



the Quill

the Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC



NOVEMBER 2005 (Volume 17 Number 3) [About the Quill](#)

In This Issue

President's Message

This month, Debbie Kerr, our chapter's President, explores what it is that technical writers do. See if you agree. ♦

Those Little Bar Charts

Opal Gamble, Past President and now webmaster extraordinaire, explains those surveys on our chapter home page. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease (and we want you to squeak). ♦

Card Sorting 101

Read about how card sorting can change your life...or at least your website, software, or document design. Sherry McMenemy visited our general meeting in October to let us in on just one of her little usability secrets. ♦

Freelance 101: Chronicles for the Self-Employed

This month Leanne Rollins discusses her temptation into full-time employment verses contract work. Find out whether she decides to turn in her invoices for a regular paycheque, and the reasons behind her choice. ♦

Extreme Makeover?

No, this is not about plastic surgery or a visit to The Home Depot. We are talking communication renovations—and we want your stories. Read all about it. ♦

Director-Sponsor's Message: We've Got Something to Brag About

Cindy Currie, Director-Sponsor of Region 1, updates us on the latest Board of Directors' meeting and the latest initiatives to provide value to STC members. This is also the time for nominations for all kinds of STC accolades—don't miss out! ♦

The Editor's Message

Greetings and welcome to the November issue!

The things that go through my head on the drive in...

Autumn, and the beautiful fall colours I see every morning on my commute into work, reminds me that change is all around us.

Change is inevitable, and usually means there is something better waiting around the corner. You may not think so at the time, but when you reflect back after the dust settles and everything's been figured out, you might think "huh, it all worked out for the best."

Out of the box

As the world changes and technology evolves, so is the way we communicate in the world. As writers, graphic artists, and trainers—whatever you want to call us—we need to stay in touch with our audiences and adapt to their changing needs.

This may mean stepping back from our comfortable routines and taking a whole new look at not only how we do things, but the tools we use to do them. I know, sounds like a recipe for a headache. Well then, you'd better get out the Tylenol. You know what they say, "no pain, no gain!"

Yep, time to think OUTSIDE the technical writing box, so to speak.

The Challenge...

I bet there are many stories out there about how you changed at least a little

[View from the Other Side](#)

Nancy talks about the work life, home life, and the challenges of language. ♦

[Council Meeting Minutes](#)

Read about what your council discussed at its October meeting. Hot topics included Education Day and PR presentations. Would you like to help? ♦

[Membership Update](#)

Leanne laments a missed opportunity to learn about card sorting, and challenges the veteran chapter members (you know who you are) to share some information about themselves. I double dare you! ♦

[General Meeting Announcements](#)

Read about what is coming for the November and December meetings (Can you say DITA, and then Structured FrameMaker and XML, oh my?). ♦

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

corner of your world, and made a difference to your audience. You may have even learned a few things (or tools) along the way. Well, we would love to hear your story! Why not share how you took a pile of lemons and made a delicious jug of lemonade? It's all about the makeovers this month, and we want to hear from you. Please don't be modest.

The Quill wants you!

Have any makeovers or otherwise interesting bits of information you want to share? Send your articles, suggestions, and comments to me, Margie, at quill@stc-soc.org.





About The Quill

by [Margie Yundt](#), 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. In **2004**, we won Most Distinguished, Most Improved, and STC Best of Show.

Publication Policies and Frequency

The Quill is published monthly, with the exception of January, so there are nine issues published from September 2005 to June 2006.

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 19
November	October 17
December	November 21
January	No Quill
February	January 23
March	February 20

April	March 20
May	April 17
June	May 22
July or August	No Quill

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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

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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

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President's Message: What's in a name?



by [Debbie Kerr](#), President

While a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, a technical communicator by any other name may not convey what we really do.

Many of us use the title, "technical writer", because it's the only one that people seem to understand. At least with this title, people know that we write, but, unfortunately, they don't seem to know what else we can do. The problem is that people focus on our writing skills and disregard many of our other skills.

Analyze this...

For example, the other day I asked a co-worker whether her group would need me to work on a project that I had worked on previously. She told me that they would need someone else, a Customer Analyst, who could identify gaps in processes and procedures. I was stunned.

After over 20 years of writing procedures, whether they were part of software manuals or part of policy and procedure manuals, I knew that I could do an analysis of processes and procedures, identify gaps, and recommend changes to those procedures. I had often found holes in processes when documenting functionality. In fact that was my job in several places I had worked previously; the problem was that they assumed because I didn't have the correct title that I did not have the skills needed to perform the job.

Many people don't seem to realize that 50 percent of technical communication involves analysis of some kind. If you are documenting software, you end up analyzing the design and layout to look for inconsistencies, logic flaws, and process improvements. Your analysis may also help you to find ways to explain difficult concepts and functionality. When someone tells you to document something, as a technical communicator, they might as well be telling you to analyze this. To me, they mean the same thing. Maybe a good compromise for a title is **Technical Writer/Analyst**.

Getting a little testy

Another skill you may discover, especially if you are documenting software, is you are a tester. While familiarizing yourself with the software you are documenting, you may find bugs and interface changes that, if fixed, will improve the user experience. Once, I was reporting so many problems that they asked me to take a break for two weeks so that the developer could test the product

himself and make fixes before I looked at the product again. Two weeks later, I started testing again, and I was still finding the same number of errors. It seems that a technical communicator can definitely be testy, in more ways than one. The logic and analytical skills associated with being a technical communicator helps to pinpoint problems that may be accidentally overlooked.

Since testing ultimately improves the customer experience, involves some analysis, and results in better writing, maybe a good title is **Technical Writer/Analyst/Tester**.

Looking good is half the battle

You can create a poster with a great message, but if it doesn't get anyone's attention, no one notices it. Unfortunately, the same is true for what you create as a technical communicator. It's hard enough to get a user to look at the documentation, but if it does not look professional, the chances of a user looking at a manual or help file decreases even further. The professionalism of the presentation also affects the user's perception of the content. Poor presentation of material means the user will not trust the content. In the software industry, this means the call to the help desk that you hoped to eliminate happens anyway.

Design skills are not limited to paper. If you have ever tried to find information on a website or use new software, you can appreciate that good design and navigation determine whether you use the site or the software again. Since you have represented the users' needs for so long, you are able to make design decisions that are also good usability decisions. You have learned and developed a "gut instinct" for what works and doesn't work when trying to communicate to users. You know what information to put where, and you know how to collect that information from users so that you can design products and websites to best suit those users' needs.

Maybe **Technical Writer/Analyst/Tester/Designer** is the title we go with?

Getting down to basics

Part of the problem with deciding on an effective job title is that we fulfill such a wide range of roles. While some of us are writers, others communicate through roles as editors, illustrators, media specialists, and web designers. However, with all our differences, we have some commonality when it comes to the basic tasks that we perform. As technical communicators, we:

- Research to obtain the required information, whether it be interviewing subject matter experts (SMEs) or reading existing information,

- Analyze the collected data and organize it until it is in a logical order, and
- Simplify complex information and present it in a clear and concise way.

This is really the lowest common denominator. You'll notice that I don't say how you present the simplified information. That's where you get into the different media that you might use to communicate the limitless possibilities.

The other basic is the entire reason for doing all this is to help a user. This is why I am proposing User Advocate as a possible job title. I figure that with all the comments I have made over the years to simplify the user interface, to simplify concepts and terminology, to simplify documentation, then I have definitely been representing each user's needs.

Accepting nothing at face value

It's not just others who have a fixed way of looking at us; sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Our own single-mindedness prevents us from seeing how a course or presentation can apply to us. We think of ourselves a certain way, and we fail to see how a meeting or course could possibly apply to us. We have to see what's in it for us.

One example is our most recent general meeting on card sorting. A subject of Card Sorting might have made you ask yourself how recipe cards could possibly help you communicate more clearly. If you came to the general meeting, you would have seen how card sorting could be used to determine the best way to set up a website's navigation. You would have learned about using them to get user feedback. You would have also seen that this same technique could be used for software documentation or software design. Even the small sample of card sorting that we tried during the meeting showed how different types of people might sort the same types of cards. It was an eye-opening experience that demonstrated how a small group of people could sort the same topics in so many different ways.

This meeting was definitely applicable to anyone in the communication field regardless of what media you use to communicate.

In Conclusion

The scope and variety of a technical communicator's role make it difficult to come up with a title to accurately describe what we do. However, the large range of skills that are wrapped up into one role make it more efficient to hire one of us. I would definitely worry less about coming up with a good title and point out to any potential employer that hiring a technical communicator by any kind of name

is truly a "sweet" deal. ♦

About Debbie Kerr (President)

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 Waterloo, where she has stepped out of her traditional role of writing user guides and help files, and now writes a variety of specifications.

Debbie has been a member of the STC since 1994 and has been a council member for many years. Most recently she was The Quill editor for two years.

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Those Little Bar Charts

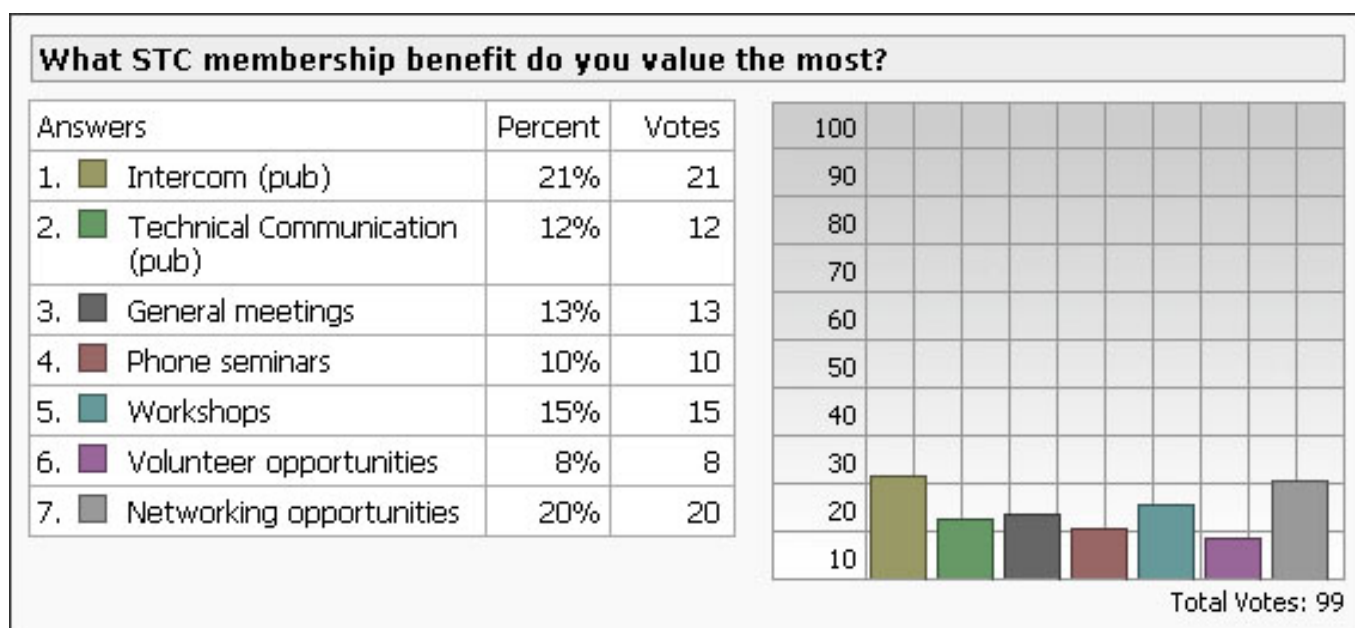


Typically, when the idea of an extensive membership survey comes up at council meetings, we get bogged down on concepts like significant data, valid results, response rates... well, you can see where I'm going with that: it's not terribly exciting.

We're listening!

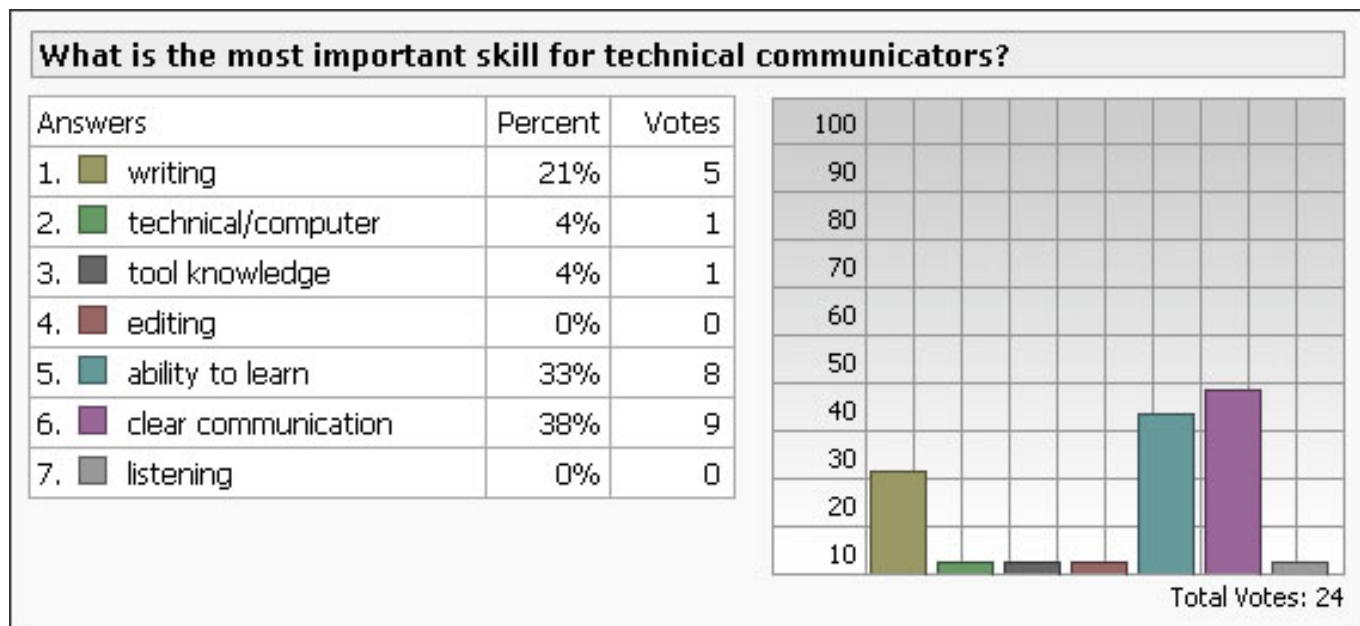
Your chapter leaders really, *really* want to know what you think about our programs, education sessions, and opportunities to give you more value for you membership bucks. While we haven't perfected our ideal survey—and frankly, it might be a few more years until we get that ironed out—we have tried for a few years to get casual information from visitors to our website.

For example, when we asked you which membership benefits you valued the most, here were the results:



While many of the options were deemed important by you, publications and networking were on the top of the heap.

Then, we asked you what skills you thought were most important in a technical writer... by a landslide, clear communication and the ability to learn each earned over 1/3 of the votes with writing not far behind (we're shocked).



It's not all about work

Now, not all of our surveys are serious. This summer, I learned that most of our survey respondees believe that a beer on the patio is the best way to stay cool during the summer—though, an 18% minority believed that hiring an engineer to make fans out of old manuals was the superior method. I also discovered that a general meeting based on a water-fight would probably leave me standing by myself in the middle of a park, since that was the only option that gathered no votes.

The squeaky wheel...

gets the grease. You know the saying, right?

So, that just goes to say that when you respond to our little homepage surveys, you're telling us what you want to see.

For example, when multiple interesting remote seminar topics are offered in a month, we often post the choices in the survey box and ask you to tell us which one you want to participate in.

So far, this method has worked very effectively: you get to hear the topics that interest you, and the council knows we made the best choice for our audience.

These surveys are important. The results can have a big impact on the direction we take in our chapter. For example, our education seminars will be taking place in February, so November is when we have to make a lot of our decisions for the seminars. Whenever a question comes up where we want feedback from our members, we will be posting questions and possible options on our website so that people can vote.

Make sure that you take the time to represent your interests. Please go to our [chapter homepage](#) and vote today!

As usual, if you have any comments about a survey, or about other issues, please [contact](#)

[someone on the STC-SOC council](#). We're always happy to hear from you. ♦

About Opal Gamble

Technical writer, web monkey, and general geek, Opal 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, [Silver Mouse Communications](#).

When she's not doing STC business or working, Opal [races cars](#) and spends a ridiculous amount of mental energy trying to figure out how to go faster.

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October's General Meeting: Card Sorting 101



by Ted Edwins

When I heard the subject of the October General Meeting was to be Card Sorting, I thought, "Finally, something that can help my budding career as an online Texas Hold 'Em Poker player!" But when I read the meeting description and discovered that Sherry McMenemy, manager of RIM's Knowledge Operations team, was going to teach us a quick and cheap method to improve the usability of websites information products, I thought, "Finally, something that can help my budding career as a Usability Expert!"

What is card sorting?

Card sorting is a venerable technique for improving the usability of anything from a website to an online help file to a software GUI to an index. Sherry assured us that card sorting is easy and that it quickly becomes addictive because of the great results you can attain.

Basically, you write examples of things that are put into categories or "buckets", such as "Monthly Newsletter" or "Forgot my password", onto sticky notes or 3x5" note cards. Give the cards to a representative user and let them sort the cards into buckets that make sense to them. Gather the cards at the end of the session and record the results in a spreadsheet. Repeat with as many users as makes sense for your application. At the end you have a road map of how users view your application.

Why use card sorting?

The reasons for using card sorting are many.

- It is a quick and cheap method to test usability. You don't need a fancy lab with mirrors and video cameras.
- Card sorting is best done "offline" in personal interactive sessions, which allows for the "human" factor.
- You can do it on paper or using a computer (though paper is usually the better approach as you tend to get more honest answers)
- It's very flexibility enables you to do a combination of the two methods so that you can do card sorting remotely or person-to-person sessions.

There are a couple of side benefits to card sorting. Firstly, the informal nature of card sorting provides a good way to gather information about your application,

which identifies potential problems or challenges. Secondly, it is often possible to construct personas by watching and listening to users during the session. Sherry said that card sorting often leads to “aha” moments as you watch users go through the process.

Planning a session

Before you can conduct a session, a little forethought is required.

1. **Determine the audience and “job one” of the system to be tested.** Who is going to use to use the application? What work are the users really trying accomplish? How is your application supposed to help them achieve that goal? If you are working on an existing system, document its current structure by preparing a record sheet. A record sheet can be either a spreadsheet that captures the hierarchy of terms or it can be a flowchart that captures the relationships between tasks or functions. It’s not the format that you use that is important; it’s that you capture the exact naming conventions as they are being used. Don’t try to correct terms, even if you think they need correcting. For example, if the user refers to “signing into” the computer, don’t change it to “logging into” the computer.
2. **Line up your participants.** Ideally, the session should be done in person so that you and the users are in the same room. This will impact the number of people to include in the session. “Bribery, such as small gifts, candy, or chocolate help to increase the attendance rate,” said Sherry. How many participants are enough? Jakob Nielsen says 7-9. Boxes and Arrows, a usability blog, says 30-100. Typically, Sherry says her team at RIM uses 20-30. The people that do participate should be representative of the users who will actually be interacting with the product. It is important to ask people who might not normally volunteer. Beware of the “professional” volunteers who want to help out on every project. You must find people who are “fresh” and will give untainted feedback.
3. **Select your topics.** There is a limit to how much work a participant can do in a session, so you must limit the number of topics each participant will process. Boxes and Arrows recommend 30-100. Sherry said that she tries to limit it to 25. The topics selected should be representative of what already exists, or what will be created. If you have time, you could do one round of tests with existing terms, then another round of tests with terms that will be used in the future.
4. **Create at least two sets of cards.** Sherry suggested that you neatly handwrite two sets of cards and number them discreetly. Let the

participants know that the number on the card is for identification only and is no suggestion of order. One set of cards is ordered sequentially (for example, 1-26) and the second set of cards is ordered backwards (26-1) to counterbalance the context.

Conducting a Session

Now that you have your card sets made up and your record sheet ready, it is time to actually conduct a session with actual participants. To help participants feel comfortable, tell them there are no wrong answers and there are no “right” number of piles. Also ask them to tell you what they are thinking while they are placing each card in a pile.

Give the participant a pile of cards and tell them to put similar things together. As participants state why they were ordering the cards a certain way, she likes to write down their thought processes right on the record sheet. Use one sheet for each session. Write down exactly what the participant says, don't try to interpret or correct the terminology that the person uses—be a “scientist” and only observe.

Keep an eye on how the participant shuffles and organizes the cards. Sherry said that it is very interesting to see how different personality types handle the cards. Some people read all the cards, and then sort them. Other people read and arrange each card as it comes up. Still others sort the cards in their hands, then put the piles on the table.

Sherry suggested that you could also experiment with conducting the session in one of two ways. You could have an “open” session, where there are no defined “buckets” for users to sort the cards. Instead, users define the buckets by putting the cards into as many piles as they want. The number of piles determines the number of buckets. When users are done sorting, they print the name of each group on a sticky and put it on that pile.

In a “closed” session, you define the buckets and then ask users to put the cards in each bucket. Each group is already named, and you want to see where the users put the topic on each card.

No matter which method you choose, at the end of the session, or some other convenient time, write the results of the session on the record sheet, and don't forget to write a thank-you note (or email) to each participant!

Collecting and Analyzing Results

Now that you have all the session results captured on record sheets, you must

decide what it all means. Sherry recommends transferring the data from the record sheets to a spreadsheet. Create a column for each category suggested by the participants, if they were allowed to do so. Group category names in a single column if you are highly confident that the meaning is the same, even if there is different wording for the categories.

As you enter the data on the spreadsheet, look for patterns and things you might not have expected. Analyze the results for number and type of categories. Are the categories named using an object- or task-oriented style?

Implementing Results

Using the analysis of your results, map out the information architecture and the navigation structure of your product. Sherry said that at this time you could run a closed card-sorting session to test the buckets or categories.

You must now write a report to provide stakeholders with compelling numbers and trends that were unearthed during the sessions. In the report, sort your inventory of items according to the results of the test. You could also provide a summary of findings to the participants and tell them the next steps of the process.

An important part of the report would be to tell the stakeholders when you're going to start implementing the changes in the product. All the efforts of you and your participants will be wasted if you don't make a concrete effort to actually implement the changes you've recommended.

Measuring Success

After a few months, conduct a different type of user testing on the interface to determine if the both the categories and the items in each category are correct. You can gather this information either through a scenario-based test or a user feedback/focus group. In either case, ask the participants and the stakeholders for feedback on the process. You want to know what went right as well as what went wrong.

Resources

Sherry recommends the following sites for more information about card sorting:

- <http://www.infodesign.com.au/usabilityresources/design/cardsorting.asp>
- http://www.boxesandarrows.com/archives/card_sorting_a_definitive_guide.php

- <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20040719.html>
- <http://www.stcsig.org/usability/topics/cardsorting.html>



About Ted Edwins

Ted Edwins is an independent consultant specializing in software documentation. He is a Past-President of the chapter. In his spare time he continues his futile quest to lower his golf handicap.



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Freelance 101: Chronicles for the Self-Employed



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

The lure of the full-time paycheque

I love the world of freelance writing. For nine months straight, I've enjoyed a steady stream of new, returning, and apparently satisfied clients. Why then, when a very satisfied client presented me with a full-time job offer was I actually tempted? For four days, I agonized over my decision—captive employee or freelance?

Finally, I took a large step backward to really examine my motivation for considering this offer. In the end, my list of pros and cons was heavily weighted towards the pros of freelancing. In order of importance to me, here's why.

1. Fresh new challenges

I am a born problem solver. I've always maintained there's no challenge too big. I'll tackle pretty much anything, even the problems no one else will touch. As a freelance writer, I encounter a new challenge every single time I take on a new project, whether the project is a few days in duration, or several months long, I'm happiest when I'm learning something very technical, very complex, or very problematic.

When I was a captive employee, I got to know the software very well. There was always something new to learn, but there was a lot more time available to learn it, and there was always someone else to rely on if I couldn't figure something out. As a freelancer, I'm hired to be the expert—to solve the problem when no one else can or wants to. In the small software shops, most developers are grateful to have a writer available to tackle the gruesome task of developing the supporting docs. I also like the variety of tasks I am hired to accomplish—everything from installation guides to marketing collateral, to technology articles, to full user guides and help systems. Most small shops also ask me to develop the style sheet as well as the look and feel. From week to week, it's something just a little different, which allows me to fully exercise my skill set and my brain.

2. Lack of politics

Not all office politics are bad, but in a full-time role, politics are constant and inescapable unless you live under a large rock. Unfortunately, I tend to jump

right into the political maelstrom even when I have no business doing so. I'm just too nosey I guess. After many months away from the fun of office politics, I'm still not ready to get back in the game. As a freelancer, I remain blissfully unaware of the political maneuverings within my clients' offices. As far as I'm concerned, everyone gets along, everyone wants to help, and everyone works for the greater good of the project. Period.

The client who offered me the full-time position was actually a remote office that reports to a head office in the U.S. From the first time I set foot in the office, it was immediately apparent that the relationship between the two offices was strained and uncomfortable. Since I was just the freelance writer, this was only an impression. But during an 'interview' it became obvious that the politics were ripe, and you'd better have a whole lot of patience to deal with it. In short, I have very little patience, and what little I have is allocated solely to my poor children.

3. Flexible schedule

Those poor children also run me ragged. To make a long story short, my van is on the road no less than three times a day doing pickup and drop-off from daycare to JK. If you add in my need for at least one hour of exercise every day, there's not a whole lot of time left to work during daylight hours. My schedule is a little wacky, which works for me because I am at my most productive between 7 pm and midnight. But most full-time jobs simply do not offer this level of flexibility, not even if they insist they can.

In this case, my client insisted I only needed to put in an appearance for meetings, and at other times at my discretion. It sounded too good to be true, and that's because it was. How long would it be before I started to feel guilty because I had to duck out in the middle of a meeting, or felt awful because I was out on a run when someone from work needed me immediately? When a client hires a freelancer, the expectation of availability is entirely different. They know I have other clients and other demands on my time. What they care about is not when I perform the work, but the quality of the work and, of course, the timeliness. Best of all, they don't care where I work. Every Friday, I head to Williams on Northfield for a change of scenery, a salad, and a smoothie. I have my laptop out and I'm hard at work in my 'office'. How many full-time employees can do that?

4. Potential income

Money became a pretty important consideration in this decision. My family is moving over the next few weeks, and with a new house comes unforeseen

expenses. The lure of a steady income was almost enough to get me to sign that offer—both my accountant (my husband) and my banker found this prospect appealing. We ran the numbers and realized that in a period of nine months, I have already earned more than my last full-time salary. There's still three months left in the year! Who knows how much more I could earn? The potential of all that lovely work and accompanying lovely money is very appealing. With a full-time job, you're pretty much capped and you know how much you will earn in a given year. I guess I like surprises a little more than I realized.

I have yet to experience a lull in cash flow, but it is bound to happen. Will it be next month or maybe in six months? We decided it was worth the risk. If ever I can't find work for a lengthy period of time, I can try to convince a client to take me on full-time. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

In the end, I decided to turn down the offer for myself and for my family. I'm enjoying myself way too much to sign on full-time, at least for now. My friends tell me they've never seen me so happy in a job. They're right—and I'd have to be certifiable to give it up so early in the game.

Once again, let me know if there is any topic in particular you'd like to me to cover next month. Email me at leanne@leannerollins.com with your input. ♦

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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Extreme Makeovers



Everyone's interested in a makeover. In fact, whole television series are devoted to them. People are being made over. Rooms are being made over. Backyards are being made over. Entire houses are being made over. There are reasons for the popularity of these shows. They enable people to see what they can accomplish with the right team of experts. The worse the starting point, the more extreme the makeover.

Why should our methods of communication be any different?

Case Studies

Have you ever been really pleased at the results of a redesign? Maybe you reworked a website, illustration, manual, brochure, or quick reference guide. Why not show everyone what a difference you made by providing us with a before and after shot so that we can see how it started and the end result? Tell us what you changed and why you changed it. Don't be modest; give us the details about the reaction to the new design, and any benefits that your company may have experienced because of the redesign.

If you have confidential information, and the text is not critical do what you are demonstrating, then substitute the original text with dummy text. We don't want to miss out on your great design ideas just because the text is proprietary. We're visual people. We will get the general idea, even if the original text is not the same.

The Value Proposition

This exercise will enable you to:

1. Learn from mistakes that others have corrected so that you don't have to make those same mistakes yourself.
2. See the things that you need to change, instead of just reading about what to do and not do when laying out pages.
3. Show employers, co-workers, and even friends, what types of things you are capable of doing in your line of work.

Submissions

Please submit your extreme makeovers to quill@stc-soc.org. Remember to

include your before and after pictures, a description of the changes, and the reactions to the changes. The number of submissions we receive will determine how many case studies we publish in The Quill each month. If you have any questions, contact Margie at quill@stc-soc.org or Debbie at president@stc-soc.org. ♦

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Director Sponsor's Message: We've Got Something to Brag About!



by [Cindy Currie](#), STC Region 1 Director Sponsor

I've just recently returned from the September STC Board of Director's meeting* in Denver, where I had the opportunity to meet and work closely with Rob Moran, the STC's new interim Executive Director. It was a great, productive pleasure to do so. Rob's a great guy whose advice and guidance to the STC (albeit short-term) will be invaluable as the STC embarks on a new strategic direction into the future of technical communication. Rob will also advise and consult to STC as we continue the search for a new permanent Executive Director.

Rob's forté is working with associations, such as the STC, on an interim basis to help them bridge the gap between executives and move them in appropriate new directions. He is exactly what the STC needs at this time. Rob is not eligible for the permanent Executive Director position (part of his contract with STC), which is unfortunate for us, but this frees him of personal investment so he is able to focus solely on helping us move forward. And, forward we are going to exciting new places!

Providing Member Value

The STC is making evident its continuing focus on providing member value and membership growth through the following proposed new initiatives:

- **Corporate Value Program**, a new membership option that is designed for companies that have a number of technical communications professionals. The STC Board approved a pilot of this new initiative last month. The initial pilot company is in New York, so we (Region 1) are the test bed for this new program that provides good incentives for companies to pay for the STC memberships of their technical communications employees. I'll provide more information about this pilot program as it progresses.
- **Localized Dues Structure**, which introduces three pricing tiers determined by the market in which an STC member resides. Technical communicators in developing, emerging, and mature markets will pay dues that reflect their local economies and thus their related local costs of living. This will help boost the STC's membership around the world, allowing many more people to invest in their professional futures as technical communicators, and enhancing the Society's global presence and prestige. The STC Board is currently surveying its membership (www.stc.org).

[org/memberlocal101.asp](http://www.stc.org/memberlocal101.asp)) for feedback on this proposed program. Look for details regarding the results of our member survey soon.

Nominations anyone?

The deadline for submitting nomination forms for the elected membership rank of STC Associate Fellow is Friday, October 21! It would be wonderful to see new Associate Fellows emerge from this region in 2006! Many thanks to those of you who took the time and effort required to prepare these forms! Thanks also to those of you who have volunteered to be references in support of the candidates put forward. Vetting of candidates begins shortly after the submission deadline. Candidates will be notified after the January Board meeting.

It's also time to consider nominations for Distinguished Chapter Service Awards. These awards honor a limited number of members from a chapter for outstanding service to the chapter. The ratio of acceptable nominations per year is 1 for every 100 members in a chapter, so 1%. (For communities with fewer than 100 members, 1 nomination is allowable.) If you've got a deserving member or two, please consider nominating them for this prestigious award. Visit http://www.stc.org/awards_DCSA.asp for details on the nomination process and a list of past winners. The deadline for nominations submissions is November 30.

Gearing up for the competition

Many chapters are gearing up for their local competitions now. And the international competition committees are preparing to distribute their Call for Judges, which should be out any minute now. I encourage you to consider applying as an international competition judge this year, particularly those of you who have been involved in local competitions previously. It's a terrific opportunity to ratchet up your STC participation to the Society level, sharing your expertise on a greater scale, networking with members you might not already know, and getting to see what award-winning technical communication looks like from around the globe. If you don't receive the application form, ask your chapter president about it or visit www.stc.org/competitions and access it there.

Rechartered at last

Lastly, congratulations to both the **Rochester** and **Vermont** chapters, whose rechartering documents were approved by the STC Board based on the recommendation from the Rechartering Committee. These two communities are now "officially" rechartered. The Boston Chapter is next as I've just reviewed

their rechartering document prior to its submission to the committee. I do encourage all of you who have not rechartered yet to do so. We have several good sample rechartering documents for you to review (and my continuing offer of assistance, remote or onsite) during this important activity. And, I will devote my next article to more information about rechartering. Stay tuned ...

** The minutes of the September 2005 Board meeting, as well as the January and May 2005 meetings, are available online at <http://www.stc.org/chapterResources.asp>, and all future Board meeting minutes will be posted as well. I encourage you all to read them as the reports are full of details that both members and leaders seem to be looking for frequently. ♦*

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View from the Other Side: Life, the Universe, and Languages



by [Nancy Halverson](#), Feature Writer

When things move slowly, they're really slow, but when things move quickly, it's always at a blistering pace.

Work life

I'm still trying to put my XML system together at work. Product work keeps getting in the way. I asked my boss for an entire week to devote to implementing my Structured FrameMaker EDD and my XML based single-source solution—on Monday he agreed with me that it was the right time to do it and I should put all other things on hold until I get it all set up. Tuesday he tells me that he needs a particular tutorial for a product that had been in perennial beta up to full release scratch. And there went my plan for the week.

So, tomorrow, I'm still going to be fighting with either FrameMaker or Word to put this tutorial to bed, and still battling with priorities to get my time to solve all the little niggles in my Structured single-source doc.

Sorry, that sounds like it should be titled 'Ode to the Lone Writer'...

Family life

The fast pace in my life (as always) is my family life. We're still getting used to having just the one kid at home now—our oldest daughter has begun her long-term French exchange. It's been very difficult for her, she's very emotional and sensitive and all we can hear (through the tears) when we talk to her on the phone is how much she misses 'home'. We're assured from everyone who's gone through these exchanges that she'll turn it around soon. She's speaking French and learning more and more every day.

This weekend we were lucky enough to go to Stratford-on-Avon for a meeting with the group of families who arrange these exchanges. We met lots of kids who've participated in the exchanges (they can do French or German exchanges - an many do both!). They all said that it was the best thing they've ever done in their lives, and were all very enthusiastic about helping Maddie. Their parents were also very helpful—they all assured us that the kids come home more confident, more appreciative of what they've got and what they've done, and most become better students. It's a remarkable group of people, and I'm so glad that we've been able to find them and take advantage of this unique opportunity.

Oh, the languages

Of course, most other parents that we know think that we're mad to send our kids off for six months to another family, in another country, to learn another language. But the ALLEF parents (Association For Learning Languages En Famille) have seen the results. And, in true English fashion, the parents all listened enthusiastically to many of the kids playing their musical instruments for us—language seems to come easily to these children, and music is just another one of their languages. The entertainment included a violin trio (well, almost) and a few solo violin performances (including our daughter Hilary performing Three Blind Mice—almost well), to a mother-assisted piano solo/duet and an eight-year-old vocalist leading a rock-quartet on 'Hard Day's Night'. It's sometimes amazing how not-shy some kids are...

The whole idea of language acquisition and fostering has been playing on my mind lately I must admit. In my daily work, I'm writing with consistency to avoid mis-interpretation on the part of translators and non-native English speakers. Of course, my audience is not the consumer audience, but a technical audience with a high degree of computer literacy. But I still wonder how easy it is for the non-native English speakers to get the language skills required to follow any computer help. This is obviously why illustrations are so necessary—and why it takes a great deal of skill and patience to localize any computer software.

Face it, as English speakers, we have it very easy. We can pretty well go anywhere in the world and someone will know a few words of our language. How many other languages would be able to say the same thing? And to truly know a language, you actually need to spend time in the culture of that language—you can't learn most of this stuff from a book. No one can tell you the nuances and subtleties of various idioms (which is why we don't use them, right?). But, we do use idioms—we use metaphors in the design of software. How easily can these be translated into another language?

Hallowe'en?

We've just had our 'Hallowe'en' festivities for the year (I'm writing this on the 30th of October). A few families in our neighbourhood put the kids together for a party - bobbing for apples, carving pumpkins - that kind of thing. Then they all went out for some trick-or-treating, but only to two households who had agreed in advance to provide for them. You see, Hallowe'en isn't done here much—I'm not sure exactly why, although I know that the Church of England frowns on it (or at least, the local churches do). So it means us foreigners and other

'outsiders' must band together and bring some fun to the kids. We had Korean, Burmese, Scottish (yes, they consider themselves foreign sometimes—at least 'outsiders' in England) Hungarian and an oddball English family, traipsing through the blustery wind together. They all carried their just-carved Jack-o'-lanterns (with candles?!) for light, since they had to come down a very spooky, completely unlit 'snicket' (which is just a path between streets which runs behind a bunch of houses). And then this whole troupe knocked on my door and all sang a song, before I handed out the candy. It's not what we're used to, but it was a great little festivity and the kids all had a wonderful time.

The Weather

It's now getting colder, and of course the leaves are all falling—some are quite colourful, but many are just kinda dead. The days are grey on grey, with small bursts of sunshine which blind everyone and send me scurrying for my sunglasses. I'm not looking forward to the dark days of winter—the rain and the wind make me feel like I live on a big ship in the mid-Atlantic. But, we all live through it, and I'm confident that I'll make it through to the springtime again. And at least the pansies usually flower most of the winter, so there's that for colour anyway!!

Next month I'll have a review of our first major STC event of this year (which I'm organizing - with a lot of help). You can read about it on our STC UK website (www.stcuk.org). ♦

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 over two years.

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Council Meeting Minutes: October 25th



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

Our meeting was held a week later than usual, because of location difficulties. We held the meeting on the 25th, in the basement of the Peer Group. The room is fine; we may be able to hold it there more often.

Kim Creed and Ursula McCloy, who work at PEER Group, waited at the door to let everyone in, which seemed to work out well. The parking lot across the street is big and better yet, no one got ticketed!

Education

Kim presented an update on the Education Seminar. She conducted a poll on the website, has taken the top four, and tried to contact them to see about pricing and availability. She has also received a suggestion about another potential speaker. So far she's heard from two of the potential speakers and hopes to have the speakers by the last meeting of this year so the advertising can start.

Volunteering

There was some discussion about how to obtain postings for the job bank portion of our website that have to do with volunteer positions. Fei Min Lorente, the Volunteer Coordinator, was looking for assistance with getting the project moving forward, and Ruth volunteered to assist her. With the posting of volunteer positions, technical communicators who are new to the role can obtain experience and expand their portfolios while helping volunteer organizations. It's a win-win situation, and a great project to get underway.

Public Relations

A while ago Lori Jankowski suggested that we prepare presentations to explain a bit about the STC, and what it can do. Lori knows someone who works at Rogers, and there is a possibility that we could be interviewed on the local station. Some further discussion is required before we finalize what type of presentation we might provide.

We would also like to explain to businesses what technical communicators can do for them. Debbie will put together an initial team to brainstorm and develop a presentation. Lori will look into possible places where this presentation might be given to have the largest impact.

If you are interested in participating in this project, contact Lori Jankowski at pr@stc-soc.org.

The Quill

And finally, a reminder from our Quill editor, Margie Yundt, for the council to submit profiles and bios. We had also discussed adding some humor or some crosswords or other fun things to The Quill, so if you have anything to contribute, submit it to Margie at quill@stc-soc.org...

We adjourned at 8:00 and we ate all the pizza. ♦

emily layng (Secretary/Recorder)

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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Membership News



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

I missed the last STC meeting, which was disappointing because I was really looking forward to seeing Sherry McMenemy in card-sorting action. Instead, I was home sick feeling sorry for myself. I hate to miss a meeting because I really enjoy meeting new people, and reconnecting with old acquaintances. I'll have to read the meeting recap to find out what I missed. Maybe I can convince Sherry to give me a one-on-one demo during lunch...

Unfortunately, I have no new members to report this month. We're currently at 151 members strong and holding.

Last month, I asked our veteran chapter members to send me information about themselves—I didn't receive a single response. This lack of response leads me to believe that our entire membership:

1. is comprised only of new members, which means head office has their stats wrong
2. has no access to email
3. is painfully shy
4. is horribly busy and can't spare a single moment for a quick reply

If you'd like to prove me wrong, please email membership@stc-soc.org. I want to hear from those within our membership who joined the STC within the past two years, but have been in the industry for 5, 10, or more years. Forward me a brief biography, and let me know why you eventually decided to join the STC. I'll include selected biographies in this membership article over the next few months.

I hope to hear from you this month! ♦

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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General Meeting Announcements



November 1 DITA as an Authoring Format for Technical Information



So what the heck is DITA? Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) provides maps for assembling topics into deliverables. By specializing the map elements, you can define a formal information architecture for your deliverables.

This architecture provides guidance to authors on how to organize topics and lets processes recognize your organizing principles, resulting in a consistent, clear experience for your users.

Join us @ the University of Waterloo Davis Centre, Room DC 1304 7:00 PM (doors open at 6:30 PM)

Michael Priestley is one of the XML architects of the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), with specific focus on its specialization and map architectures. He is also an information architect and tools specialist for Rational software in IBM. He has written numerous papers on information design, architecture, single-sourcing, and information development processes.

December 6th Document Development with Structured FrameMaker and XML on a Small Budget



Would you like to break into the world of XML, but you don't have much time or money? Come to the December general meeting to learn about tools to help you:

- Get information from SMEs in electronic format and seamlessly import it into your desktop publishing tool
- Manage reviewers in remote locations
- Produce both HTML and PDF from a single source
- Develop documentation for the popular Eclipse development environment.

Let Fei Min introduce you to some neat tools that will help you achieve your goals more efficiently. If your documentation department is looking for a low-cost entry point to using XML that has a minimal impact on your production

schedule, she'd got a practical solution.

Join us @ the University of Waterloo Davis Centre, Room DC 1304 7:00 PM (doors open at 6:30 PM)

Fei Min Lorente has been a technical writer for over 15 years and has worked with different tools from General Markup Language (GML) on a mainframe to Word on a MacIntosh. She has often had to take a leadership role in developing new processes and researching new tools for producing documentation. She has worked in the database, defence, oil and gas, banking and semiconductor industries. She is currently the lone writer at AMI Semiconductor Canada Company, the Volunteer Coordinator for the Southwestern Ontario chapter, and one of the editors for the CIC SIG. She considers herself a programming dilettante. ♦

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the Quill

the Newsletter for the Southwestern Ontario Chapter STC



NOVEMBER 2005 (Volume 17 Number 3) [About the Quill](#)

In This Issue

President's Message

This month, Debbie Kerr, our chapter's President, explores what it is that technical writers do. See if you agree. ♦

Those Little Bar Charts

Opal Gample, Past President and now webmaster extraordinaire, explains those surveys on our chapter home page. Remember, the squeaky wheel gets the grease (and we want you to squeak). ♦

Card Sorting 101

Read about how card sorting can change your life...or at least your website, software, or document design. Sherry McMenemy visited our general meeting in October to let us in on just one of her little usability secrets. ♦

Freelance 101: Chronicles for the Self-Employed

This month Leanne Rollins discusses her temptation into full-time employment verses contract work. Find out whether she decides to turn in her invoices for a regular paycheque, and the reasons behind her choice. ♦

Extreme Makeover?

No, this is not about plastic surgery or a visit to The Home Depot. We are talking communication renovations—and we want your stories. Read all about it. ♦

Director-Sponsor's Message: We've Got Something to Brag About

Cindy Currie, Director-Sponsor of Region 1, updates us on the latest Board of Directors' meeting and the latest initiatives to provide value to STC members. This is also the time for nominations for all kinds of STC accolades—don't miss out! ♦

The Editor's Message

Greetings and welcome to the November issue!

The things that go through my head on the drive in...

Autumn, and the beautiful fall colours I see every morning on my commute into work, reminds me that change is all around us.

Change is inevitable, and usually means there is something better waiting around the corner. You may not think so at the time, but when you reflect back after the dust settles and everything's been figured out, you might think "huh, it all worked out for the best."

Out of the box

As the world changes and technology evolves, so is the way we communicate in the world. As writers, graphic artists, and trainers—whatever you want to call us—we need to stay in touch with our audiences and adapt to their changing needs.

This may mean stepping back from our comfortable routines and taking a whole new look at not only how we do things, but the tools we use to do them. I know, sounds like a recipe for a headache. Well then, you'd better get out the Tylenol. You know what they say, "no pain, no gain!"

Yep, time to think OUTSIDE the technical writing box, so to speak.

The Challenge...

I bet there are many stories out there about how you changed at least a little

[View from the Other Side](#)

Nancy talks about the work life, home life, and the challenges of language. ♦

[Council Meeting Minutes](#)

Read about what your council discussed at its October meeting. Hot topics included Education Day and PR presentations. Would you like to help? ♦

[Membership Update](#)

Leanne laments a missed opportunity to learn about card sorting, and challenges the veteran chapter members (you know who you are) to share some information about themselves. I double dare you! ♦

[General Meeting Announcements](#)

Read about what is coming for the November and December meetings (Can you say DITA, and then Structured FrameMaker and XML, oh my?). ♦

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

corner of your world, and made a difference to your audience. You may have even learned a few things (or tools) along the way. Well, we would love to hear your story! Why not share how you took a pile of lemons and made a delicious jug of lemonade? It's all about the makeovers this month, and we want to hear from you. Please don't be modest.

The Quill wants you!

Have any makeovers or otherwise interesting bits of information you want to share? Send your articles, suggestions, and comments to me, Margie, at quill@stc-soc.org.





About The Quill

by [Margie Yundt](#), 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. In **2004**, we won Most Distinguished, Most Improved, and STC Best of Show.

Publication Policies and Frequency

The Quill is published monthly, with the exception of January, so there are nine issues published from September 2005 to June 2006.

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 19
November	October 17
December	November 21
January	No Quill
February	January 23
March	February 20

April	March 20
May	April 17
June	May 22
July or August	No Quill

Copyright Statement

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication 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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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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President's Message: What's in a name?



by [Debbie Kerr](#), President

While a rose by any other name may smell as sweet, a technical communicator by any other name may not convey what we really do.

Many of us use the title, "technical writer", because it's the only one that people seem to understand. At least with this title, people know that we write, but, unfortunately, they don't seem to know what else we can do. The problem is that people focus on our writing skills and disregard many of our other skills.

Analyze this...

For example, the other day I asked a co-worker whether her group would need me to work on a project that I had worked on previously. She told me that they would need someone else, a Customer Analyst, who could identify gaps in processes and procedures. I was stunned.

After over 20 years of writing procedures, whether they were part of software manuals or part of policy and procedure manuals, I knew that

I could do an analysis of processes and procedures, identify gaps, and recommend changes to those procedures. I had often found holes in processes when documenting functionality. In fact that was my job in several places I had worked previously; the problem was that they assumed because I didn't have the correct title that I did not have the skills needed to perform the job.

Many people don't seem to realize that 50 percent of technical communication involves analysis of some kind. If you are documenting software, you end up analyzing the design and layout to look for inconsistencies, logic flaws, and process improvements. Your analysis may also help you to find ways to explain difficult concepts and functionality. When someone tells you to document something, as a technical communicator, they might as well be telling you to analyze this. To me, they mean the same thing. Maybe a good compromise for a title is **Technical Writer/Analyst**.

Getting a little testy

Another skill you may discover, especially if you are documenting software, is you are a tester. While familiarizing yourself with the software you are documenting, you may find bugs and interface changes that, if fixed, will improve the user experience. Once, I was reporting so many problems that they asked me to take a break for two weeks so that the developer could test the product

himself and make fixes before I looked at the product again. Two weeks later, I started testing again, and I was still finding the same number of errors. It seems that a technical communicator can definitely be testy, in more ways than one. The logic and analytical skills associated with being a technical communicator helps to pinpoint problems that may be accidentally overlooked.

Since testing ultimately improves the customer experience, involves some analysis, and results in better writing, maybe a good title is **Technical Writer/Analyst/Tester**.

Looking good is half the battle

You can create a poster with a great message, but if it doesn't get anyone's attention, no one notices it. Unfortunately, the same is true for what you create as a technical communicator. It's hard enough to get a user to look at the documentation, but if it does not look professional, the chances of a user looking at a manual or help file decreases even further. The professionalism of the presentation also affects the user's perception of the content. Poor presentation of material means the user will not trust the content. In the software industry, this means the call to the help desk that you hoped to eliminate happens anyway.

Design skills are not limited to paper. If you have ever tried to find information on a website or use new software, you can appreciate that good design and navigation determine whether you use the site or the software again. Since you have represented the users' needs for so long, you are able to make design decisions that are also good usability decisions. You have learned and developed a "gut instinct" for what works and doesn't work when trying to communicate to users. You know what information to put where, and you know how to collect that information from users so that you can design products and websites to best suit those users' needs.

Maybe **Technical Writer/Analyst/Tester/Designer** is the title we go with?

Getting down to basics

Part of the problem with deciding on an effective job title is that we fulfill such a wide range of roles. While some of us are writers, others communicate through roles as editors, illustrators, media specialists, and web designers. However, with all our differences, we have some commonality when it comes to the basic tasks that we perform. As technical communicators, we:

- Research to obtain the required information, whether it be interviewing subject matter experts (SMEs) or reading existing information,

- Analyze the collected data and organize it until it is in a logical order, and
- Simplify complex information and present it in a clear and concise way.

This is really the lowest common denominator. You'll notice that I don't say how you present the simplified information. That's where you get into the different media that you might use to communicate the limitless possibilities.

The other basic is the entire reason for doing all this is to help a user. This is why I am proposing User Advocate as a possible job title. I figure that with all the comments I have made over the years to simplify the user interface, to simplify concepts and terminology, to simplify documentation, then I have definitely been representing each user's needs.

Accepting nothing at face value

It's not just others who have a fixed way of looking at us; sometimes we are our own worst enemy. Our own single-mindedness prevents us from seeing how a course or presentation can apply to us. We think of ourselves a certain way, and we fail to see how a meeting or course could possibly apply to us. We have to see what's in it for us.

One example is our most recent general meeting on card sorting. A subject of Card Sorting might have made you ask yourself how recipe cards could possibly help you communicate more clearly. If you came to the general meeting, you would have seen how card sorting could be used to determine the best way to set up a website's navigation. You would have learned about using them to get user feedback. You would have also seen that this same technique could be used for software documentation or software design. Even the small sample of card sorting that we tried during the meeting showed how different types of people might sort the same types of cards. It was an eye-opening experience that demonstrated how a small group of people could sort the same topics in so many different ways.

This meeting was definitely applicable to anyone in the communication field regardless of what media you use to communicate.

In Conclusion

The scope and variety of a technical communicator's role make it difficult to come up with a title to accurately describe what we do. However, the large range of skills that are wrapped up into one role make it more efficient to hire one of us. I would definitely worry less about coming up with a good title and point out to any potential employer that hiring a technical communicator by any kind of name

is truly a "sweet" deal. ♦

About Debbie Kerr (President)

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 Waterloo, where she has stepped out of her traditional role of writing user guides and help files, and now writes a variety of specifications.

Debbie has been a member of the STC since 1994 and has been a council member for many years. Most recently she was The Quill editor for two years.

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Those Little Bar Charts

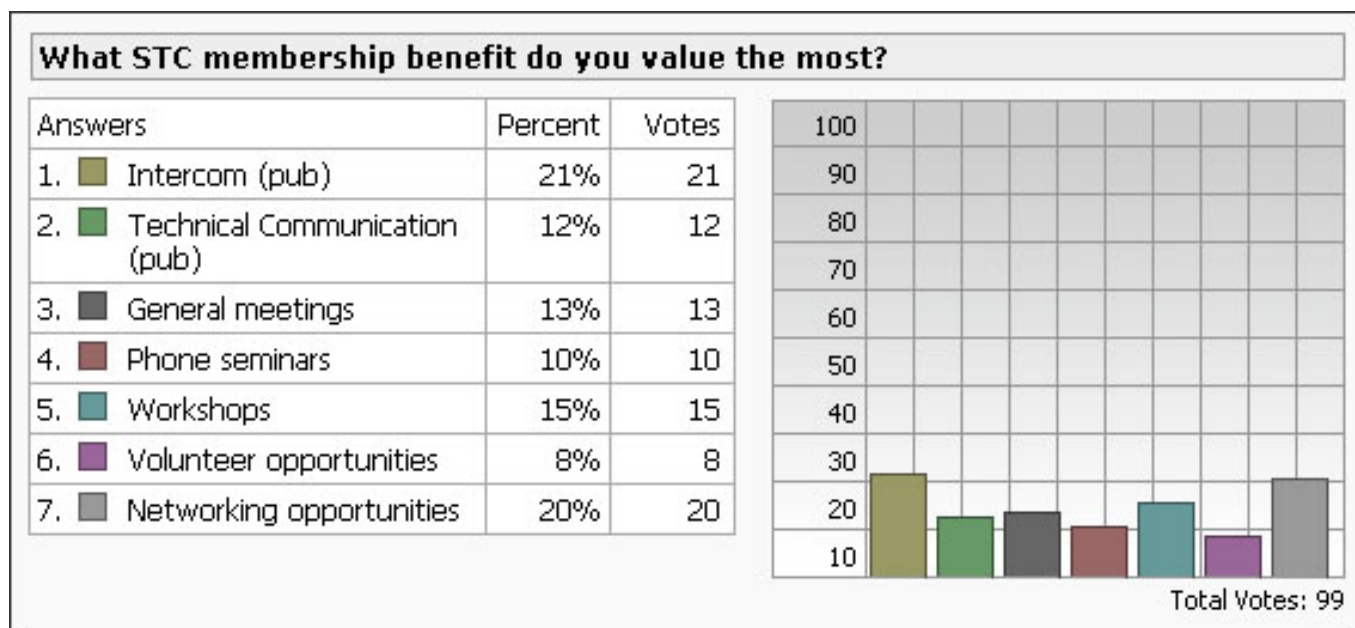


Typically, when the idea of an extensive membership survey comes up at council meetings, we get bogged down on concepts like significant data, valid results, response rates... well, you can see where I'm going with that: it's not terribly exciting.

We're listening!

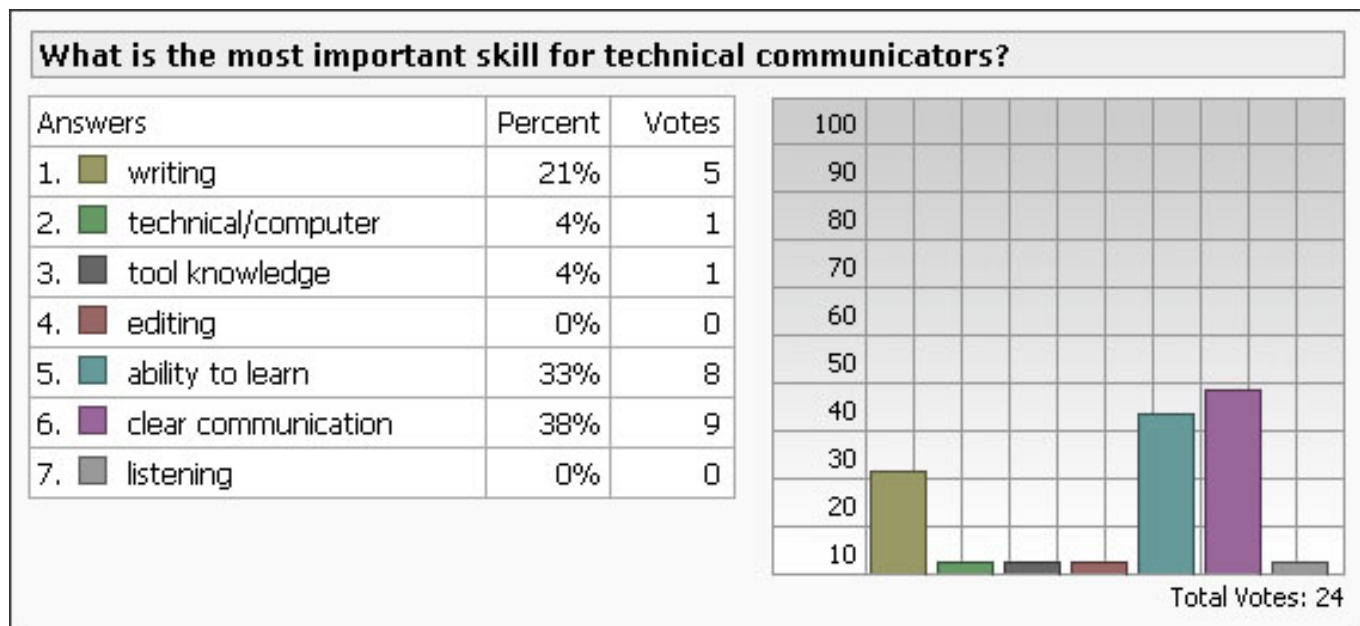
Your chapter leaders really, *really* want to know what you think about our programs, education sessions, and opportunities to give you more value for you membership bucks. While we haven't perfected our ideal survey—and frankly, it might be a few more years until we get that ironed out—we have tried for a few years to get casual information from visitors to our website.

For example, when we asked you which membership benefits you valued the most, here were the results:



While many of the options were deemed important by you, publications and networking were on the top of the heap.

Then, we asked you what skills you thought were most important in a technical writer... by a landslide, clear communication and the ability to learn each earned over 1/3 of the votes with writing not far behind (we're shocked).



It's not all about work

Now, not all of our surveys are serious. This summer, I learned that most of our survey respondees believe that a beer on the patio is the best way to stay cool during the summer—though, an 18% minority believed that hiring an engineer to make fans out of old manuals was the superior method. I also discovered that a general meeting based on a water-fight would probably leave me standing by myself in the middle of a park, since that was the only option that gathered no votes.

The squeaky wheel...

gets the grease. You know the saying, right?

So, that just goes to say that when you respond to our little homepage surveys, you're telling us what you want to see.

For example, when multiple interesting remote seminar topics are offered in a month, we often post the choices in the survey box and ask you to tell us which one you want to participate in.

So far, this method has worked very effectively: you get to hear the topics that interest you, and the council knows we made the best choice for our audience.

These surveys are important. The results can have a big impact on the direction we take in our chapter. For example, our education seminars will be taking place in February, so November is when we have to make a lot of our decisions for the seminars. Whenever a question comes up where we want feedback from our members, we will be posting questions and possible options on our website so that people can vote.

Make sure that you take the time to represent your interests. Please go to our [chapter homepage](#) and vote today!

As usual, if you have any comments about a survey, or about other issues, please [contact](#)

[someone on the STC-SOC council](#). We're always happy to hear from you. ♦

About Opal Gamble

Technical writer, web monkey, and general geek, Opal 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, [Silver Mouse Communications](#).

When she's not doing STC business or working, Opal [races cars](#) and spends a ridiculous amount of mental energy trying to figure out how to go faster.

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October's General Meeting: Card Sorting 101



by Ted Edwins

When I heard the subject of the October General Meeting was to be Card Sorting, I thought, "Finally, something that can help my budding career as an online Texas Hold 'Em Poker player!" But when I read the meeting description and discovered that Sherry McMenemy, manager of RIM's Knowledge Operations team, was going to teach us a quick and cheap method to improve the usability of websites information products, I thought, "Finally, something that can help my budding career as a Usability Expert!"

What is card sorting?

Card sorting is a venerable technique for improving the usability of anything from a website to an online help file to a software GUI to an index. Sherry assured us that card sorting is easy and that it quickly becomes addictive because of the great results you can attain.

Basically, you write examples of things that are put into categories or "buckets", such as "Monthly Newsletter" or "Forgot my password", onto sticky notes or 3x5" note cards. Give the cards to a representative user and let them sort the cards into buckets that make sense to them. Gather the cards at the end of the session and record the results in a spreadsheet. Repeat with as many users as makes sense for your application. At the end you have a road map of how users view your application.

Why use card sorting?

The reasons for using card sorting are many.

- It is a quick and cheap method to test usability. You don't need a fancy lab with mirrors and video cameras.
- Card sorting is best done "offline" in personal interactive sessions, which allows for the "human" factor.
- You can do it on paper or using a computer (though paper is usually the better approach as you tend to get more honest answers)
- It's very flexibility enables you to do a combination of the two methods so that you can do card sorting remotely or person-to-person sessions.

There are a couple of side benefits to card sorting. Firstly, the informal nature of card sorting provides a good way to gather information about your application,

which identifies potential problems or challenges. Secondly, it is often possible to construct personas by watching and listening to users during the session. Sherry said that card sorting often leads to “aha” moments as you watch users go through the process.

Planning a session

Before you can conduct a session, a little forethought is required.

1. **Determine the audience and “job one” of the system to be tested.** Who is going to use to use the application? What work are the users really trying accomplish? How is your application supposed to help them achieve that goal? If you are working on an existing system, document its current structure by preparing a record sheet. A record sheet can be either a spreadsheet that captures the hierarchy of terms or it can be a flowchart that captures the relationships between tasks or functions. It’s not the format that you use that is important; it’s that you capture the exact naming conventions as they are being used. Don’t try to correct terms, even if you think they need correcting. For example, if the user refers to “signing into” the computer, don’t change it to “logging into” the computer.
2. **Line up your participants.** Ideally, the session should be done in person so that you and the users are in the same room. This will impact the number of people to include in the session. “Bribery, such as small gifts, candy, or chocolate help to increase the attendance rate,” said Sherry. How many participants are enough? Jakob Nielsen says 7-9. Boxes and Arrows, a usability blog, says 30-100. Typically, Sherry says her team at RIM uses 20-30. The people that do participate should be representative of the users who will actually be interacting with the product. It is important to ask people who might not normally volunteer. Beware of the “professional” volunteers who want to help out on every project. You must find people who are “fresh” and will give untainted feedback.
3. **Select your topics.** There is a limit to how much work a participant can do in a session, so you must limit the number of topics each participant will process. Boxes and Arrows recommend 30-100. Sherry said that she tries to limit it to 25. The topics selected should be representative of what already exists, or what will be created. If you have time, you could do one round of tests with existing terms, then another round of tests with terms that will be used in the future.
4. **Create at least two sets of cards.** Sherry suggested that you neatly handwrite two sets of cards and number them discreetly. Let the

participants know that the number on the card is for identification only and is no suggestion of order. One set of cards is ordered sequentially (for example, 1-26) and the second set of cards is ordered backwards (26-1) to counterbalance the context.

Conducting a Session

Now that you have your card sets made up and your record sheet ready, it is time to actually conduct a session with actual participants. To help participants feel comfortable, tell them there are no wrong answers and there are no “right” number of piles. Also ask them to tell you what they are thinking while they are placing each card in a pile.

Give the participant a pile of cards and tell them to put similar things together. As participants state why they were ordering the cards a certain way, she likes to write down their thought processes right on the record sheet. Use one sheet for each session. Write down exactly what the participant says, don't try to interpret or correct the terminology that the person uses—be a “scientist” and only observe.

Keep an eye on how the participant shuffles and organizes the cards. Sherry said that it is very interesting to see how different personality types handle the cards. Some people read all the cards, and then sort them. Other people read and arrange each card as it comes up. Still others sort the cards in their hands, then put the piles on the table.

Sherry suggested that you could also experiment with conducting the session in one of two ways. You could have an “open” session, where there are no defined “buckets” for users to sort the cards. Instead, users define the buckets by putting the cards into as many piles as they want. The number of piles determines the number of buckets. When users are done sorting, they print the name of each group on a sticky and put it on that pile.

In a “closed” session, you define the buckets and then ask users to put the cards in each bucket. Each group is already named, and you want to see where the users put the topic on each card.

No matter which method you choose, at the end of the session, or some other convenient time, write the results of the session on the record sheet, and don't forget to write a thank-you note (or email) to each participant!

Collecting and Analyzing Results

Now that you have all the session results captured on record sheets, you must

decide what it all means. Sherry recommends transferring the data from the record sheets to a spreadsheet. Create a column for each category suggested by the participants, if they were allowed to do so. Group category names in a single column if you are highly confident that the meaning is the same, even if there is different wording for the categories.

As you enter the data on the spreadsheet, look for patterns and things you might not have expected. Analyze the results for number and type of categories. Are the categories named using an object- or task-oriented style?

Implementing Results

Using the analysis of your results, map out the information architecture and the navigation structure of your product. Sherry said that at this time you could run a closed card-sorting session to test the buckets or categories.

You must now write a report to provide stakeholders with compelling numbers and trends that were unearthed during the sessions. In the report, sort your inventory of items according to the results of the test. You could also provide a summary of findings to the participants and tell them the next steps of the process.

An important part of the report would be to tell the stakeholders when you're going to start implementing the changes in the product. All the efforts of you and your participants will be wasted if you don't make a concrete effort to actually implement the changes you've recommended.

Measuring Success

After a few months, conduct a different type of user testing on the interface to determine if the both the categories and the items in each category are correct. You can gather this information either through a scenario-based test or a user feedback/focus group. In either case, ask the participants and the stakeholders for feedback on the process. You want to know what went right as well as what went wrong.

Resources

Sherry recommends the following sites for more information about card sorting:

- <http://www.infodesign.com.au/usabilityresources/design/cardsorting.asp>
- http://www.boxesandarrows.com/archives/card_sorting_a_definitive_guide.php

- <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20040719.html>
- <http://www.stcsig.org/usability/topics/cardsorting.html>



About Ted Edwins

Ted Edwins is an independent consultant specializing in software documentation. He is a Past-President of the chapter. In his spare time he continues his futile quest to lower his golf handicap.



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Freelance 101: Chronicles for the Self-Employed



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

The lure of the full-time paycheque

I love the world of freelance writing. For nine months straight, I've enjoyed a steady stream of new, returning, and apparently satisfied clients. Why then, when a very satisfied client presented me with a full-time job offer was I actually tempted? For four days, I agonized over my decision—captive employee or freelance?

Finally, I took a large step backward to really examine my motivation for considering this offer. In the end, my list of pros and cons was heavily weighted towards the pros of freelancing. In order of importance to me, here's why.

1. Fresh new challenges

I am a born problem solver. I've always maintained there's no challenge too big. I'll tackle pretty much anything, even the problems no one else will touch. As a freelance writer, I encounter a new challenge every single time I take on a new project, whether the project is a few days in duration, or several months long, I'm happiest when I'm learning something very technical, very complex, or very problematic.

When I was a captive employee, I got to know the software very well. There was always something new to learn, but there was a lot more time available to learn it, and there was always someone else to rely on if I couldn't figure something out. As a freelancer, I'm hired to be the expert—to solve the problem when no one else can or wants to. In the small software shops, most developers are grateful to have a writer available to tackle the gruesome task of developing the supporting docs. I also like the variety of tasks I am hired to accomplish—everything from installation guides to marketing collateral, to technology articles, to full user guides and help systems. Most small shops also ask me to develop the style sheet as well as the look and feel. From week to week, it's something just a little different, which allows me to fully exercise my skill set and my brain.

2. Lack of politics

Not all office politics are bad, but in a full-time role, politics are constant and inescapable unless you live under a large rock. Unfortunately, I tend to jump

right into the political maelstrom even when I have no business doing so. I'm just too nosey I guess. After many months away from the fun of office politics, I'm still not ready to get back in the game. As a freelancer, I remain blissfully unaware of the political maneuverings within my clients' offices. As far as I'm concerned, everyone gets along, everyone wants to help, and everyone works for the greater good of the project. Period.

The client who offered me the full-time position was actually a remote office that reports to a head office in the U.S. From the first time I set foot in the office, it was immediately apparent that the relationship between the two offices was strained and uncomfortable. Since I was just the freelance writer, this was only an impression. But during an 'interview' it became obvious that the politics were ripe, and you'd better have a whole lot of patience to deal with it. In short, I have very little patience, and what little I have is allocated solely to my poor children.

3. Flexible schedule

Those poor children also run me ragged. To make a long story short, my van is on the road no less than three times a day doing pickup and drop-off from daycare to JK. If you add in my need for at least one hour of exercise every day, there's not a whole lot of time left to work during daylight hours. My schedule is a little wacky, which works for me because I am at my most productive between 7 pm and midnight. But most full-time jobs simply do not offer this level of flexibility, not even if they insist they can.

In this case, my client insisted I only needed to put in an appearance for meetings, and at other times at my discretion. It sounded too good to be true, and that's because it was. How long would it be before I started to feel guilty because I had to duck out in the middle of a meeting, or felt awful because I was out on a run when someone from work needed me immediately? When a client hires a freelancer, the expectation of availability is entirely different. They know I have other clients and other demands on my time. What they care about is not when I perform the work, but the quality of the work and, of course, the timeliness. Best of all, they don't care where I work. Every Friday, I head to Williams on Northfield for a change of scenery, a salad, and a smoothie. I have my laptop out and I'm hard at work in my 'office'. How many full-time employees can do that?

4. Potential income

Money became a pretty important consideration in this decision. My family is moving over the next few weeks, and with a new house comes unforeseen

expenses. The lure of a steady income was almost enough to get me to sign that offer—both my accountant (my husband) and my banker found this prospect appealing. We ran the numbers and realized that in a period of nine months, I have already earned more than my last full-time salary. There's still three months left in the year! Who knows how much more I could earn? The potential of all that lovely work and accompanying lovely money is very appealing. With a full-time job, you're pretty much capped and you know how much you will earn in a given year. I guess I like surprises a little more than I realized.

I have yet to experience a lull in cash flow, but it is bound to happen. Will it be next month or maybe in six months? We decided it was worth the risk. If ever I can't find work for a lengthy period of time, I can try to convince a client to take me on full-time. I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

In the end, I decided to turn down the offer for myself and for my family. I'm enjoying myself way too much to sign on full-time, at least for now. My friends tell me they've never seen me so happy in a job. They're right—and I'd have to be certifiable to give it up so early in the game.

Once again, let me know if there is any topic in particular you'd like to me to cover next month. Email me at leanne@leannerollins.com with your input. ♦

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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Extreme Makeovers



Everyone's interested in a makeover. In fact, whole television series are devoted to them. People are being made over. Rooms are being made over. Backyards are being made over. Entire houses are being made over. There are reasons for the popularity of these shows. They enable people to see what they can accomplish with the right team of experts. The worse the starting point, the more extreme the makeover.

Why should our methods of communication be any different?

Case Studies

Have you ever been really pleased at the results of a redesign? Maybe you reworked a website, illustration, manual, brochure, or quick reference guide. Why not show everyone what a difference you made by providing us with a before and after shot so that we can see how it started and the end result? Tell us what you changed and why you changed it. Don't be modest; give us the details about the reaction to the new design, and any benefits that your company may have experienced because of the redesign.

If you have confidential information, and the text is not critical do what you are demonstrating, then substitute the original text with dummy text. We don't want to miss out on your great design ideas just because the text is proprietary. We're visual people. We will get the general idea, even if the original text is not the same.

The Value Proposition

This exercise will enable you to:

1. Learn from mistakes that others have corrected so that you don't have to make those same mistakes yourself.
2. See the things that you need to change, instead of just reading about what to do and not do when laying out pages.
3. Show employers, co-workers, and even friends, what types of things you are capable of doing in your line of work.

Submissions

Please submit your extreme makeovers to quill@stc-soc.org. Remember to

include your before and after pictures, a description of the changes, and the reactions to the changes. The number of submissions we receive will determine how many case studies we publish in The Quill each month. If you have any questions, contact Margie at quill@stc-soc.org or Debbie at president@stc-soc.org. ♦

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Director Sponsor's Message: We've Got Something to Brag About!



by [Cindy Currie](#), STC Region 1 Director Sponsor

I've just recently returned from the September STC Board of Director's meeting* in Denver, where I had the opportunity to meet and work closely with Rob Moran, the STC's new interim Executive Director. It was a great, productive pleasure to do so. Rob's a great guy whose advice and guidance to the STC (albeit short-term) will be invaluable as the STC embarks on a new strategic direction into the future of technical communication. Rob will also advise and consult to STC as we continue the search for a new permanent Executive Director.

Rob's forté is working with associations, such as the STC, on an interim basis to help them bridge the gap between executives and move them in appropriate new directions. He is exactly what the STC needs at this time. Rob is not eligible for the permanent Executive Director position (part of his contract with STC), which is unfortunate for us, but this frees him of personal investment so he is able to focus solely on helping us move forward. And, forward we are going to exciting new places!

Providing Member Value

The STC is making evident its continuing focus on providing member value and membership growth through the following proposed new initiatives:

- **Corporate Value Program**, a new membership option that is designed for companies that have a number of technical communications professionals. The STC Board approved a pilot of this new initiative last month. The initial pilot company is in New York, so we (Region 1) are the test bed for this new program that provides good incentives for companies to pay for the STC memberships of their technical communications employees. I'll provide more information about this pilot program as it progresses.
- **Localized Dues Structure**, which introduces three pricing tiers determined by the market in which an STC member resides. Technical communicators in developing, emerging, and mature markets will pay dues that reflect their local economies and thus their related local costs of living. This will help boost the STC's membership around the world, allowing many more people to invest in their professional futures as technical communicators, and enhancing the Society's global presence and prestige. The STC Board is currently surveying its membership (www.stc.org).

[org/memberlocal101.asp](http://www.stc.org/memberlocal101.asp)) for feedback on this proposed program. Look for details regarding the results of our member survey soon.

Nominations anyone?

The deadline for submitting nomination forms for the elected membership rank of STC Associate Fellow is Friday, October 21! It would be wonderful to see new Associate Fellows emerge from this region in 2006! Many thanks to those of you who took the time and effort required to prepare these forms! Thanks also to those of you who have volunteered to be references in support of the candidates put forward. Vetting of candidates begins shortly after the submission deadline. Candidates will be notified after the January Board meeting.

It's also time to consider nominations for Distinguished Chapter Service Awards. These awards honor a limited number of members from a chapter for outstanding service to the chapter. The ratio of acceptable nominations per year is 1 for every 100 members in a chapter, so 1%. (For communities with fewer than 100 members, 1 nomination is allowable.) If you've got a deserving member or two, please consider nominating them for this prestigious award. Visit http://www.stc.org/awards_DCSA.asp for details on the nomination process and a list of past winners. The deadline for nominations submissions is November 30.

Gearing up for the competition

Many chapters are gearing up for their local competitions now. And the international competition committees are preparing to distribute their Call for Judges, which should be out any minute now. I encourage you to consider applying as an international competition judge this year, particularly those of you who have been involved in local competitions previously. It's a terrific opportunity to ratchet up your STC participation to the Society level, sharing your expertise on a greater scale, networking with members you might not already know, and getting to see what award-winning technical communication looks like from around the globe. If you don't receive the application form, ask your chapter president about it or visit www.stc.org/competitions and access it there.

Rechartered at last

Lastly, congratulations to both the **Rochester** and **Vermont** chapters, whose rechartering documents were approved by the STC Board based on the recommendation from the Rechartering Committee. These two communities are now "officially" rechartered. The Boston Chapter is next as I've just reviewed

their rechartering document prior to its submission to the committee. I do encourage all of you who have not rechartered yet to do so. We have several good sample rechartering documents for you to review (and my continuing offer of assistance, remote or onsite) during this important activity. And, I will devote my next article to more information about rechartering. Stay tuned ...

** The minutes of the September 2005 Board meeting, as well as the January and May 2005 meetings, are available online at <http://www.stc.org/chapterResources.asp>, and all future Board meeting minutes will be posted as well. I encourage you all to read them as the reports are full of details that both members and leaders seem to be looking for frequently. ♦*

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View from the Other Side: Life, the Universe, and Languages



by [Nancy Halverson](#), Feature Writer

When things move slowly, they're really slow, but when things move quickly, it's always at a blistering pace.

Work life

I'm still trying to put my XML system together at work. Product work keeps getting in the way. I asked my boss for an entire week to devote to implementing my Structured FrameMaker EDD and my XML based single-source solution—on Monday he agreed with me that it was the right time to do it and I should put all other things on hold until I get it all set up. Tuesday he tells me that he needs a particular tutorial for a product that had been in perennial beta up to full release scratch. And there went my plan for the week.

So, tomorrow, I'm still going to be fighting with either FrameMaker or Word to put this tutorial to bed, and still battling with priorities to get my time to solve all the little niggles in my Structured single-source doc.

Sorry, that sounds like it should be titled 'Ode to the Lone Writer'...

Family life

The fast pace in my life (as always) is my family life. We're still getting used to having just the one kid at home now—our oldest daughter has begun her long-term French exchange. It's been very difficult for her, she's very emotional and sensitive and all we can hear (through the tears) when we talk to her on the phone is how much she misses 'home'. We're assured from everyone who's gone through these exchanges that she'll turn it around soon. She's speaking French and learning more and more every day.

This weekend we were lucky enough to go to Stratford-on-Avon for a meeting with the group of families who arrange these exchanges. We met lots of kids who've participated in the exchanges (they can do French or German exchanges - an many do both!). They all said that it was the best thing they've ever done in their lives, and were all very enthusiastic about helping Maddie. Their parents were also very helpful—they all assured us that the kids come home more confident, more appreciative of what they've got and what they've done, and most become better students. It's a remarkable group of people, and I'm so glad that we've been able to find them and take advantage of this unique opportunity.

Oh, the languages

Of course, most other parents that we know think that we're mad to send our kids off for six months to another family, in another country, to learn another language. But the ALLEF parents (Association For Learning Languages En Famille) have seen the results. And, in true English fashion, the parents all listened enthusiastically to many of the kids playing their musical instruments for us—language seems to come easily to these children, and music is just another one of their languages. The entertainment included a violin trio (well, almost) and a few solo violin performances (including our daughter Hilary performing Three Blind Mice—almost well), to a mother-assisted piano solo/duet and an eight-year-old vocalist leading a rock-quartet on 'Hard Day's Night'. It's sometimes amazing how not-shy some kids are...

The whole idea of language acquisition and fostering has been playing on my mind lately I must admit. In my daily work, I'm writing with consistency to avoid mis-interpretation on the part of translators and non-native English speakers. Of course, my audience is not the consumer audience, but a technical audience with a high degree of computer literacy. But I still wonder how easy it is for the non-native English speakers to get the language skills required to follow any computer help. This is obviously why illustrations are so necessary—and why it takes a great deal of skill and patience to localize any computer software.

Face it, as English speakers, we have it very easy. We can pretty well go anywhere in the world and someone will know a few words of our language. How many other languages would be able to say the same thing? And to truly know a language, you actually need to spend time in the culture of that language—you can't learn most of this stuff from a book. No one can tell you the nuances and subtleties of various idioms (which is why we don't use them, right?). But, we do use idioms—we use metaphors in the design of software. How easily can these be translated into another language?

Hallowe'en?

We've just had our 'Hallowe'en' festivities for the year (I'm writing this on the 30th of October). A few families in our neighbourhood put the kids together for a party - bobbing for apples, carving pumpkins - that kind of thing. Then they all went out for some trick-or-treating, but only to two households who had agreed in advance to provide for them. You see, Hallowe'en isn't done here much—I'm not sure exactly why, although I know that the Church of England frowns on it (or at least, the local churches do). So it means us foreigners and other

'outsiders' must band together and bring some fun to the kids. We had Korean, Burmese, Scottish (yes, they consider themselves foreign sometimes—at least 'outsiders' in England) Hungarian and an oddball English family, traipsing through the blustery wind together. They all carried their just-carved Jack-o'-lanterns (with candles?!) for light, since they had to come down a very spooky, completely unlit 'snicket' (which is just a path between streets which runs behind a bunch of houses). And then this whole troupe knocked on my door and all sang a song, before I handed out the candy. It's not what we're used to, but it was a great little festivity and the kids all had a wonderful time.

The Weather

It's now getting colder, and of course the leaves are all falling—some are quite colourful, but many are just kinda dead. The days are grey on grey, with small bursts of sunshine which blind everyone and send me scurrying for my sunglasses. I'm not looking forward to the dark days of winter—the rain and the wind make me feel like I live on a big ship in the mid-Atlantic. But, we all live through it, and I'm confident that I'll make it through to the springtime again. And at least the pansies usually flower most of the winter, so there's that for colour anyway!!

Next month I'll have a review of our first major STC event of this year (which I'm organizing - with a lot of help). You can read about it on our STC UK website (www.stcuk.org). ♦

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 over two years.

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Council Meeting Minutes: October 25th



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

Our meeting was held a week later than usual, because of location difficulties. We held the meeting on the 25th, in the basement of the Peer Group. The room is fine; we may be able to hold it there more often.

Kim Creed and Ursula McCloy, who work at PEER Group, waited at the door to let everyone in, which seemed to work out well. The parking lot across the street is big and better yet, no one got ticketed!

Education

Kim presented an update on the Education Seminar. She conducted a poll on the website, has taken the top four, and tried to contact them to see about pricing and availability. She has also received a suggestion about another potential speaker. So far she's heard from two of the potential speakers and hopes to have the speakers by the last meeting of this year so the advertising can start.

Volunteering

There was some discussion about how to obtain postings for the job bank portion of our website that have to do with volunteer positions. Fei Min Lorente, the Volunteer Coordinator, was looking for assistance with getting the project moving forward, and Ruth volunteered to assist her. With the posting of volunteer positions, technical communicators who are new to the role can obtain experience and expand their portfolios while helping volunteer organizations. It's a win-win situation, and a great project to get underway.

Public Relations

A while ago Lori Jankowski suggested that we prepare presentations to explain a bit about the STC, and what it can do. Lori knows someone who works at Rogers, and there is a possibility that we could be interviewed on the local station. Some further discussion is required before we finalize what type of presentation we might provide.

We would also like to explain to businesses what technical communicators can do for them. Debbie will put together an initial team to brainstorm and develop a presentation. Lori will look into possible places where this presentation might be given to have the largest impact.

If you are interested in participating in this project, contact Lori Jankowski at pr@stc-soc.org.

The Quill

And finally, a reminder from our Quill editor, Margie Yundt, for the council to submit profiles and bios. We had also discussed adding some humor or some crosswords or other fun things to The Quill, so if you have anything to contribute, submit it to Margie at quill@stc-soc.org...

We adjourned at 8:00 and we ate all the pizza. ♦

emily layng (Secretary/Recorder)

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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Membership News



by [Leanne Rollins](#), Membership Manager

I missed the last STC meeting, which was disappointing because I was really looking forward to seeing Sherry McMenemy in card-sorting action. Instead, I was home sick feeling sorry for myself. I hate to miss a meeting because I really enjoy meeting new people, and reconnecting with old acquaintances. I'll have to read the meeting recap to find out what I missed. Maybe I can convince Sherry to give me a one-on-one demo during lunch...

Unfortunately, I have no new members to report this month. We're currently at 151 members strong and holding.

Last month, I asked our veteran chapter members to send me information about themselves—I didn't receive a single response. This lack of response leads me to believe that our entire membership:

1. is comprised only of new members, which means head office has their stats wrong
2. has no access to email
3. is painfully shy
4. is horribly busy and can't spare a single moment for a quick reply

If you'd like to prove me wrong, please email membership@stc-soc.org. I want to hear from those within our membership who joined the STC within the past two years, but have been in the industry for 5, 10, or more years. Forward me a brief biography, and let me know why you eventually decided to join the STC. I'll include selected biographies in this membership article over the next few months.

I hope to hear from you this month! ♦

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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General Meeting Announcements



November 1 DITA as an Authoring Format for Technical Information



So what the heck is DITA? Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) provides maps for assembling topics into deliverables. By specializing the map elements, you can define a formal information architecture for your deliverables.

This architecture provides guidance to authors on how to organize topics and lets processes recognize your organizing principles, resulting in a consistent, clear experience for your users.

Join us @ the University of Waterloo Davis Centre, Room DC 1304 7:00 PM (doors open at 6:30 PM)

Michael Priestley is one of the XML architects of the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), with specific focus on its specialization and map architectures. He is also an information architect and tools specialist for Rational software in IBM. He has written numerous papers on information design, architecture, single-sourcing, and information development processes.

December 6th Document Development with Structured FrameMaker and XML on a Small Budget



Would you like to break into the world of XML, but you don't have much time or money? Come to the December general meeting to learn about tools to help you:

- Get information from SMEs in electronic format and seamlessly import it into your desktop publishing tool
- Manage reviewers in remote locations
- Produce both HTML and PDF from a single source
- Develop documentation for the popular Eclipse development environment.

Let Fei Min introduce you to some neat tools that will help you achieve your goals more efficiently. If your documentation department is looking for a low-cost entry point to using XML that has a minimal impact on your production

schedule, she'd got a practical solution.

Join us @ the University of Waterloo Davis Centre, Room DC 1304 7:00 PM (doors open at 6:30 PM)

Fei Min Lorente has been a technical writer for over 15 years and has worked with different tools from General Markup Language (GML) on a mainframe to Word on a MacIntosh. She has often had to take a leadership role in developing new processes and researching new tools for producing documentation. She has worked in the database, defence, oil and gas, banking and semiconductor industries. She is currently the lone writer at AMI Semiconductor Canada Company, the Volunteer Coordinator for the Southwestern Ontario chapter, and one of the editors for the CIC SIG. She considers herself a programming dilettante. ♦

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