the destination and what tasks they will be performing. That won't work, because we truly don't know the tasks. Enter the bumbling outsider (me) who asks the truly ridiculous question...has anyone on the design team ever done any task analysis? Project manager: what's a task analysis? Design team leader: the short answer is...no. Well, looks like there might just be a bit of difficulty trying to figure out the most likely routes then?! We've left the question for our doc manager to sort out -- she was on vacation last week. It's just her sort of thing though, so I'm sure she'll be thrilled.

Feedback About My Meeting

I'm still getting feedback from people on our informal meeting in April here in Sheffield. People who want to be a part of it next time keep e-mailing me, and the list is growing. I've received e-mails from a past president of the Trans-alpine chapter (European) who says that they have similar informal group get-togethers in many areas of Europe. They call them local interest groups, which sounds perfect. I'll be getting more information on that soon. It's still tough adjusting to life without an active STC, and 100+ members in one area. The whole of the STC-UK's chapter has only 120 members!

The ISTC (Institute of Scientific and Technical Communication)

I should say here that there is another organization, the ISTC, which has eight times that membership. The STC is seen as a very American-centric organization (not an unheard-of opinion elsewhere) and the ISTC's seen as more of an English organization. The membership fees for the ISTC are very steep, as are their conference fees. Nothing seems to come from the genuine wish to share professional ideas, but more from a point of view of making some money from the activities -- but this is just my outsider's opinion.

I've yet to fully investigate their events (although I've always been put off by the cost whenever I've contemplated actually going to one). I'm heading down to London for the annual general meeting of the STC-UK chapter in June. I want to see who's around and who might be interested in doing some cross-disciplinary work with me and the others I met with in Sheffield. It's something that I'm looking forward to, especially as some bright light's suggested me as a vice president of the UK chapter. (You can stop laughing now... I'm checking it out; it's not a done deal.) But, it could be done, maybe. I'll have to see what they'd be looking for me to actually do. Time commitments are difficult for me to gauge at this point -- we're just about to start some major renovation work on our house, etc. We all know that everything takes more time and effort than you originally predict, right?

In Conclusion

I hope you've enjoyed my little pieces in The Quill, and I'll be sure to keep in touch with what goes on in the STC-UK chapter. It's a long summer ahead of us now (well, hopefully!) and I hope you will all wish for sunshine and fine temperatures for the last two weeks in July, when my family and I will be in Southern Ontario for a visit. It's going to be great to be 'home'. ♦

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May Meeting Recap: Translation Basics

by Opal Gamble, Program Manager



May's general meeting, Translation Basics, had a small turn out -- apparently the Leaf's playoff game was important (who knew?) -- but still featured an impressive string of questions from the small, but curious, audience.

Our panel of translation experts, Al Daigen (Daigen Communications), Margie Yundt (Virtek Vision International Inc.), Steve Desmeules and Rudi Vanvaerenbergh (DNS Translations Inc. / ACCU-Translation Services Ltd.) answered everything the audience could come up with -- then they stayed for nearly an hour answering even more questions!

To quote Rudi, translation is a "good business... it's a passion." It must be if they skipped the playoff game for our meeting!

How do you write for translation?

Be concise. Don't use slang and make sure you have clear descriptions.

Good writing always translates well.

How long should a project take?

This depends on the project, but generally 100 pages takes around six weeks. However, there are many variables for a time estimate, including the availability previous translations, the translator's familiarity with the product and/or authoring tool, and the technical complexity of the content.



How do I make a translation project go as smoothly as possible?

Give your translators as much information as possible for context. For example, send them:

- previous versions (translated or not, these documents provide translators with relevant background information and terminology references)
- glossary of terms

- style guide
- any relevant information about the document's structure and template, including any useful authoring tool tips
- flags indicating things that should not be translated

How do you deal with confidentiality issues?

Translators work under the Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario's [Code of Ethics](#); for additional confidentiality, some companies ask translators to sign contracts or NDAs. However, you are protected by privacy regulations.

What are your ideal requirements for a project?

- finished! (Laugh, but we all know about project creep!)
- editable format (i.e., *not* PDF!)
- clear expectations
- translation time built into a project estimate
- heads-up that a project is coming
- access to SMEs
- documents with whitespace -- French and Spanish are 20% longer than English

How many drafts does a translator do?

Typically one, then there's an editorial review.

Does a good client get a better deal?

Absolutely! Relationship goes a long way.

Helpful clients with lots of work (volume) and friction-free interactions require less work and get the best deals possible. A client willing to spend time is a good customer.

Repeat work (for example, translation of an updated guide that had previous, translated versions) means translations take less time (and less translation) because you have the advantage of the translator's memory and glossaries.

How do I find a good translator?

Ask around for referrals and word of mouth recommendations.

Request that prospective translators send you references, suggestions for project optimization, and samples of their work.

Extra tips and tricks of the trade

- After finalizing page layouts for translated documents, send them back to the translators for a final check for appropriate hyphenation and page breaks in the target language. Most translators provide this service at no extra cost. Remember that hyphenation rules change for each language -- what looks right to you from an English perspective might not be correct for other languages.
- There is a deep pool of translation talent in Quebec and Canada -- don't think that you have to use foreign translators to get superior results.
- Trust between a client and a translator is important -- if you have feedback from sales people, resellers, or customers, send it to the translator! But, keep in mind that some feedback is a matter of style; sometimes translation disagreements are just personal preference.
- Agree on target audience and terminology before you begin a project. ♦

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Writing in Ancient Greece

by Carol Lawless, Treasurer



Wow -- we're winding up our golden anniversary celebrations. The STC is 50 years old and our chapter is a mature 15 (going on 16).

The History of Documentation

Fifty years of history have left me wondering how old our profession really is. Can you imagine a world without technical writers? We know it isn't the oldest or the second oldest profession -- they've been taken -- but surely it must be up there. Did not the ancient Egyptians seek to document the way to the afterlife? Does not Genesis include clear specifications for



shipbuilding? A recent visit to Greece has confirmed that the roots of our great trade are surely founded, like so much of our western civilization, in the great Hellenic age.

During my ten days on the mainland and in the islands, all the tech writing axioms ever drilled into my head were popping out of the marble-works where-ever I looked.

Proofreading Marble

I use the work marble-works advisedly. Wood certainly doesn't have the same lasting quality as marble, and of marble there was plenty. As I stood in absolute awe on the Athenian acropolis, the Parthenon towering over me, I paused to look around at the stone and marble stacked for restoration. Just imagine, for twenty-five centuries these inscriptions have remained for all to read. Just imagine, my writing will be revised with the next release due out soon! Just imagine making a typo! I wonder what the ancient Greek is for "pass the whiteout, please"? So the first of the axioms -- "proofread your work carefully".

Including Warnings

Next, "State warnings and cautions carefully". We visited Patmos, in the Icarian Sea. Gazing over the breathtaking beauty it's easy to understand why Icarus neglected to read the warning on his wings "do not fly close to sun; wax will melt". Unfortunately,

his father the inventor Daedalus, didn't include the ending, "or you will plummet into the sea". As his son did, giving it his name.

Using Graphics and Icons

Of course "graphics and icons can be worth a thousand words". The Greco-Roman city of Ephesus knew the value of icons. The largest early Christian community during an era of persecution still shows signs of the engravings that marked Christian homes and businesses for their friends and co-religionists. Then there's the icon representing the way to the local brothel. But that's another story!

Posting Signs

Speaking of signs, "make sure you signpost your work so your readers can find what they're looking for". Rhodes was the home to one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the great Colossus. It stood astride the harbour, or maybe overlooking the harbour, or possibly just inside the town. Well, we're not really sure where it stood, but it certainly graced the town from 282 to 226 BC. Then it tumbled to the ground, or maybe to the sea during an earthquake. Nearly a thousand years later the fragments were sold and transported elsewhere. Signposts would have been nice. We still don't know what it really looked like! Or where to find it!

Choosing Translators

If you have an international audience, "choose your translation / localization company carefully". The disk of Phaestos from Minoan Crete dates from before 1700BC. The pre-Linear A pictorial script surely gives detailed instructions for programming a VCR. I dare you to prove me wrong -- after all, no-one can translate it. Come to think of it, poor instructions are even harder to interpret than the disk!

Checking Facts



Back to the mainland where the Temple of Apollo at Cape Sounion, overlooks the Aegean Sea. You may be able to detect a trend -- drown and you have a sea named after you. King Aegeus threw himself from the cliffs, thinking that his son's mission was a failure and he himself was dead. Unfortunately, Theseus was very much alive and had neglected to change the sails from mourning black to white, indicating success. Always remember check your facts before you jump to conclusions". Or over the cliff.

Knowing the Audience

Of course the most important rule: "Know your audience" was never more prevalent than at Delphi. Readers -- oops, I mean pilgrims -- approached the great god Apollo through his seer, the Pythia (or Sybil) for revelations great and small.

After seven days of hospitality (and seven nights at the local pub) the priests of Apollo certainly knew their audience. In fact their ratings were so high that great kings and emperors sought them out.

Being Clear and Concise

That leads me to the final great axiom, "Be clear and avoid ambiguity". When Croesus, king of Lydia sought her advice on invading Persia, the Pythia declared "Croesus will destroy a great empire." As indeed he did. His own. No wait! I think the message at Delphi was "ambiguity is good for business". Ah well, seven axioms out of eight isn't bad!

Yes -- all the rules of technical writing are clearly present in ancient Greece. But perhaps I should double-check my facts. I hear there's a two-week tour to Turkey and Greece next year. Guess where I'll be! ♦

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Knowing My Audience: What Do You Want From Your General Meetings?



by Peter Szabo, Incoming Program Manager

As the incoming Program Manager for our STC Southwestern Ontario Chapter, I want some input from you, our local members, about future general meetings.

Although there are opportunities for you to provide feedback at the meetings, this survey is a way for all members (whether you attend meetings or not) to tell me what you want.

Please provide me with some feedback to help me know my audience better.

I'll use your input to develop more relevant general meetings in the 2004-2005 chapter year. I'll also include the results of this survey in a future issue of The Quill.

Three-Minute Survey

The following survey should take you about three minutes to complete, unless you want to provide further details. In which case, I welcome your comments about our general meetings at program@stc-soc.org.

Meeting Location

In which city would you prefer the general meetings be held?(select all that apply)

Cambridge

Guelph

Waterloo

Kitchener

Rotating locations

Other (please provide suggestions via [email](#))

Meeting Day of the Week

On which day of the week would you prefer general meetings be held? (select all that apply)

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Topics

Which of the following general meeting topics are of most interest to you?(select all that apply)

Software tools and technology (for example, XML, FrameMaker, online Help software)

Technical skills (for example, editing, indexing)

Project management (for example, time estimates, project planning)

Soft skills (for example, teamwork, interviewing SMEs, mentoring)

Career Development (for example, résumés, networking, prospecting, selling your skills)

Other (please provide suggestions via [email](#))

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London Student Chapter Holds First Annual Professional Development Event



by Dee Morrissey, Faculty Advisor, London Student Chapter

Technical communicators know the importance of professional development. Membership in professional associations like the STC, participation in meetings, and attendance at conferences are all professional development activities that keep us current and connected. To ensure students appreciate the benefits of professional development, the London Student Chapter held its first annual Professional Development Event on Saturday, April 24 at Fanshawe College.

The nine full-time technical writing students in Fanshawe College's post-graduate Technical Writing program organized the half-day event. The day featured five presentations and attracted 30 technical communicators from Southwestern Ontario.

Keynote Speaker

Peter Vogel, a much sought after presenter and a principal in PH&V Information Services, kicked off the day with a dynamic session on "Clarity and Signaling." Peter discussed how signaling can improve the clarity of technical communication, particularly through the use *given/new* scenarios. For example, technical writers can first refer to what is known by the audience (the *given*) and then signal the introduction of the unknown (the *new*).



Diverse Breakout Sessions

Following Peter's keynote address, four breakout sessions provided attendees with choices ranging from the highly technical to the more reflective. **Patrick Hofmann**, a visual interaction designer, discussed the failures, successes, and [strategies](#) of using pictures in technical documentation and instruction. **Christy Simard**, an information developer, explored the relationship between technical writing and marketing communications. **Christine McVarney**, a technical writer, presented a workshop on what informal "on-the-job training" technical writers might expect. And **Peter Crisp**, president of a documentation company, discussed how XML can be used for structured document authoring.

Successful Segue

In her welcome, Catherine Haycock, London Student Chapter President, stated that the event would be a success if just one participant learned something beneficial to his or her career. All in attendance would agree that Catherine's goal was more than met -- speakers were informative and entertaining, and participants were attentive and enthusiastic! And for Fanshawe's technical writing graduates, the day was a perfect segue from their formal education to the ongoing professional development that will be part of their new careers.

Plans for next year's event will begin as soon as the fall semester begins. Watch for the call for presenters early in 2005! ♦

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Membership News

by Tina Chonko, Membership Manager



This month we had the following new members:

- Heather Celik
- Dr. Heather MacDougall (representative for University of Waterloo as a sustaining organization)
- Amy Ross
- David Schroeder

Of the people who could be reached by e-mail, only Heather Celik responded quickly enough to be included in this issue of our newsletter. If you are one of the new members listed and did not receive an inquiry e-mail, please contact our [Membership Manager](#) to provide us with your valid e-mail address.

Heather Celik

After a two-year sojourn teaching English in Istanbul, I've recently returned to the field of technical writing. Although my past experience has been writing end-user documentation for software applications, I am now part of a group developing internal information for a new company-wide initiative. I'm looking forward to becoming more active in the profession and catching up on the developments that have occurred since I've been away. ♦

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Online Survey Results From Our Site

by Debbie Kerr, Quill Editor



Beginning in the fall last year, our chapter posted survey questions on our [homepage](#). In cases like the February workshop and telephone seminars, the questions were used to help us determine the topics that interested you the most.

Some of the questions and answers are enlightening. For example, we seem to want to watch what we eat, but about half of us do not like to do any outdoor activities (exercise) in the winter. We also seem to have a coffee fixation.

Top Answers

The following are some of the questions that have been posted on our Web site and their top answers.

Question	Top Answers (# of Responses)	Total Responses
What authoring tools do you use?	Word (32)FrameMaker (27)Other (26)	106
When you interview a prospective employer, what is your most important consideration?	the quality of the coffee (18)working environment (9)job challenge (7)	39
What kinds of snacks would you like at each meeting?	fruit and veggies - I'm watching the calories (21)	29
How do you feel about our newsletter's format?	I like the online format (16)I prefer a printed copy (5)Either format is fine (3)	24
What's your favourite winter activity (other than STC meetings)?	huddling inside (10)skiing (6)	22

What can you do?

If you have a question that you would like to see as part of our online survey, send it to our [Webmaster](#). The next time that you are on our site, why don't you take the time to respond to one of our surveys? ♦

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STC Head Office: Memberships, Proposals, and Events



The following articles appeared in the May/June issue of Tieline, The Society Leaders' newsletter.

Members Can Still Renew

Although online renewal is no longer available, members who have not yet paid their dues can still renew for 2004 by submitting their payment with either a 2004 dues renewal invoice or a new membership application. (When filling out the application, members should check the box next to "I hereby apply for reinstatement.") Please remind chapter members that they can download printable membership applications from the [STC Web site](#). To request a dues renewal invoice, members should contact the STC membership department.

STC's 52nd Annual Conference Call for Proposals

The [call for proposals](#) for STC's 52nd Annual Conference will soon be available on the STC Web site. This year, the submission process for proposals will be entirely online. The submission deadline is July 31, 2004.

The conference will be held May 8-11, 2005, in Seattle, Washington. The conference theme is "Experiencing Technical Communication." For more information, please contact [Buffy M. Bennett](#).

Upcoming Events

July 25-27

The Sacramento Chapter STC will host the **STC Region 8 Conference** at the University of California, Davis. The conference will feature seminars, a regional leadership summit, and a trade show and career expo. For more information, please contact:

[Eric Butow](#)

www.stcregion8conference.org

October 21-24

The Intermountain Chapter STC will host the **2004 STC Region 5 Conference** at the Wyndham Hotel in Salt Lake City, Utah. The conference theme is "Ascending the Summit: A Technical Communication Expedition." The deadline for submitting proposals has been extended to May 15. For more information, please contact:

[Marj Hermansen-Eldard](#)

(650) 842-9486

(801) 362-8955

(801) 225-4463

www.intermountain-stc.org ♦

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