



Inside This Issue:

STC Program Schedule..... 2
 Last Month's Program 3
 Nonmember \$5 Off Coupon... 3
 Tales Out of School..... 4
 Letter from Linda 6
 Chapter Announcements 8
 Chapter Contact Info 9

Getting User Input During Development, Not After

How do you ensure that the products you create will be useful – or even used at all? You can ask for user input before you begin a project, ask again during development, and once again before the final product release. However, this can be an expensive and time-consuming process for many communicators.

In this lively and informative presentation, Brenda Huettner introduces several methods for obtaining user input, with the focus on quick, low-cost methods of soliciting user feedback. Brenda is an STC Associate Fellow and an active member of the Management Special Interest Group (SIG) and the Southern Arizona Chapter. In addition, she has many years of experience as an independent technical communication consultant and as a speaker at local, regional, and international events.

See Also: Web Interface Design Usability Workshop on page 8.

Save the Date: Thursday, November 13

Where: Tucson Courtyard by Marriott, 201 S. Williams Blvd. (in the Williams Centre near Broadway and Craycroft).

Registration: 5:30 to 6 p.m.

Dinner (optional): 6 to 7 p.m. Hot hors d'oeuvres – buffalo wings, chicken tenders, finger sandwiches, baked potatoes, beverage, and dessert.*

Program: 7 to 8:30 p.m.

Pricing:

- **Program only:** free to members, \$5 for nonmembers.
- **Program plus dinner:** \$15 for members and \$20 for nonmembers.
- Never attended a Southern Arizona Chapter meeting before? Use the **\$5 Off Coupon** on page 3!

RSVP: Send an e-mail message to Helen Marty (martyh46@msn.com) by 4 p.m. on Monday, November 10 indicating dinner or program-only. No-shows will be billed. Walk-ins are always welcome, but we cannot guarantee a meal (see below).

* Please make your dinner reservations by the 4 p.m. Monday deadline. Our hotel requires a final headcount 72 hours in advance to ensure ample food and good service for all of us. Thank you for your cooperation!

**Mission statement for
STC's Southern
Arizona Chapter:**

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

Clip and Save:

STC Planned Program Schedule

Southern Arizona Chapter – 2003/2004

September 11:

Network and Nibble

October 9:

Trends in Technical Communication Panel Discussion

November 13:

Getting User Input During Development, Not After – **Brenda Huettner**

December 11:

Holiday Party with speaker **Cynthia Scribner**. Silent Auction to benefit the STC Scholarship Fund

January 23:

National STC Board Meeting and dinner at La Fuente Restaurant

February 12:

Whine & Cheese – Instructional Design Progressions

March 11:

Intuit's Knowledge Management Implementation – **Sally Fowler**

April 8:

Avoid Clichés Like the Plague: A Lighthearted Safari through the Jungle of the English Language – **Dave Carlson and Victoria Yuki**

May 20:

Recognition party and awards

June through August:

Summer sabbatical

Unless otherwise noted, programs are held on the second Thursday of each month at the Courtyard by Marriott, 201 S. Williams Blvd. (in the Williams Centre near Broadway and Craycroft, in Tucson, Arizona). Program schedule is subject to change without notice; for up-to-date meeting information, visit www.stc-saz.org.



Review: Last Month's Program

Kitty Aughey, Program Manager

The October program on communication trends was informational and FUN! There were 14 attendees who all participated in the discussions. The meeting began with Pat Markey handing out copies of the Governors' Proclamation that October 12 through 18, 2003 was Technical Communication Week in Arizona. This is great recognition for our profession.

Carrie Cooper moderated the discussions with **Brenda Huettner** and **Pat Markey** rounding out the panel. The panel was excellent and they were able to bring all the attendees into the discussions. Additional written references to communication trends were available to take home. The winning trends seemed to be usability, single-sourcing and writing for translation.

This meeting resulted in 12 evaluations, with an overall score of 3.5 out of a possible 4. Comments from attendees include:



- I haven't been a member of STC since 1998. This program was more interesting and relevant than presentations in the past.
- Lots of thought-provoking information.
- Time just flew by.
- Lively!
- Meeting was too short to cover the interesting topics.
- Speakers were informative and encouraged active discussion.
- This type of meeting is a great service to members! ■

Don't belong to the STC yet? Want to just check out our chapter? Clip this coupon to save \$5.

STC, Southern Arizona Chapter

Nonmember \$5 Off Coupon

Save \$5 at Your First Meeting

We encourage nonmembers to attend a chapter program to learn about the STC and the Southern Arizona Chapter. Bring this completed coupon to the first chapter program you attend, and you'll save \$5 off the cost of admission.

Name (please print): _____

E-mail address: _____

Date of program: _____



Guest Corner:

Tales Out of School: Practicing Technical Communication

C. Gilbert Storms

Six years ago, after spending 29 years as a university teacher of technical communication, I left my academic career to pursue a second career as a full-time technical writer. While teaching, I'd worked occasionally as a contract writer and had always enjoyed my industry experiences. The work was challenging and the people I worked with talented and dedicated. But inevitably, I tended to think of technical communication in terms of familiar theoretical and teaching issues: the problem of defining "audiences," technical communication as problem-solving, and so on.

***In recent years,
I've found myself
less occupied with
writing in my work,
and more occupied
with software...***

This wasn't a bad thing. Having the distance afforded by theory enabled me to see how all technical communication was related, independent of where it was practiced. My venture into practice provided the specific instances. Still, I know I didn't appreciate the daunting complexity of some tasks technical communicators perform - or the extent to which many of the things we do resist teaching because they're almost impossible to replicate in the classroom.

In any case, I'd like to describe five things I learned about technical communication practice, at least some of which I hadn't anticipated. I should add that most of these ideas came from my work in the computer industry, but I'm confident that they'd apply in other settings as well.

***Our word
processing,
document design,
help authoring, and
graphics programs
... require more and
more hours to learn
and use.***

I found that technical communicators:

- Create the information they convey
- Live in complex "neighborhoods"
- Should think "users," not "audience"
- Must learn the technology of publication
- Must be their own project managers

Technical writers create the information they convey. Research has long since dispelled the notion that technical writers simply convey the "correct" information about a topic to a passive audience, and that all writers have to do is gather that information and write it in clear, grammatical sentences. Instead, we've learned that technical writers "create" the information they convey through their language choices and that technical communications are often composed collaboratively through dialogues among writers, subject matter experts, and even users.

Even knowing that, it's disconcerting when I find that I'm inventing, rather than just "documenting," content. For example, when documenting developing software on a tight schedule, I'd often have to draft from specifications or developers' predictions - writing steps based upon how we *expected* the software to work. When writing corporate policy manuals in the insurance industry, I'd ask managers for statements of policy that I could document. But sometimes those policies didn't exist yet, so I was invited to draft statements that could be approved or revised when the manual was reviewed by management. *cont'd...*

Technical communicators live in complex “neighborhoods.” Technical communicators work among varied “discourse communities,” to use a term popular among rhetoricians. That is, we interact with a variety of professionals – engineers, software developers, quality assurance staff, marketing specialists, and others. Because documenting involves the collaboration of all these people, we have to “get to know the neighborhood” where we work. We have to learn the unique vocabularies, practices, and concerns of the specialists we work with and on whom we depend for our content, reviews, even documentation delivery.

Think “users,” not “audience.” It’s long been an axiom in our profession that technical writers must be vitally concerned with the “audience,” for their communications. The term “audience” provides a neat, theatrical metaphor for the idea that the readers of technical writing respond to what they read moment by moment, like spectators at a play.

But we know that consumers of technical communications aren’t passive readers and that they don’t normally sit in rapt attention reading our documentation, like spectators at a play or readers of a novel. A better term for these consumers might be “users” since they “use” technical writing like they use the products it describes (software, widgets, corporate travel procedures, etc.). Despite our admonitions to users to read the documentation before performing a task, they usually don’t – unless they have to solve a problem or find a specific piece of information, in which case they may “use” the available documentation to find what they need. Or they may just call the Help line.

Technical writers must learn publication technology. In recent years, I’ve found myself less occupied with writing in my work, and more occupied with software – trying to get Word or FrameMaker or RoboHelp to do what I want it to do. Our word processing, document design, help authoring, and graphics programs – all designed to make our work easier and more efficient – require more and more hours to learn and use. And we’ve all complained about how employers define the jobs they offer in terms of the software they’ve bought to do the work – (“Wanted: Technical writer with FrameMaker skills to create user manuals, etc. . . .”) In any case, it’s clear that there’s a growing area of expertise here that didn’t exist, say, 10 years ago, and technical communicators who don’t master it are narrowing their prospects considerably.

Technical writers must be their own project managers. Whether working independently or with a team, technical writers must take ownership of their documentation projects and be prepared to manage them to completion. Even when working closely with a team, team leaders who aren’t technical communicators aren’t likely to know how to formulate documentation objectives, how much time will be needed for drafts and revisions, and how to test for usability or organize review cycles.

Technical communicators, in turn, must carve out a place for documentation in the project schedule. Engineers and software developers are inclined to think that a project ends when development is done, and documentation, even when acknowledged as necessary, tends to be an afterthought. The writer must make clear to the project team what scheduling is necessary to complete the documentation so it can be released with the product.

Others could compile their own lists, I’m sure, but perhaps it will suffice to say that we all can help prepare new technical communicators by sharing the “stories” of our work.

Gilbert Storms is a freelance technical communicator recently moved to Tucson. He is co-editor of a book on the profession of technical communication, *The Practice of Technical and Scientific Communication: Writing in Professional Contexts* (Ablex, 1999). You can contact him at gstorms@cox.net. ■



Letter from Linda

Linda Oestreich, Region 5 Director-Sponsor

I'm sitting in my brother's den in Cathedral City, CA, with the mountains rising all around me. It's late October and the outside temperature is approaching 100 degrees, but the humidity is only 18%. Doesn't feel much like Houston! I'm on a quasi vacation, but since I have no job to be vacant from, I guess it's not really a vacation.

It's been two weeks since the phenomenal, magical, wonderful Region 5 conference! And what a technical stampede of communications it was! We had several successful preconference workshops on Thursday, a fun kickoff reception on Thursday evening, and two and a half days of incomparable keynote speakers, exciting sessions, and productive networking. Diana Barkley and her team did an outstanding job!

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

The program committee for the conference really outdid themselves in finding perfect keynote speakers. On Friday morning, Dr. William Gribbons the Director of Human Factors in Information Design Center at Bentley College in Waltham, MA, spoke on the "The Road Ahead for Technical Communication: Where are we Going?" His talk was powerful and timely. Almost every session I attended wound up in a discussion of what was happening to our profession and what we could do to stay ahead of the curve.

So much happened that it's impossible to give you more than just a taste of what you missed. It was grand, it was enlightening, and it was fun.

Dr. Gribbons is an associate professor of Information Design and through his work he has helped numerous Fortune 500 companies improve the usability of their technology products. He also has the pleasure of helping students who graduate from his program find jobs. Dr. Gribbons believes that the best fields for the future are finance and health services and that even with the huge changes we face, the profession will thrive.

On Saturday, during lunch, Dr. Andrew Dillon, Dean of the School of Information at the University of Texas at Austin, spoke on the trends in the emerging field of information architecture. This term, one that we've heard and sometimes even taken as our own, has attracted practitioners from a variety of backgrounds. Dr. Dillon believes that we in technical communication share many areas of expertise with information architects, and those of us who choose to enhance those skills will truly thrive as we move into the future.

SESSIONS

More than 100 people attended the conference, and about 40 of them were presenters. Those forty polished and smart folks shared their ideas, their skills, and their expertise with the rest of us in the beautiful setting of the Omni Hotel Austin. Naturally I couldn't attend all the sessions (we had four tracks!), but I saw some and heard about many. All the reports were positive and packed with excitement. Session topics were varied and they included usability, commodity writer versus strategic contributor, integrated documentation, recruiter roundtable, Frame script and Adobe Acrobat tips and tricks, indexing, managing remote teams (as remote as Pune, India), single sourcing, project management, instructional design, and ethics. Whew! I get tired just remembering this partial list!

cont'd...

The meeting rooms were comfy and the hotel was magnificent. Sixth Street, Austin's music and entertainment strip, was a short walk away, so the attendees had no excuse for quiet, boring evenings! I managed to sneak away and listen to some very loud, live music for a short while and loved it. And on Friday night, I had the not-so-faint strains of a Robert Cray concert wafting in through my 18th floor windows from Stubbs, several blocks away!

PEOPLE

Attendees included folks from many chapters and we tried some new things, such as a used book sale. Sprinkled among our Region 5 folks were members from as far away as Wichita, Kansas, and Chicago, Illinois. We love it when we have visitors! The used book sale was fun and didn't cost anything more than a few strained muscles to move the boxes of books to the hotel. The team sold them for \$2 to \$5, and some of the selections were a real bargain. Conference folks took the remainders to Half Price Books to add a few more bucks to the kitty!

LEADERSHIP

Sunday morning brought the Leadership Workshop. I was privileged to have Thea Teich (STC President) and Andrea Ames (STC 1st V.P.) help me out. (Suzanna Laurent, our 2nd V.P., had planned to be there, but had to stay home for a family emergency.) Judy Glick-Smith, our past Immediate Past President (say THAT three times real fast!) also attended and shared her wisdom with the group. We had more than 20 folks there from eight different chapters. Not bad for a bunch of people who were already tired from two and a half days of conferencing! STC leaders and potential leaders rock!

SUMMARY

So much happened that it's impossible to give you more than just a taste of what you missed. It was grand, it was enlightening, and it was fun. To be sure that you're part of the excitement for next year, I suggest you start making plans for your trip to the 2004 Region 5 conference in Salt Lake City now! Many blessings to you all, here's hoping your autumn days are filled with color, joy, and prosperity! ■



Chapter Announcements

Usability Workshop: Fix that Web Site Now!

Have you tested your Web site on users? If you haven't, chances are good that your Web site interface could use improvement. In this workshop, nationally recognized Web strategists **Cia Romano** and **Sean Fitzpatrick** teach you the basics of practical usability for Web sites, then help you assess and quickly improve your existing Web site interface by applying those basics. Romano and Fitzpatrick are the CEO/founder and Senior Media Strategist at Interface Guru™ www.interfaceguru.com.

User-centered strategy is the key to online success in today's demanding media environment. This workshop explores user/reader expectations and the impact of user experience on audience loyalty, profitability and market reach. You will learn how to make the most of the all-important Web site interface – the place where you win or lose your reader.

In Part I, Romano and Fitzpatrick lead a clinic on Web usability fundamentals based on Romano's lab studies and industry standards such as the National Cancer Institute's new Research-Based Guidelines for Web Design and Usability. In Part II, Romano and Fitzpatrick guide attendees in evaluating and redesigning their own Web site's home page, applying the concepts taught in Part I.

- **When:** Saturday, November 15, 2003. Registration and continental breakfast at 8:30 a.m.; workshop from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. with a snack break.
- **Where:** Hilton Tucson East, 7600 East Broadway, Tucson
- **Price:** \$45 for members and \$55 for nonmembers
- **RSVP:** Send an e-mail message to Helen Marty (martyh46@msn.com) by 4 p.m. on Monday, November 10. No-shows will be billed. Walk-ins are always welcome, but we cannot guarantee breakfast or snacks.
- **What to bring:**
 - ✓ Inexpensive 10x12 drawing pad and 3x5 index cards;
 - ✓ #2 pencils, black fine line marker, and 3 highlighters (pink/yellow/green);
 - ✓ 2 color and 1 grayscale printouts of the home page you're interested in.

STC Phoenix Chapter Workshop: No Guts, No Gain™

In this interactive workshop, you will redefine your goals, create a plan to achieve them, and build a process to overcome those inevitable obstacles. Our presenter reveals powerful ideas and techniques that will help redirect your thoughts and energies toward achieving clear and compelling business and personal goals. Join us to experience how the "Mental Health Club for Professionals" can change your reality in 2004 and beyond.

Jeff Hanlon, facilitator, trainer, and sales professional has over ten years of professional experience, including sales, sales management, sales instruction, marketing and logistics.

- **When:** Tuesday, November 11, 2003. Registration and networking start at 5 p.m., dinner at 6, and the program starts at 7 p.m.
- **Where:** Wyndham Hotel Phoenix Airport, 427 N. 44th Street, Phoenix
- **For more information:** Please visit www.stc-phoenix.com. ■

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About the Newsletter

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Submissions

Contributions, book and product reviews, letters, and articles are welcome. We prefer items on topics that are relevant to the field of technical communication. Your text may be edited to conform to style guidelines and space restrictions of the newsletter. The deadline for submissions is the last Friday of each month.

Send submissions by e-mail (Word file or RTF) to the [Editor](#). Include your name and telephone number. By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and you permit other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Unless otherwise noted, authors retain copyright.

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About the STC

Our Mission...Designing the future of technical communication

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is the world's largest professional association for anyone whose job involves communicating technical information. Contact the STC at 901 N. Stuart St., Ste. 904, Arlington, VA 22203-1822. Phone: (703) 522-4114; Web: www.stc.org

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