



the Quill

the Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC



May 2005 (Volume 16 Number 8) [About the Quill](#)

In This Issue

President's Message

As a writer, you know what it is like to have to write something when you don't feel, well, inspired. And so, to show that she is only human, she takes a break from writing words of wisdom and settles on sharing some frivolous...stuff. ♦

Deciding When to Leave a Job

Leaving a job can be very traumatic, whether someone else made that decision for you or you made it yourself. Find out what other writers use as a gauge when it is time to find another job. ♦

General Meeting Recap: Intranet Documentation - A Case Study

Our April general meeting took us to Blount Canada Ltd. where we learned the pros and cons of setting up documentation on an Intranet and then getting employees to access it. ♦

Recap of E-Learning Webinar

E-Learning is one of those new buzz words, and with good reason. When you want to learn about e-learning, William Horton is the person you want to teach you. ♦

Membership Quiz

If you haven't been to one of our general meetings or our Webinars, then you are not getting the most out of your STC membership. Take this quiz to find out what you are missing. ♦

Get Your Hot Dogs Here

Every part of our STC functions seems to involve food, so why should the newsletter be any exception? The only difference with this story is that there is a slight twist to this food adventure. The only clue is that Heidi nominates you to come up with the ending. ♦

Recap of April's Council Meeting

The Editor's Message

Raining on Everyone (Weather)

Luckily or unluckily, we haven't experienced the April showers until near the end of the month. I haven't decided if this is good or bad. If the showers had come at the beginning of the month, we wouldn't have experienced great weather and we would have gone from snow to rain, and then on to sunshine. During winter, you sort of forget what real weather can be like, but once you are reminded of what you were missing in winter, then it is hard to go back to any kind of wet stuff.

Raining on Everyone (Work)

It seems that April, especially the last few weeks, has been raining work down on people. This has been a tough month to get people to submit articles. As I am writing this column, Thursday night, I am still waiting for at least two people to submit articles and Margie is scrambling to do some copy editing for me, because of her workload. Maybe the bosses get too pumped in the spring and they should allow their communicators to awaken slowly like the flowers in spring. Why don't we all put that in our suggestion boxes at work?

The End is Near

Considering the other two headings in this column, you might think that I meant the end of bad weather and your current workload, but I am referring to my time as editor of this

Here is another place where you can get free food, if you want to attend. Find out what our council members were up to besides eating pizza. ♦

Upcoming Events

May is another busy month for our chapter, especially when we are building up to our annual barbecue in June. Don't forget to say that you will come. Do you see more of a food trend? ♦

Getting and Giving Feedback

In an effort to make sure that people get recognized for their good work, we have competitions, we nominate people, and we enter competitions. Find out what awards our chapter has been giving and what new ones it has just received! ♦

Seminar Shatters Ancient Myth

Sometimes part of learning is knowing when to toss out an old belief to accept a new one. Find out about the new magic numbers that will optimize learning and retention. ♦

Freelance 101: Chronicles for the self-employed

Not everyone is cut out to do freelance work. If you have been thinking about it, read this article to find out what questions you should be asking yourself before you make that leap. ♦

News From STC Head Office

Find out the results of the election and see what you can do to nominate someone for a society-level position in 2006. In addition to helping the organization, you can help yourself with a list of links to Web sites for chapters, chapter Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and society SIGs. ♦

View from the other side...of finding her way

Nancy shows us that it is not always easy to find your way in England, whether it be on the road, at work, or when putting together an STC function. The signs are all there; its just knowing how to read them. ♦

newsletter. June will be my last issue of the newsletter.

I have very mixed feelings about this end to my adventure. Part of me would like to continue and another part of me knew it was time to pass the torch to someone else before the newsletter became stale.

I will not miss the hours that it takes to collect the articles and put them into a format that I hope is easy to read. At the same time, I will miss the interaction with all my new contacts. In fact, part of me really will miss the hours of work, because they are shorter than putting a manual together and you get to see the results within a couple of weeks.

Your Suggestion Box

If there is anything that you would like to see covered in the next issue, now is the time to tell me while I still have the chance to make it a reality. Is there a topic that you want covered? Is there someone you would like to write an article for next month? Is there something about the chapter that you would like to change? Is there something good that you would like to praise? This newsletter is your forum for communication, so use it.

Send your articles, suggestions, and comments to me, Debbie, at quill@stc-soc.org.



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



About The Quill

by [Debbie Kerr](#), The Quill Editor



The Quill is the monthly newsletter of the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC, which is a Canadian chapter in Region 1. Our chapter spans from Windsor to Mississauga and Georgian Bay to Lake Ontario. This area is home to the technology triangle, which is home to many high-tech industries.

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.

Publication Policies and Frequency

The Quill is published monthly, with the exception of January, so there are nine issues published from September 2004 to June 2005.

The following is a summary of when articles must be submitted so that they can be included in a particular issue. To help the Quill Editor to plan the content of each issue, contributors are encouraged to submit their story ideas one week before submitting their articles.

Issue	Article Deadline
September	August 23
October	September 20
November	October 18
December	November 22
January	No Quill
February	January 18
March	February 14
April	March 21

May	April 18
June	May 23
July or August	No Quill

Copyright Statement

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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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For a complete list of contacts, go to the site of the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC at www.stc-soc.org.

STC Head Office

Mission Statement:

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

You can find out more about the STC using any of the following methods.

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A Few, Frivolous Thoughts

by [Opal Gamble](#), President



Someone asked me the other day what, specifically, a Chapter President does, and what I liked best and least about the role.

I replied with a brief, tech writer styled, neatly bulleted list that outlined things. My correspondent replied saying, "but you forgot X, Y, Z, and your monthly Quill article!"

Whoops (notice I didn't say it was a *complete* list...)

Writing this monthly article for the Quill is one of my duties as President. Sometimes it's a pleasant duty, but often I struggle. Why? Well, because I am supposed to pass on important information from head office, or from our council meetings. Let's face it: that's a dry read.

I know you're all just scooting by on your way to go read Nancy's article (you wouldn't believe how many people tell me that's the first thing, and occasionally only thing, they read in the Quill).

So, since I have no great news of importance to intone from on top of my soapbox this month—okay, fine, I'm short: my stack of soapboxes—I'm going to expound on some tech writer thoughts that have floated through my brain in the last month.

Sitting in the dark

When I get to my cubical early in the morning, I usually turn on the little florescent light under my over-desk storage unit and leave the main lights in our area off. I've noticed over the years that most technical writers I've worked with have similar habits.

Oddly, we all have an expression of disgust and dismay when some cheerful soul sings "Good moooooorning!" and flips on every light in the office.

Is it a common trait for tech writers to like the glow of a monitor with a little accent lighting?

Pants, pants, pants

In a completely unscientific study, I have discovered that technical writers, in general, have a lousy time finding pants that fit.

They might be too big, they might be too small. Maybe too short, maybe too tall. But when it really comes down to it, writers are challenged by a trip to the mall.

(No, I'm not giving up my day job to become a poet.)

How many writers does it take to change a light bulb?

By my estimation, five.

- One to plan the project
- One to write
- One to review
- One to do a usability test
- One to actually change the light bulb

That said, it will only be one writer that actually does this task, because having five writers available for a project is unheard of! ♦

About Opal Gamble

Technical writer, web monkey, and general geek, Opal's wanted to be a tech writer since high school; she became a STC-SOC council member in 1997. A graduate of UW's co-op Rhetoric and Professional Writing program, Opal is a contract Technical Writer at [Campana](#). She also runs her own freelance business, [SiO2](#).

When she's not doing STC business, Opal participates in autocross events (with a hybrid car, no less!) and tries to cultivate a green thumb in her garden.

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Deciding When It's Time to Leave



by [Kim Creed](#), Education Manager

Inevitably, most technical communicators change jobs along the career track. Sometimes, a company reorganizes, or acquires, or gets acquired, resulting in an unplanned job change. But, how do we decide that is time to initiate our own job change? When is it time to go?

The Subjects

I polled some technical communicators to find out what they were doing to manage their careers. Some of those polled had recently changed jobs. The technical communicators polled varied in terms of experience, education and key motivators. The criteria and process each person used for determining when it was time to go also varied greatly.

The Need to be Challenged

Most of those polled agreed that having challenging work and being part of a great team helped to keep them at a job. Challenging work includes feeling that the current employer can nurture the growth of writing skills and provide some variety in the type of work. When you couple challenging work with feeling rewarded, chances are writers will stay.

Challenging work was also linked to perceiving advancement opportunities at a company. Without opportunities to take on more senior work, new projects or managerial roles, writers looked outside for the next job. To paraphrase one writer, if you feel uninspired and unmotivated, it's time to take a look around. Most writers polled took stock of their career direction during performance appraisals. The review process brought perspective and a chance to reflect on goals.

The Company Culture

Company culture contributed to deciding whether to stay or go. Lack of training opportunities, lack of funding for new tools and processes, and questionable company practices caused writers to become frustrated and disillusioned. Other issues that pointed the way to the door also included: inadequate tools to do the job, lack of advancement opportunities, fighting the same fires from release to release, and the desire for better remuneration.

Although lack of company perks such as special events and fruit baskets were

not listed as reasons for leaving a company; however, the writers polled did list these perks as reasons for staying at a company—human resources personnel take note.

Additionally, one writer noted that technical communicators were well respected at her place of employment. Feeling respected as "an integral member of the engineering team," also ranked highly as a reason to stay. Nevertheless, this writer left the place of employment because there was no opportunity to pursue management there.

The Decision is Yours

Should you stay or should you go? Most writers agreed that if they were doing the same old stuff and just collecting a pay cheque, that it was not reason enough to stay.

Look around and see what others are doing. Get to know what new processes, tools and roles are available. That kind of knowledge can be motivating and put a new perspective on things. It might even open some new doors. ♦

About Kim Creed

Kim works as an Information Developer at PEERGroup. Previously, she has written documentation for optical carriers, business process automation software, and manufacturing assembly lines. In her downtime, Kim practices yoga (Sivananda tradition), sketches, creates culinary delights, reads a lot of non-fiction, and is patiently trying to teach her bird to say a few words.



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General Meeting Recap: Intranet Documentation - A Case Study



by [Marisa Latin](#), Hospitality Manager

This is the story of how Blount, using only its current resources, successfully moved an ISO documentation system online in a manufacturing community.

The Situation

Blount Canada Ltd., in Guelph, Ontario, is an international manufacturer of saw chains, guide bars, and sprockets. While its head office is in Portland, Oregon, the Guelph office alone employs over 900 people.

In 1995, Blount received ISO-9002 registration and, since then, it has spent a lot of time maintaining and updating its ISO documentation. Employees refer to ISO procedures for every machine floor task on a regular basis. For safety and quality reasons, the documentation must be current at all locations at all times, which is why the documentation is updated frequently.



The Mission

Ben McCarl, Manager of Quality and IT at Blount Canada Ltd., was given the mandate to make the volumes of ISO documentation easier to manage, update, and distribute. He began the company's intranet project a few years ago.

The Challenges

Ben had to develop a solution that would address the following challenges:

- Many employees on the manufacturing shop floors were not comfortable using computers, and some had never used one.
- Employees were used to paper documentation. Once ISO documentation went online, employees would not be permitted to print it. This step was required to ensure that only the latest documentation was circulated and used. If printing was allowed shredding procedures would have been necessary, which was too costly and time-consuming.
- There were 900 employees but only 170 computers. Getting more computers was not a cost-effective option.
- English was not the primary language of many machine floor employees.

- There were no Web or design professionals on board at the start of this process.

The Process

The plan was to start small and not aim at being perfect, but at being good enough. The goal was to get information online as soon as possible. To encourage employees to go to the new Web site, it had to be fun. In the beginning, 90% of the material on the Web site was not directly job related.

Generating Interest

Employees went to the site to read what was on the lunch cafeteria menu, what the weather was going to be like, or who was giving away free stuff in the 'Employee Marketplace'.

Links like 'What's New' and anonymous 'Feedback' were also well received.

One of the most popular pages became the nurse's 'Health and Safety' site. It was frequently updated with new articles about different ailments that employees could relate to because of friends and family, or that they just found interesting.

The 'Number of Hits' counter was also a point of interest, and some employees went to the site over and over again just to make the hit counter go up. Although the counter itself ended up having no value, the goal to get employees to use the intranet was met.

Finding Willing Participants

To make the site easier to navigate for employees with a limited amount of computers and no printing capabilities, Ben sought the assistance of willing participants in each department to take ownership of their own sections of the Web site and manage the content in a way that would be ideal for their department. They became the council.

Deciding on a Look and Format

It was decided that the department pages would remain diverse, since they were asking non-graphic people to go online. MS FrontPage was chosen as the software to create the pages because all of the participants already had it on their systems. The 'designers' were given the guideline to limit their look to 3 colors or to use a template.

Some of the documentation was best delivered in .html format while other worked best in .pdf format, which was similar to how paper copies look. The result was that every department had its own personality. Since most employees

would mainly access information in their own department, they could easily tell when they were in the wrong location.

To make mountains of procedures easy to find online, a paper on the shop floor listed the operation numbers that employees needed to complete their tasks. The number of each operation was made clearly visible on or within a layer of the department's home page. (For ergonomic reasons, employees don't do the same job all the time.)

Introducing Graphics

To make the site easy to navigate for non-English speaking employees, the team added pictures and diagrams at every opportunity. Blount later hired a co-op Web programming student who helped design icons and other items.

The Results

Ben knew that employees were using the intranet when they started saying things like 'Shouldn't this (memo, data, document) go online?' and 'I can't find this online.'

Many other unforeseen benefits came about. The process of changing one's address or license plate number with Human Resources was greatly improved once it moved online. Employees were now able to track their vacation hours and the training courses they still needed to complete internally.

The Web site is constantly evolving. When an employee can't find something, even when it's there, the Web contributors seek and implement a solution. Blount will continue to add content and, to automate processes, simplifying what they can.

Just how successful is this intranet? Productivity goes up every year. Efficiency go up every year. It's hard to tell why. What Ben does know is that the Web site serves the need of its users. It works. ♦

About Marisa Latin

Marisa has been a technical writer for over ten years and is currently at Inscriber. She lives with her lively family and long list of pets. In her spare time, you can find her seeking nature's wonders and capturing 'life' on camera.



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Recap of E-Learning Webinar

by Kasia Novak, Quill Contributor



The STC telephone workshop, "Breaking Into E-learning", was presented by William Horton. The target audience for this workshop included those seeking employment in e-learning—either full time or part time—and employers wanting to learn how to interview for e-learning positions.

The market demand for skilled manpower in the field of e-learning should alert us technical communicators to potential career opportunities that may not be as far away from home as we may think. Not long ago, advanced computer technologies let us offer our customers online documentation. It did not take us long to learn proper software tools and use appropriate writing styles to meet the demand for online documentation. A similar transition may take place if we want to move to e-learning.

In his presentation, W. Horton provided a good overview of e-learning and supplemented it with useful tips for researching the subject. This summary should make you want to learn more about e-learning.

What is E-learning?

E-learning uses information and communication technologies to create learning experiences. The need for e-learning is most evident in education (online universities, colleges, public education), government (internal training), volunteer organizations, and software companies, but the potential demand is not limited to these sectors. Practically any training documentation is a candidate for e-learning. To find opportunities, take a close look at your current job or research other departments responsible for education and training. You may notice many opportunities for e-learning.

Recognizing Potential E-learning Job Ads

The e-learning job titles are neither precise nor standardized, therefore read the job description to uncover the required skill set. E-learning positions may be advertised as:

- Media Specialist
- Instructional Designer (writes instructions)
- E-learning Producer (implements instructions)
- Performance Technologist

- Trainer
- Graphic Designer
- Document Specialist

Some of the advertised positions may not sound familiar at all, so is there a common ground between e-learning and online documentation?

Comparing E-learning to Online Documentation

E-learning	Online Documentation
Educates	Provides information
Prepares people to solve their own problems by offering skills, concepts, and principles.	Solves immediate problems by providing facts, figures, and procedures.
Long-term retention is critical.	Clarity and completeness is critical.

The difference between e-learning and online documentation is similar to comparing a university course with a workshop. In the long run, the principles you have learned in university will benefit many life disciplines, whereas the workshop will give you a set of skills for immediate use in a particular discipline.

Conducting a workshop and teaching a university course require two drastically different styles. A workshop facilitator tells participants what to do to meet a specific goal, while a university professor teaches the students how to solve their own problems, which are not limited to any specific industry. Therefore, teaching is more complex than telling, and we, as technical communicators, have both skills in our portfolio. So, what else do we need to break into e-learning?

Roadmap from Paper-Based Documentation to E-learning

If you work mostly with paper-based documentation, switching to e-learning requires you to sell your idea to management, negotiate with decision makers and technical experts, and do a lot of planning, implementing, and testing by yourself. Here is a condensed list of some of the hurdles you may have to face.

- Sell radical-sounding ideas to conservative management.
- Negotiate with impatient and resistant subject-matter experts, server administrators, and media producers.
- Cope with tight deadlines and thrice-squeezed budgets.
- Admit that your bright idea did not work and scramble to recover.

- Test and refine.
- Build and integrate media to create learning experiences.
- Prescribe learning experiences to accomplish each objective.
- Select a strategy: informational, behavioral, cognitive, or constructive.
- Catalog the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learners must acquire (objectives).
- Identify precise learning goals.

Researching E-learning – Recommended Authors

Whether you look at in-house or outside opportunities, be prepared to speak the e-learning lingo, recognize e-learning gurus, and identify authoring tools.

Benjamin Bloom

Benjamin Bloom classified the levels of thinking, which are important in the processes of learning. This became a taxonomy that included the three domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective.

Robert Gagné

According to R. Gagne, there are nine events that activate processes needed for effective learning.

All lessons should include this sequence of events:

1. Gain attention
2. Inform learner
3. Stimulate recall
4. Present information
5. Provide guidance
6. Elicit performance
7. Provide feedback
8. Assess performance
9. Enhance retention

Howard Gardiner

H. Gardiner defined multiple intelligences, which include:

1. Linguistic

2. Logical-mathematical
3. Spatial
4. Musical
5. Kinesthetic
6. Interpersonal
7. Intrapersonal

Donald Kirkpatrick

Kirkpatrick's book, *Evaluating Training Programs*, became a widely used and popular model for the evaluation of training and learning.

The four levels of Kirkpatrick's evaluation model measure:

1. Reaction of student - what they thought and felt about the training
2. Learning - the resulting increase in knowledge or capability
3. Behaviour - extent of behaviour and capability improvement and implementation/application
4. Results - the effects on the business or environment resulting from the trainee's performance

Using the E-learning Industry Lingo

ADDIE

Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate. The ADDIE instructional design model is a basic model that holds true for any type of learning, including Web based.

AICC

The Aviation Industry CBT (Computer-Based Training) Committee (AICC) is an international association of technology-based training professionals. The AICC develops guidelines for aviation industry in the development, delivery, and evaluation of CBT and related training technologies.

LCMS= LMS+CMS.

LMS - Learning Management System's objective is to simplify the administration of learning/training programs within an organization.

CMS

Content Management System is a term commonly used in the online publishing industry. Its objective is to simplify the creation and administration of online content

(articles, reports, pictures, ad banners, etc.) used in publications.

SCORM

The Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) standard allows compliant e-learning content to be deployed on any Learning Management System (LMS) and assembled with other SCORM-compliant e-learning content to create a course that brings together best-of-breed learning components. Reusability, interoperability, and extensibility have arrived in the area of e-learning.

SWF

Macromedia's Shockwave Flash

Recognizing the E-learning Authoring Tools

Some of the most popular technologies suitable for e-learning include:

- Macromedia: Authorware, Captivate, Flash
- Microsoft: PowerPoint
- Outstart: Trainersoft
- Sum Total Systems: ToolBook

Considering a University Course in E-learning

If you want to go to school, be prepared for two years training and a \$20,000 to \$40,000 price tag. To pick a university, ask graduates what positions they hold. Check e-learning experience of faculty and ask recent grads how well the school prepared them. You may also ask potential employers which universities they respect. After graduation, you may end up teaching e-learning.

Recommended Books

If you like to self-study, or you would like to do more research about e-learning, here is the list of recommended books.

- Marc Rosenberg, e-Learning (high-level business perspective)
- William Horton, Designing Web-Based Training (design of courses, topics, and activities)
- William & Katherine Horton, E-Learning Tools and Technologies (hardware and software at all levels)
- Betsy Bruce, eLearning with Dreamweaver MX (typical how-to)

- Ruth Clark & Richard Mayer, e-Learning Science of Instruction (research basis for good design)

See other books by Michael Doyle or Garin Hess.

Recommended Conferences in the E-learning Industry

Conferences are gold mines that offer not only seminars but opportunity to make contacts within the industry. They are highly recommended for anyone who seriously thinks about getting into e-learning. Most popular sponsors and their conferences are listed as follows.

VNULEARNING.COM

VNULearning.com's world-class conferences, expositions and e-newsletters focus on job-related, employer sponsored training and education in the working world. VNULEARNING sponsors two great e-learning conferences: IDI (Instructional Design Institute) and Training Conference and Expo.

The eLearning Guild

The eLearning Guild is a Community of Practice for designers, developers, and managers of e-learning. Through the member driven community they provide high-quality learning opportunities, networking services, resources, and publications. The eLearning Guild sponsors the eLearning Producer conference.

ISPI

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) is the association dedicated to improving productivity and performance in the workplace. ISPI represents more than 10,000 international and chapter members throughout the United States, Canada, and 40 other countries.

ASTD

The American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) sponsors a TechKnowledge conference.

Advanstar Communications

Advanstar is a worldwide business information company serving specialized markets with high quality information resources and integrated marketing solutions. Advanstar sponsors a TechLearn conference.

Tips for Overcoming Stereotypes During a Job Interview

Getting an interview may be challenging, but be prepared to be stereotyped, especially if the interviewer is not an expert in the technical communication field.

The stereotypes may be both positive and negative, but it is the latter ones you should be prepared for.

Positive stereotypes

- Can write clearly
- Can deal with electronic media
- Comfortable with technical content
- Avoids "art for art's sake"
- Understands modular design

Tip: Just briefly confirm these stereotypes.

Negative stereotypes

How do you prove these stereotypes do not apply to you?

- "Press the Start button to start"
- Word bigot
- "They won't let me" and other whines
- Cubicle hermit
- Typo police

Tip: Offer a portfolio, resume, and other evidence that you can do the job.

Meeting a Hiring Manager's Expectations

This is a prioritized list of skills and attitudes of hiring managers.

1. Meet commitments
2. Communicate in multiple media
3. Quickly learn new subjects
4. Sell ideas to others
5. Know learning theory & research
6. Design computer games
7. Learn new authoring tools
8. Write error-free prose
9. Write computer programs

Demonstrating a Professional Skill Set During an Interview

When you apply for an e-learning position, be prepared to:

- Pass an instructional design test
- Prove you can do an internet research on an industry buzz-words (see a sample research test following this list)
- Have your own Web site with an online portfolio and be prepared to talk about plug-ins, interactive objects, and different design and evaluation stages. Include the customer testimonials.

Sample Research Test

Search the Web to find the answers to the following questions. For each question, record the answer and the URLs you accessed to find the answer.

1. Which processor is used in the fastest IBM ThinkPad computer available?
Answer: URLs:
2. How many Japanese Language courses are offered by Audible.com?
Answer: URLs:
3. Who founded SumTotal Systems? Answer: URLs:
4. Are the Porsche Cayenne and Volkswagen Touareg based on the same chassis? (List three pieces of evidence for your answer) Answer: URLs:
5. In what file format does Napster deliver songs? Answer: URLs:
6. In what countries does Ericsson have sales offices? Answer: URLs:

Summary

To get a job in e-learning, you should:

1. Prove you can do the job
2. Learn to design instruction
3. Create a portfolio
4. Get active in e-learning communities
5. Manage how others perceive you





About Kasia Novak

Kasia is an editor at Raytheon Canada Limited, a supplier of Air Traffic Management Systems. In her previous positions, she was a technical writer at CheckFree i-Solutions and MKS. Born in Poland, Kasia's interest in books, languages, and technology brought her into the fascinating field of technical communication.

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Membership Quiz



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

So, you're an STC member. Great job—you remembered to renew your membership and for that we thank you. But, do you make the most of your membership? Beyond combing the pages of Intercom, Technical Communication, and the Quill, do you take advantage of the many resources that your membership affords?

New Members

Chris Cumming

Richard Morris

Kasia Novak

Larry Owen

Paul Schaus

Doug Minaker

New Senior Member

Chet Skibinski

Let's find out! Take this quiz:

1. The letters STC are an acronym for:
 - a. Society for Technical Communication
 - b. So totally cool
 - c. Spring took control
2. The last time I attended an STC meeting was:
 - a. Last month
 - b. Last year
 - c. It was so long ago, I can't even remember
3. STC Southwestern Ontario chapter meetings are held:
 - a. The first Tuesday of each month with a few Wednesdays mixed in
 - b. On snowy, wintry days when driving stinks

- c. Meetings? What for?
4. I check the Southwestern Ontario chapter Web site:
 - a. Monthly at www.stc-soc.org
 - b. Bi-monthly
 - c. There's a Web site?
5. An STC telephone seminar / Webinar is:
 - a. A chapter sponsored learning event hosted at a local company.
 - b. A great way to kill an hour and half
 - c. Another way for the phone companies to sell you additional services
6. The 52nd annual STC Conference will be held in:
 - a. Seattle
 - b. Hawaii
 - c. Waterloo

Scores

Give yourself **2** points for every **a** answer, **1** point for every **b** answer, and a fat **0** for every **c** answer.

If you scored between **10 and 12**, you are well informed about the opportunities STC provides for education, networking, and knowledge sharing. You are doing a great job in making the most of your membership.

If you scored between **6 and 9**, you are making an effort to keep informed, but definitely could benefit from a little more participation this month!

If you scored between **0 and 5**, the STC police are on their way to arrest you right now. You are in need of some STC intervention!

Missed Opportunities

Try to attend just one great STC event before summer begins—maybe a telephone seminar / Webinar, or the monthly meeting. Take it a step further and check out the [list](#) of available council positions for the 2005-2006 year.

Volunteers are welcome and needed to help shape the Southwestern Ontario chapter STC .

Getting the most out of your membership is entirely in your hands. Come on out

and join us! ♦



About Leanne Rollins

Leanne recently became a self-employed contractor, escaping management roles for the first time in years. This newfound freedom has allowed Leanne to take on extra-curricular activities such as a more active role in the STC. When not writing or playing with her kids, Leanne enjoys running and soccer.

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Get Your Hot Dogs Here



by [Heidi Marr](#), Past President and Nominations Manager

If you've ever been to a professional baseball game, you've heard the young food vendors chant this famous cry: "Get your hot dogs here!"

The sound, by its nature, makes fans salivate. The want becomes an urgent need and soon you're not only purchasing dogs for the entire family, but also indulging in over-priced snacks and watered-down beer.

Now, with the same intonation, say this with me: "Get your red hot council positions here!"

Admittedly, it doesn't have quite the same ring to it, but it did make you think, didn't it?

There are only three open council positions...so act now!

We need a Hospitality Manager!

If you attended a general meeting this year, you were undoubtedly greeted by Marisa's welcoming smile and friendly words. We'd love for you to take over her monthly post at the door. This position takes minimal effort but provides maximum benefit to our members. All you have to do is buy a few snacks, show up for the meetings (and let's face it, you were going anyway), and greet our guests. It's that simple.

We also need a Competition Manager!

If you've ever had the honour of winning an STC competition award, you'll know you cannot let this post sit empty next year. Why not be part of the team that gets to experience the privilege of bestowing awards on others? This group brings excitement and happiness to several talented technical communicators in our area. We try to run a joint competition with the Toronto chapter and they have already filled this role, so what are you waiting for? Go for it and become the Southwestern Ontario Competition Manager.

Finally, we need a President!

Although it has a fancy title, this role is actually quite manageable (honestly!). With all the fabulous volunteers in other capacities, the President merely has to chair a few meetings, complete a few forms for STC.org, and delegate a few tasks. As President, you will be amazed at the great people you meet, and I

speak from experience—as well as the excellent networking opportunities that will present themselves.

Please e-mail me at pastpresident@stc-soc.org if you are interested in any or all of these positions. I can't wait to hear from you!

Speaking of hot dogs... I hope to see you all at our chapter's [annual BBQ](#) in June.



About Heidi Marr

Heidi works at NCR, Waterloo as an Information Engineering Team Lead for the ImageMark Archive product. She enjoys travelling, camping, long lunches with friends, and beverages on sunny pub patios. At home, she takes advantage of a water-access property by kayaking and canoeing on Puslinch Lake whenever weather and time permit.



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Recap of April's Council Meeting



by [emily layng](#), Secretary/Recorder

Editor's Note: Proceed with caution when reading this article. The reference to great weather might make you sick unless the weather has switched back to warm by the time you read this.

Hello again, fellow Quill readers! Have you been enjoying the nice weather? After a cold winter this is just what we needed.

We were so impressed by the weather on Tuesday that we decided to have our pizza outside. It was very nice out there on the patio, albeit a tad windy near the end. We moved indoors for the meeting portion of the evening and only two topics were on the agenda:

- Nominations
- Barbecue

Nominations

The nominations are going well and we still have a [few spots](#) on the council that could be filled, so if anyone out there is interested, contact [Opal](#) or [Heidi](#) and let them know.

Barbecue News

The barbecue is going to be at the Wellington County Brewery in Guelph this year on June 7th from 7:00 pm to 9:00pm. There will be a tour of the Brewery that starts, just before the picnic starts. This is one of the more popular events, so mark it on your calendar and come ready for some networking and excellently prepared food (by us!).

Hope to see you there! ♦

About emily layng

Emily is currently working at ATS, in Cambridge, and has recently been promoted to Team Leader of Systems 1. As part of a busy group, long days and short weekends are the norm. She has been a technical writer since 1996, and has created documentation for both hardware and software companies. Outside of ATS, she is involved with a local Astrology group that is putting together correspondence courses for learning Astrology.



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Upcoming Events

by [Peter Szabo](#), Program Manager



As usual, we've changed from winter into summer as fast as a super-hero changes from street clothes to a costume. Of course, the first Canadian sunshine and warmth is immediately followed by...sunburns and black flies. But first, we have a few STC events left in our Southwestern Ontario back pocket to make what we do for work a little more interesting.

For our May evening seminar and general meeting, STC member Tim Grantham will be cooking up a technical communication feast as he presents a practical guide to designing documentation. There's our usual STC chapter council meeting, in which the council members enjoy pizza and pop while planning ways to stimulate and inspire technical communicators in the region.

Oh, and in case you're looking for them, we are not offering any STC seminars in May because, well, the STC isn't offering any. So conserve your networking energy and urge to learn for the June barbecue, where you can eat, drink, and merrily discover tips and tricks of the trade from your fellow front line workers.

MAY EVENTS

Tuesday, May 3, 2005: Seminar/General Meeting

Topic: Cooking the Books—A Practical Guide to Documentation Design

Tim Grantham draws on two decades of experience designing, writing, editing, and publishing just about every kind of technical document there is, to get you up to speed on the kinds of information that you need to provide for almost any product. He defines the six basic classes of products and their associated documentation sets—what information those document sets include, how they are structured, and who has to use them—and drills down to take a closer look at designs for two types of documents: the software developer's guide and the hardware service manual.

Time: 7:00 p.m., doors open 6:30 p.m.

Cost: FREE for all.

Location: University of Waterloo (U of W), Davis Centre, Room 1304 [[map](#)].

Tuesday, May 17, 2005: Council Meeting

Time: 6:30-8:30 p.m.

Location: CheckFree i-Solutions, 455 Phillip Street, Waterloo

All members welcome—help your chapter by becoming a volunteer!

RSVP to [Opal Gamble](#).

Tuesday, May 31, 2005: RSVP Deadline for June barbecue

See details that follow.

JUNE EVENTS

Tuesday, June 7, 2005: Annual Year-end Barbecue Networking Event

Time: Brewery Tour: 6:30, Main Event: 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Location: Wellington Brewery—Iron Duke House, 950 Woodlawn Road West, Guelph

Open to members and non-members (including friends and family).

Cost: LOTS FOR FREE—one drink, an optional brewery tour, and great barbecued food and fixings. Additional beer and wine are available at \$1.50 per drink!

RSVP: To plan for the brewery tour and to prepare a sufficient amount of food, we request that you RSVP by May 31 to [Peter Szabo](#) with the following information:

- your name
- the number of any guests you are bringing
- the total number attending the meal
- the total number, if any, attending the brewery tour.

If you have any questions about upcoming chapter events, you have a suggestion for a meeting topic, or you would like to help with any aspect of the barbecue, feel free to e-mail [Peter Szabo](#) (Program Manager).

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



About Peter Szabo

Peter has been a technical writer in one form or another for ten years. For the past five years, Peter has worked for CheckFree i-Solutions, a software firm in Waterloo, and is currently the Manager of Technical Publications.

Born and raised in Toronto, Ontario, Peter moved to Guelph in 1997, where he currently lives with his wife, Irene, and six-year-old son, Taylor. He is working on his first feature-length screenplay.

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Getting and Giving Feedback

by [Debbie Kerr](#), Quill Editor



We often criticize people when they do something wrong, but we don't always take the time to tell people when they have done something right. Ask my children and they will tell you just how true this is! (Sorry kids!)

Chapter-sponsored Feedback and Awards

Even as adults, we still need to hear how we are doing at work or we start to feel like what we do is not being noticed. To enable people to get that feedback (and possibly an award), our chapter has two annual competitions:

- The Heidi Thiessen Memorial award for student technical writing, which is aimed at students from Wilfrid Laurier University, University of Waterloo, and University of Guelph; and
- the Technical Publications Competition, where members and non-members pay to submit technical documents like quick reference guides and manuals so that judges can see how they measure up to specific criteria.

Chapter-initiated Awards for Individuals

In addition to the awards that we give out, there are also awards that we solicit from the STC Head Office for members who we feel are deserving of recognition. This year, our president, with the support of our council, identified two people in our chapter who qualified to receive these awards, due to their years of dedicated service. These awards were issued at our Wine and Cheese event.

The **Distinguished Service Award for Students** was awarded to Sarah-Beth Doner.

The **Distinguished Chapter Service Award** was awarded to Robin Danube, who is receiving the award from Opal Gamble (on the right) in the picture.



Chapter Awards

This year, The Quill received two awards: Distinguished (a mark of 91.5 and above), and Most Improved for chapters with membership counts between 76 to 150.

We were the only chapter in Canada to submit entries, and we finished third

overall in this international competition. This is the first year where the actual marks were included instead of just the level of award that was won.

Awards Available

There are three possible levels of awards, each chapter was required to submit three consecutive issues. Those issues were then judged on very specific criteria and awarded marks out of 100. The following are the approximate ranges that correspond to each of the awards: Merit (71 to 81), Excellence (81 to 91.4), and Distinguished (91.5 to 100). In addition to these awards, a Best of Show is awarded to the top newsletter. The top mark this year was 92.9 and our mark was 91.8. It doesn't get much closer.

The Team

Congratulations to everyone who made this year so successful. I couldn't have done it without my team of experts: Opal Gamble, technical and layout advisor; Margie Yundt, copy editor; and Martin Eisenloeffel, illustrator—the person who creates the line art.

The Contributors

In addition to the team, I also want to thank anyone who has ever contributed to the newsletter whether you are a feature writer or a one time contributor. Without you, there would be no newsletters.

It's been a great year! My heartfelt thanks goes out to each and every one of you. ♦

About Debbie Kerr

In the 20 years that Debbie has been writing documentation, she has worked in a variety of industries: government, retail, software, and insurance. She is currently employed at The Economical Insurance Group in Kitchener writing design specifications.

Debbie has been a member of the STC since 1994 and has held several council positions.

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Seminar Shatters Ancient Myth

by Susan E. Smith, Quill Contributor



Don't believe everything you read. And definitely don't believe everything you hear. That was the first lesson we learned from Jean-luc Dumont during his April 20th telephone seminar, "Magic Numbers", held at CheckFree in Waterloo.

Most of us are familiar with the "7 + or – 2 rule". This rule says that for any list, slide, or menu, you can include five, seven, or nine items, and the user will be just fine with it.

Well, turns out it's not quite that simple.

The Origin of the Magic Numbers

So where did this rule come from, anyway? According to Dumont, it was derived from Dr. George Miller's 1956 Psychological Review article, "The magical number seven, plus or minus two: some limits on our capacity for processing information". After reading this article, Dumont concluded that it has been misinterpreted all along. In his phone seminar, Dumont gave us his revised interpretation of Dr. Miller's research, along with some practical suggestions for presenting information that users can manage.

The 7 + or – 2 Myth: What George Miller Actually Meant

Miller's paper describes the results of a series of experiments involving ring tones (as in, one tone tells you your car door is open, a different one tells you your keys are in the ignition, another tells you your lights are on, and so forth). He tested to see how many different tones a person could remember and identify.

Subject testing produced the following conclusions:

- 3 tones – remembered easily (no errors)
- 4 tones – a few errors
- 5 tones or more – frequent errors

If you plot the results on a graph, you get a line that is straight at first, then curves towards a horizontal line (an asymptotical limit).

So where does 7 + or – 2 come from? It's a math thing. You take the mean (2.6) and the standard deviation (0.6) from Miller's data, and you plug them into some equations, and you come up with 7 + or – 2. Take my word for it. That's as technical as I want to get.

The number of items that can be remembered without error is not all that's important. The category of information should also be considered when determining a numerical limit.

Getting Around the Limit: Miller's More Useful Lessons

The true limit, it seems, is lower than we thought. Fortunately, there are ways around it. Miller proposed these strategies:

- Use relative judgments, rather than absolute ones. For example, use a graph to show size relative to a scale and to other measurements.
- Group related items together wherever possible (as is often done with menus, or links on a Web site). This gives the information a visual structure so that users can process it more easily. Another example is taking a large number like 6000000 and adding spaces to it (6 000 000). This lets you immediately see the structure, and you know instantly what the number is, without counting the zeros.

In addition, Dumont recommends that you:

- Use a book's table of contents as a way to quickly convey the structure of the document, rather than providing an exhaustive list of the topics within. The index does that, and does it very well. The contents should serve a different purpose. Keep it to two pages if possible by leaving out the lower-level entries so that it reveals the book's structure at a glance.
- Vary several stimuli concurrently as a way to encode the same information. For example, at an intersection, you see both a stop sign and a white line painted on the road. This is called effective redundancy. Giving the same message twice, in two different ways, helps to reinforce it. It also means that if one of the stimuli is not available (e.g., snow covers the line on the road), the message is still there.
- Use a sequence of absolute judgments instead of a single, more complex judgment. More simply put, this means chunking. For example, if you have nine items in a list, present them as three groups of three items.

Upper Limits Revisited: There Is Magic Everywhere

Three is the most magical number of all, because humans can look at a grouping of three things and instantly take in the fact that there are three, without having to stop and count. Three opens up a new dimension, and introduces a middle ground.

Five is also a magical number because it is the span of attention up to which humans can process globally. Five is a useful upper limit on the number of items in any list.

To ensure global processing, Dumont recommends these limits:

- Limit the number of items to five per group (upper limit).
- Limit the number of levels to three (a nice number for any grouping).
- Include no more than two levels in an overview; also use two for effective redundancy.

Beware of extrapolation: don't carry research over to where it does not apply. And, above all, don't believe everything you read. ♦

About Susan E. Smith

Susan is a former editor of this newsletter who enjoys hiking, writing, photography, gardening, pie-baking, reading, movies, cats, tea, chocolate, and spending time with her friends. If you see her, ask her how that novel is coming along. If enough people ask, it just might make her feel guilty enough to actually start writing it. At last count, her combined lifetime income from non-technical writing and photography was \$240.25. For now, at least, she plans to keep her day job at NCR.

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Freelance 101: Chronicles for the self-employed



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

January 4, 2005 was a momentous day in my life. I was 'restructured' out of my full-time job, set loose upon the world with nothing but time to reflect upon what I should do next.

For years, I had considered freelancing, casting away the constraints of captive employment and flying free to seek out individual assignments wherever the wind took me. I talked about this idea to my friends and family, but in reality, I was all talk. Then, a decision was made for me, and I was handed a gift—the chance to put all my talk into action and see if I could truly make a go of freelancing. And so, I did it.

I'm writing these chronicles for those of you who wonder if this freelancing gig is really all it's cracked up to be. Each month, I'll share the successes, the mistakes, and the lessons learned as I get my business up and running. I hope you enjoy the ride!

Questions to ask yourself before you take the plunge

Can I handle the financial risk?

If you have a family to support, giving up a full-time gig not only means giving up a steady salary, it also means giving up benefits and any nice little bonus cheques the company doles out. You need to have at least two months operating experiences set aside to sustain your lifestyle. In the event of a dry spell, you'll then have those two months to find more freelance work or find a full-time job. Getting that first contract is a huge win, but don't forget that it takes hard work and commitment to source out clients and keep them.

Best case scenario—get restructured out of your job, collect a tidy severance, and then you'll have a nest egg to provide that little bit of security!

Can I handle the emotional risk?

Branching out on your own is a lonely business at first. Since it's your brainchild, the onus is entirely on your shoulders to put together a plan, execute it, and consistently deliver on it.

Not only that, but I've found it tough to work pretty much in isolation most days. If you're used to an office environment, you might miss the ability to head to the coffee maker for some human interaction. My dog and I have a lot of

conversations, and while she is smart, she's not quite the conversationalist my co-workers were.

If you're a very social creature (which I admittedly am not), you can arrange on-site work arrangements with your clients, schedule lunches with friends each week, or hit the mall at lunch simply to be near people. Since I have two small children, I tend to enjoy the quiet that my home office affords, but it's definitely not for everyone.

Do I have enough experience?

Throughout my full-time career, I've also taken on freelance work. As my career steered into management roles, I became a little concerned about losing my tech writing know-how. So, I'd prepare online help or training material by the light of the moon just to keep my writing skills current. By doing this, I learned a few things. First, I had the discipline to work odd hours to get the job done. Second, I loved to learn about new technologies and subject matter. Third, the money could be terrific.

But clients hire contractors for very specific jobs. They won't train you or invest in any time you need to get up to speed on their product. You need to walk in and be the 'expert' not only about professional writing, but also about tools, techniques, and timing. These are things you learn from experience, and you need enough work experience under your belt to lend an air of authenticity to your skills.

Do I have the chutzpah to network and cold call?

Unfortunately, jobs don't just fall from the sky. It really does take work to put yourself out there. As soon as I made the decision to freelance, I made a list of friends, acquaintances, former employers and co-workers. I then let everyone on that list know I was freelancing, either by phone, e-mail, or over lunch. I had so many lunches with old acquaintances in those first few weeks that I gained about seven pounds! These lunches netted me two jobs, so they paid off despite the extra weight.

Cold calling is so hard. I am not a shy person at all, but something about picking up that phone and putting yourself at the mercy of some stranger is heart-rending. The funny part is that people are fundamentally nice, and they won't generally be mean or nasty if you get quickly to the point. I made just two cold calls in those first few weeks, and I netted interviews for both of them. One turned into a job offer, but alas, it was a full-time job offer. (Look for more about over-selling your services in a later installment of the chronicles.)

"Do or do not. There is no try."

Yup, Yoda said it best. Once I took the plunge, I determined to give it my all. That said, in the weeks after losing my job, I applied to a select few full-time job postings just to cover my bases. In the back of my mind, I knew freelancing was really what I wanted, but I also needed the reassurance that someone, somewhere, valued my skills on a full-time level. It seems silly now, but restructuring is also rejection, and my pride took a hit. Having a few full-time job offers renewed my confidence, and now there's no looking back.

Next month, I'll chronicle the fine art of cold-calling—how to pick the targets, how to position your pitch, and how to follow through and seal the deal. ♦

About Leanne Rollins

Leanne recently became a self-employed contractor, escaping management roles for the first time in years. This newfound freedom has allowed Leanne to take on extra-curricular activities such as a more active role in the STC. When not writing or playing with her kids, Leanne enjoys running and soccer.



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News from STC Head Office



The following are two articles that were in the March issue of *Tieline*, the Chapter Leaders' Newsletter.

STC Election Results

President Suzanna Laurent

First Vice President Mike Bates

Second Vice President Paula R. Berger

Treasurer William C. Wiese

Director Cynthia C. Currie

Director Sherry J. Michaels

Director John V. Hedtke

Nominating Committee Michelle A. Didier

Nominating Committee Martha K. Sippel

Links to Chapters and SIGS Posted

To encourage the exchange of information among STC communities, the Online Information SIG has posted an [updated list of links](#) to community Web sites. Originally compiled by Thomas P. Barnett, Phoenix chapter webmaster, the list was recently updated by Ann L. Wiley, manager of the Online Information SIG. The list gathers on one Web page links to chapter, Society SIG, and chapter SIG Web sites. Using this page, Society leaders can easily catch up on news from other STC communities. Thanks to Tom and Ann for providing such a valuable resource!

Nominating Committee Seeks Candidates for Society-Level Positions in 2006

Would you like to help STC remain a vital organization? You—and other members whom you know and respect—can perform this important function by being a candidate for a Society-level position in 2006.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Are you good at listening to and implementing ideas?
- Do you think you can help direct and administer Society-level activities?
- Would you like to represent our membership on ceremonial occasions?
- Could you help coordinate an array of programs beneficial to our profession?

If your answers are "yes," tell the STC nominating committee that you would be interested in running for office. If you know another member who should be considered for a position on our international board, please add that person's name, too.

A healthy board needs a combination of seasoned Society leaders and new senior members (those with at least five years of STC membership). So whether you're a veteran member or a new senior member, consider stepping forward.

The nominating committee will consider all recommendations as it draws up the 2006 slate of candidates. Part of the committee's process involves contacting potential candidates to confirm that they are interested in running for STC office.

The members of this year's nominating committee are [Mary R. Wise](#), manager, Washington, DC chapter; [John P. Garison](#), Boston chapter; [Hillary Hart](#), Austin chapter; and two others to be determined in this year's election. Please feel free to discuss your ideas with any of these people.

Open Positions and Qualifications

In the STC year ahead, the nominating committee will be developing a slate of candidates for the following positions:

- Second vice president
- Secretary
- Director for Region 2 **or** at-large director (see note below)
- Director for Region 3 **or** at-large director (see note below)
- Two nominating committee members

Note: The two director positions listed currently represent Regions 2 and 3. However, a proposed amendment to the STC Bylaws would change all director positions to at-large director positions. The amendment is currently being voted on; results will be known in late April. Those interested in running for the director positions should wait until the results of the current election have been announced to find out whether they may run for at-large or regional director positions.

All candidates must be senior members. Candidates for second vice president must have extensive leadership experience, preferably in positions at the Society level. Candidates for secretary should have strong communication skills and leadership experience at the chapter, SIG, or regional level.

Candidates for director should have a history of successful STC leadership, preferably at the chapter, SIG, or regional level. Nominating committee candidates should have excellent judgment about people and wide acquaintance with members at all levels of the Society.

The nominating committee welcomes your suggestions about potential candidates for the positions listed here. If you think that you or someone you know should be considered, please fill out the accompanying form and return it to STC by August 1, 2005.

Alternatively, members attending STC's 52nd Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, May 8-11, may turn in their forms at the program booth in the south lobby of the Washington State Convention and Trade Center.

Candidates for Society Office

Check the appropriate box below and provide the necessary information.

- I would like to be considered for the office listed below.
- I would like to recommend the person listed below for the office listed here.

Office: _____

If you would like to be considered for office—or would like to recommend another member—please enter the appropriate information below.

Potential candidate's

name: _____

Address: _____

Daytime phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Filling out this form is only a preliminary step in the nomination process. Additional information will be sent to you or the person you recommend. Please remember that when STC members consent to be candidates, they do not automatically become candidates.

Please return a copy of this form by August 1, 2005, to the following address:

Society for Technical Communication

Attn: Nominating Committee

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View from the other side...of finding her way



by [Nancy Halverson](#), Feature Writer

Missing Words

'Minging'... I think that's one of the major omissions from my North American English. "Eewww, minging!" It's an expression of disgust, like finding moldy bread. Another one that I missed out was 'kip', which means nap or sleep. "I'll grab a kip on the sofa."

Another one that I particularly like (although I can't seem to get away with using it—I just sound too weird) is skiving. "He's skiving off today—watching snooker instead". It means that someone's shirking their duty, or playing hooky.

Signs...a Whole Other Language

Anyone who plans on travelling in England should also know about the navigation etiquette. Signs aren't very big or prominent. Most appear on walls of houses or other buildings, and are fairly small. It's not predictable where the signs will appear—they may be placed high up, or they may be low on a stone fence. There also may be ivy or tree branches obscuring the sign.

You'll also find that most of the emphasis is on where you're going, with no confirmation of where you are. I miss the signs on the roads every once in a while that tell you which road you're on.

You always need to plan your route knowing what the highway numbers are that you might be using, and the towns that you might be going through. This gives you more chances of seeing something that you might be able to follow. The road signs tell you where you might get to if you stay on the road long enough, not necessarily the next place that you might pass through. It's just a little bizarre for a North American. I find it confusing still that street names are basically irrelevant in directions—the route may be named, but few people actually know it or refer to the name or number.



Landmark Referral Communication

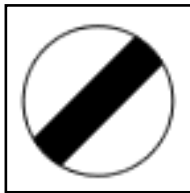
I think it's a referral communication method, or metaphorical, if you will. The landmarks mean more than the actual names, so you'd hear about the Blahblah roundabout, and be told that you had to take the second exit. The Blahblah

roundabout of course would be famous because of Whatever landmark, but it wouldn't be obviously signed—so you never actually can confirm that you're at the Blahblah roundabout. Maybe it is signed, but there's so much information that you need to read, absorb, and analyze as you approach, you never see the name of the actual roundabout.

Street names change every few metres anyway, so I guess it's just too much information to take in.

It's also bizarre to read some of the signs where 'everyone' knows the meaning: "Caution, site entrance", or "Access only". A 'site' entrance is actually a construction site with a temporary entrance, while 'access' means only emergency vehicles have access.

Other Signs of the Time



Of course, this sign should be obvious to everyone. It means that the speed limit is whatever it should be for the type of road you're driving on. Of course, you have to know what the relevant speed limit is, and figure out what type of road it is that you're on.

Another example is this one, which means no stopping. It appears on the sides of the highways mostly, although sometimes you may one on a country lane.



This may seem to be a weird point, but it has relevance for us as communicators. Basic, daily and crucial information cannot rely on knowledge of secondary information. Make it plain, make it obvious, and confirm it as frequently as possible, especially if the use is given a choice to leave that path.

Pubs...a Navigation Method

Road trips don't figure too prominently in our lives at the moment, but whenever one arises, we still spend most of our trip planning trying to find all the possible pubs that we might have to pass by. Most people seem to navigate by pubs as they're frequent landmarks. And yes, we spend a lot of time lost—our kids still ask us if we know where we're going when we set off on a car journey. We of course reply "no, we don't know, but we'll get there when we get there."

Basically, it's our motto for life.

A Zoo at ZOO

My life at ZOO has been manic the past few weeks—last minute changes before

release of our latest version, and unanticipated requests for platform changes for the docs have meant that I've been burning a few candles at a few ends. I must admit that I'm tired, and haven't had to work at this kind of pace for a while.

You know those days when you walk into the office and log in and put your head down for the next eight or more hours. It's the little breaks that I miss the most—a brief conversation about something other than what I'm working on. I also miss getting e-mails or visits from people who weren't asking for another document to be created, edited, output, or revamped. Okay, I'm kvetching a bit—maybe even exaggerating (not much, really!)—but believe me, I really needed a weekend off.

Unfortunately, I've had to bring work home even this weekend (which is a long weekend here in Britain—another celebration of the banks... no longer called the May Day weekend, it's only called a Bank Holiday). It's a sign that our software is sparking some major interest, and that we need to put more resources out there for prospective and existing customers. Both things are great—I'm just wondering when I should be asking for more resources for developing this information. I don't want to jump the gun, but I also don't want to have to live my life at this pace forever. I guess it'll take more than a few weeks at a frenetic pace before I can reasonably ask for more staff.

On the STC Front

We're now preparing for our STC UK annual general meeting. It's in June, in London—at the British National Library of all places! We're doing another day-long group of seminars. I guess it's as if we replace the monthly meetings with a few big sessions all at once. I'm not even sure what all the topics will be, except that we'll squeeze our AGM into a short session.

As I'm moving into the position of first vice-president this year, I imagine I'll be much busier with STC activities. The way they work the nominations here makes some sense—the president is in place two years before their term starts—they serve as second v-p, then as first v-p. After their term they serve another year as a mentor in the role of past-president. We're hoping to begin a few years of invigorating growth in our membership and activities, and have already begun discussing the ways we can achieve this.

I know that there's a lot that an active STC can contribute to anyone's career. I'm interested in bringing together different organizations that may cross-pollinate our chapter. It's a shame that we aren't able to be in the same organization. I'm not interested in stealing members, but it would be great to know that we're contributing to the communications needs of different

professions.

Spring Has Sprung

Oh, and yes, spring is in full swing here in Britain—flowers are bursting out; trees are full of blossoms; and the grass desperately needs cutting. The trees are almost in full leaf, and it's even getting warmer. There are so many shades of green around that you cannot count them. It's amazing what all this rain can bring—hopefully it's a good sign! ♦

About Nancy Halverson

Nancy grew up in Toronto, but has lived in Ottawa, Melbourne, Waterloo, and now Sheffield. She has travelled through the South Pacific, Australia and Indonesia, which is where she met her husband, Ryan Wilson (another Canadian), along the way.

A career switch introduced her to the STC in 1997. Her writing experience has included several contract positions and a position at Inscriber for several years. She has two daughters and has been living in England for two years.

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