Boston Broadside

In this Issue

From the President's Desk

by Steve Jong,
Boston Chapter President

A few weeks ago I participated in the consensus judging for the Boston/Northern New England Publications competition. The competition is what pushed me into active involvement with the chapter ten years ago. Since then I've done everything from judging at the chapter level to serving as best-of-show judge at the International technical Publication Competition--in effect, helping to select the best technical document in the world.

This year's competition has run smoothly thanks to the hard work of Mike Ball, the competitions general manager, and his coordinators Deanna Dysert (Publications), Patty Morin (Art), and Steve Straight (Online); Mark Decker, Denise Dennett, Mary Flebotte of NNE,

Admit It. You May Need New Hardware

As painful as it may be, many of us *should* invest in a new computer. We can do more, faster and not have to worry about our PC.

by Michael Ball

When my bike shop wouldn't overhaul my 10-year-old Girvin Pro-Flex bike, I had to look for a new one. That's parallel to what many of us face with our PCs. We use them all the time, but eventually, these old friends no longer deliver.

My old yellow two-wheeler had a crack in the frame that might have left me bleeding on the trail. An out-of-tech PC may not hurt physically, but it can cost you business or at least make using it inefficient and unpleasant. Frame 7 and PhotoShop CS may require more power than your old buddy has.

Figuring out where to go and what to buy is tough. The technologies have changed. There are more local and online vendors. We can feel the folks in the supermarket

Write Your Way to Success

by Karen Giventer,
STC-Boston Volunteer Coordinator

If I may be so bold, I'm going to make a new year's resolution for you – a resolution you can easily keep. No, it's not Eat Right, Lose Weight, or Wake Up Earlier. This is something I know you can do. Here it is:

Write an article for the *Boston Broadside*.

I know you can keep this resolution because we STC members are writers. So, since you're a writer, I'm just asking you to write. It's like asking a Green Bean to Be Green.

Write About What You Know…or Don't Know

What topics are needed for the *Broadside*? The subjects for articles are very flexible. I'm sure that you've heard the expression, "Write about what you know." This is very good advice. Suppose you are

Judging Best of Show in the IOCC

10 Lessons on What "The Best" Means

by Paula Berger,
Fellow, Boston Chapter

At the 2004 International Online Communication Competition (IOCC) judging in March, I had the honor and pleasure of serving as a Best of Show (BOS) judge. The other judges on this team were John Garison and Neil Perlin, each of whom has extensive judging experience and over 25 years in technical communication. Both of them were extremely knowledgeable and a pleasure to work with. We spent a long, intense day together looking at "the best of the best."

To be entered in the IOCC, an entry had to have already won an Award of Distinction in a chapter or regional STC competition. At the IOCC, all entries were judged again by new teams of expert judges, who then submitted the

Annette Roth, and Joan Wotkowicz; and the many volunteer judges. From having seen how other chapters run their competition, and knowing how hard the Boston volunteers work, I can tell you that the Boston/NNE competition is the biggest and the best in the Society.

I used to think of the competition as a way to give back to the Society and the profession, and I still do. In addition, I think of the competition as a member benefit, for entrants and judges alike. Here's why.

Technical writers crave, but rarely get, feedback on their work. Did anyone read the manual? Did they like it? Was it clear? Was it effective? Well, for a modest entry fee of under $100 (less for members), you can received detailed, objective feedback from three readers, and you can get this feedback for as many technical documents, of whatever type, that you choose to enter. In addition, there's an opportunity for recognition and reward in the form of an Award of Merit, Excellence, or Distinction, which looks good in a performance review and on your resume.

STC recognition can benefit your employer. One year, when my company's entries won multiple awards, we issued a press release and the stock price went up $1 million the next day.

For judges, the competition offers many rewards as well. For me, this year I renewed old acquaintances and met new colleagues. Aside from networking, I saw some interesting new technologies and examined some interesting new ways of presenting technical information. Judges receive training that helps them understand about documentation quality and recognize what to look for. Judging can make you a better writer, editor, illustrator, reviewer, or manager.

Even if you haven't participated in one of the competitions this year, you can still see what a winning entry looks like by coming to the STACIEs banquet February 16. Please volunteer, and enter, next year!

Look for announcements from STC-INFO and on the Web site. **§**

very best entries they had seen to our BOS judging team.

Only 12 entries made it to our team. These 12 entries we judged were diverse in format – Help systems, tutorials, websites, demos, and technical brochures – as well as in audience and purpose. It was fascinating to see the similarities and differences in "great" online communication. We learned a lot, reinforcing knowledge we already had and recognizing some newer truisms. We'd like to share the top 10 lessons we learned with you.

1. Strong navigation is as important as great content.

Content is still king, but it isn't content unless you can find it! This lesson came through over and over again. The most common reason we ruled out entries

from Best of Show (BOS) contention was because we just could not find things we wanted to look at. Navigation was weak or missing or sometimes just wrong. Entries had no search capability or index. We saw entries with unbelievably wonderful content, but we almost always had a problem with navigation. We often said, "Remember that nifty thing? Let's go look at it again." And then we couldn't find our way back to it without major headaches. One index was very thorough, but then we realized it was just a list of terms and didn't have any links. We're still scratching our heads over that one.

2. Organization matters, too.

In addition to the problems we had getting around and finding information, it seemed that the way information was organized – as a whole, within sections, even within topics – was often problematic. We expected to find similar topics presented in a similar fashion, sections of information assembled logically, and consistency within the whole piece. But we sometimes found that one section bore little resemblance to another section in the same piece. Since strong

organization is so critical for usability, we were surprised to find these weaknesses still common at this quality level.

3. Focus on your audience.

Back to basic principles. Who are you communicating with? Why? When? The better an entry was targeted to its audience and its purpose, the clearer the message.

4. Use the strengths of the online medium.

The bar, and our expectations, keep going up. What would have been considered bleeding-edge and excellent only a few years ago is now run-of-the-mill and has little chance of winning. It's a testament to how far the field has come that the best entries did not use the book paradigm in any way. That is not to say they did not use text, but that the text was just one element. Visual, dynamic, engaging, non-linear – these were important elements of all the entries that we thought were strongest. The days of putting your book into a PDF file and calling it online communication are ending. Book-like help files, so common for the last decade, now look mundane.

5. Keep it simple.

Bells and whistles only matter if they add value – focusing attention on key information, clarifying concepts, improving navigation. Otherwise, the pieces we liked best were simple, clean, crisp, clear, and uncluttered.

Tip of the Month

Whenever you are networking with another professional, be sure to remember the most important bit of information you will ever need to know about the person— his or her name.

6. Words and pictures are an unbeatable combination – when the proportions are right.

Nothing made it to BOS consideration without a strong visual component, proving how far we have come from the days of PDFing a reference manual and calling it online documentation. But some entries had swung too far the other way and lacked sufficient text. We saw some elegant demos and tutorials… but sometimes we just lost track of where we were. We needed just a bit of text, enough to keep us focused and to ensure we were making the right connections. Some entries had too much text, even more had too little text, making it clear to us that finding the right balance is very tricky.

7. Money isn't everything, but it matters.

We were comparing extremely sophisticated, high-end pieces from some of the world's largest companies with low-budget entries created by students, along with everything in between. Solid use of basic concepts can sometimes outweigh "all the design that money can buy." However, at the BOS level, some of the entries are almost works of art. Works of art are created without regard to cost and as one-time creations – was that true of these entries? It would be interesting to know whether the winners had to provide a cost-justification of their work, whether they will have to maintain it, and how those two issues affected their approach and design.

8. Standards are a good thing.

Developers often feel limited by standards, but we saw a case in which a non-standard design proved to be a fatal flaw. On the verge of crashing a real-time flight simulator, we looked around desperately for help but found nothing – no "Help" button anywhere and F1 did nothing. It turned out that help was available, but by pressing F10. F1 is an old and declining standard but many people know it. F10 is meaningless. We never even thought to try it, we never found help, and that was one of the major factors in taking the entry out of contention.

9. Enthusiasm improves communication.

Several entries presented a positive, upbeat, enthusiastic view of the technical content. Many of these were NOT marketing pieces. The presentation and style conveyed that the authors were excited about the content, and we responded by becoming excited about it too.

10. Technical communication truly is global.

In case anyone didn't realize how global technical communication has become, one of the very best entries was created in Germany and written in UK English. Several of the other entry forms indicated that the entries were created specifically for use worldwide.

And finally… STC is good at this.

The IOCC judges are very, very good at evaluating entries. Over the years, the criteria have been clarified, the judging process has been honed, and the evaluations have become more consistent. The volunteer judges take this very seriously and work very hard. Of the 12 entries presented to us as possible BOS candidates, we agreed that all of them were indeed worthy of BOS consideration and the Award of Distinction they received.

About the Author

Paula Berger (www.paulaberger.com) is an STC Fellow and a candidate for STC 2nd Vice President. She has served as a judge in the International Competitions since 1997, managed the Boston Competitions from 1986-1991, and was a committee member and judge for the first Trans European Competitions in 2003. She is Director of Communication Services at Virtual, Inc. **§**

Volunteer of the Month

Steve Straight, *Co-Coordinator Online Competitions Committee*

Steve Straight is the technical publications manager at Openwave Systems in Burlington. Steve's group writes documentation for Openwave's messaging software applications. Steve has been a technical writer for about 15 years.

This was Steve's first year involved with any of the competitions. He worked closely with Joan Wotkowicz and Mark Decker as co-coordinator of the Online Communication Competition. Steve notes that "It was challenging at times but ultimately quite rewarding." Steve has committed to staying on for next year's competitions and working with the team to help improve the process. He looks forward to meeting the challenges presented by new technologies in online communication. **§**

scanning hundreds of cereal choices when all we really want is Kellogg's Corn Flakes.

Desktop or Laptop

Just when we knew the differences between notebooks and desk computers, everyone changed their catalogs. Today, you can get 15 and even 17-inch screens on laptops with DVD burners. These are true desktop PC replacements capable of anything a tech writer can ask.

Unfortunately with screen costs and customer demand, these gems cost two to four times as much as a desktop with similar capabilities. It is an expensive way to go unless you are a contractor, researcher, or otherwise need to move your system frequently.

If you go laptop, be sure to pay the extra $100 to $400 for the extended service contact. You can get a contract that will swap out your PC while they repair it or less expensive service that let you take it to a service center.

Tip: This is one of Dell's weak spots. They charge heavily for service contracts on equipment that only comes with a 1-year contract. If you compare their business systems with 3-year contracts, you may find that you can get your system on that side of Dell for less than buying the 1-year version and upgrading the contract.

How Beefy

You can save perhaps $200 or more by choosing the minimum configuration for your software. That might be 256KB RAM, 20GB hard drive, no NIC, and no burner with your CD drive. ***DO NOT DO THIS.*** DO NOT SCRIMP ON HARDWARE.

On one extreme, unless you also design high-end games, you don't need a $7,000 system. On the other, most of us don't buy a new PC every year. We should project three years out and not buy a production machine that will run our software too slowly, not handle the next upgrades, and crash when we load multi-

ple applications.

I go way back with PCs and remember when small specs by today's standards — 64KB (that's right, *K*) and 168KB floppies —were plenty. Those were also days when the rule of thumb was $2,000 to $4,000 bought a tech-writer's system. You can get a lot of computer now for $2,000, without considering the inflation from way back.

Obsolescence

The nah-nah factor is real. Whatever you buy will be less powerful and more expensive than if you had waited. But the time period is longer. The difference is no longer measured in weeks, rather in many months. Spec out what you need, commit to it, and know that you'll get your money's worth. (I know I got my value from the $3,000 I spent in 1979.)

You can pick machines at sweet spots, when less is not enough and more is only nice. The sweet spot is what does the job at a fair price. You should be able to get a three to five-year horizon desktop PC for $600 to $1,000, about the price of an okay road bike.

If you choose one of those $350 specials at CompUSA or MicroCenter, you are likely to get iffy components, slow bus, RAM and CPU speeds, and the chance to get to know the service department very well. When you consider the per-day amortization, choosing a low-end

> "Just when we knew the differences between notebooks and desk computers, everyone changed their catalogs."

PC is a false economy.

Sweet spots

You'll find hardware tip points that meet current and mid-term or longer needs. these include:

512MB of RAM. Nearly all tech-writing software works fine with this. You can have a FrameMaker book with lots of chapters and illustrations open, convert a fair sized Word.DOC and save the mess as a PDF. You should be able to have your text or layout program open

with your high-end art one.

However, it is no surprise that 1GB is better here. You are unlikely to need 2GB or more.

An unpleasant wrinkle in today's technology relates to RAM though. Most motherboards have only two RAM slots and current RAM is much more expensive in larger sizes. So if you buy two 256MB RAM cards, you fill both slots and need to buy two 512MB units to upgrade to 1GB. If you are not sure you need more than 512MB, you are probably better to pay the premium for a single 512MB unit and leave a slot open.

Tip: Be sure that your RAM comes with a lifetime warranty. Most does and it is worth asking. These chips can fail. The lifetime ones are the same price.

CPU Speed. High-end gaming requires very fast processors. Tech writers in general will be delighted with 1.8GHz or faster. You will not notice the difference a 3GHz chip has over a 2.4GHz one. RAM is much more important and a better place to spend an extra $100.

Bigger Monitor. You can probably use your old monitor. If you have to squint to see your pages, this is a good time to upgrade. Look for a 17-inch or 19-inch with at least 1280x1024 resolution that will let you see two full pages for editing and layout. Look for 72 to 85Hz horizontal or better so you can adjust for flicker.

Careless shopping can make your monitor cost more than the PC. Careful comparisons can get you an upgrade for free (Dell often offers this incentive) or for the same price as smaller monitors. Regardless, you should be able to get a big, good monitor for $200 to $300.

An LCD monitor is often twice the price or more of a regular with a flat screen. Unless you have a tiny desk, you may not need this admittedly beautiful toy. (We all want one.)

CD or DVD and Read/Write. The minimum you need is a CD burner (CD/RW). Two drives are nice because you can copy disks quickly. DVDs are better than CDs because it is easy to get one

that also reads CDs, and more software comes on DVD now. A drive that plays and writes both is a gem because you can do everything except illegally steal movies — that would take two of those units. Fortunately the increment in cost of DVD/RW/CD/RW drives is marginal over that of a CD/RW burner only. Paying the extra or looking for a free upgrade is worth it.

The middle ground is a DVD/CD/RW that reads DVD and both reads and burns CD. This will be fine for most of us.

Brick or Net

You can be astonished by how little sales reps and clerks in small and large computer stores know. There is little sense in paying the premium to buy in a store, other than having a place where you can grab someone in service by the collar and demand satisfaction. True, at a Micro-Center or Staples, you can usually walk out of the store with the box, but it is likely that you have gotten lower quality components than purchasing it online or by phone, and paid more too.

There are reasons so many companies buy their computers from Dell and HP. Both sell a lot, have good prices, try to test and deliver systems that won't come back, and can demand high quality from their suppliers.

HP is the sales leader and Dell tries real hard. Both have good deals. Dell is tricky in changing its deals a couple of times a week. It is worth shopping its site several times to get a sense of the current discounts and free upgrades. It may be worth watching Dell's deals for a couple of weeks.

Both offer free (Dell) or low-cost (HP) shipping and very fast (Dell) or within a week (HP) schedules.

Buy or Build

Most people would not and should not consider what I did for my production tech-writing PC. I built my own from scratch. That takes a little skill and a lot of guts.

Doing this is not much cheaper than buying a PC complete. It's also like owning your own home. There is no superintendent to call when the faucet drips or the gutters rot. You're the super, Mack. If you build a PC, you're responsible for making the system work and you fix it.

The plus side is that you can build what you want, in appearance, performance, and components. For the same price, you get a faster processor, higher-quality components, and geek points.

I went to the headwaters of components, www.newegg.com. The prices are the lowest, the delivery is a day or two or three and often for free, the selection is vast, and the catalog has enough (barely enough) information. There are other places, but some like PCs for Everyone in Cambridge aren't as inexpensive and don't have the selection. You'll find that the alpha geeks approve of New Egg.

If you go this way, you can ruin the equipment. If you don't use a static strap or don't touch a ground (like a radiator), you can blow the RAM, for instance. On the other hand, simple precautions and the type of methodical action we use every day in our jobs is what it takes.

If you look at your PC's box, you'll find that you only really need to choose:

Case. One of the geek joys of DIY is getting a case as big as you need (expansion slots and extra fans), or small, in your color, even with neon. Careful shopping at someplace like New Egg finds a case that includes a good power supply (350 watts or more) and fits the motherboard you want. These should be well under $100.

Motherboard. The circuit board that you plug everything else into will have a standard size, but fit only Intel *or* AMD CPU chips. You have to make sure it has a socket compatible with your chip.

They are almost all ATX form factor so that they work with the cases. Nearly all have fast internal and extra communications (bus speed), but the extras differ.

Most tech writers will be happy with the onboard audio and video; these are much better than only a few years ago. It should also have an AGP slot in case you want to buy a fancy video card later. It is rare to pay more than $100 for a motherboard and many good ones are $50 or $60.

CPU Chip. RAM is definitely more important than CPU speed. Many highly capable processors in the 1.8 to 2.4GHz range are under $100. Intel or AMD are both good. Having 256KB to 1GB of cache is normal and necessary.

RAM. Your working memory is what makes the system useful and fast. Your motherboard probably has two slots. Start with one 512MB or 1GB chip. Choose one with a lifetime warranty and a speed compatible with your motherboard (almost all are, but double-check). If you find 1GB chips too pricey, it's a good bet that buying two 512MB ones will last you as long as the PC system. You may never need more.

Hard Drive. Faster and bigger are better for drives. The cost differential between 40 and 80GB or more is very small. It's not unusual for software to be 300MB or more for all features. If you use digital images you can fill 40GB. Spin speeds of 7200 or above and buffers of 8MB are worth the incremental cost.

Note: I remember my first CP/M system in 1979. A 5MB (not 5GB) drive would have cost $5,000! Electronics prices are going in the right direction.

Input Devices. I'm a trackball guy. So I pay the extra for the convenience and option of writing or typing with my right hand while mousing left. Otherwise, you can use what you have for

keyboard and mouse or buy good, inexpensive ones at a store or online. I keep at least one spare of each.

If you have more than one system, a KVM switch lets you share keyboard, monitor and mouse. These are in the nature of $30 to $75 for two to four-set models. I have maxed out a four-port with my writing PC, a Linux box for contracting, and two low-powered ones to test software and networking.

CD and DVD Drives. See "CD or DVD and Read/Write" on page 4.

Assembly. No single doc for motherboard, chip or case will tell you everything you need to know about putting the parts together. The trickiest step can be trying to figure out what front-panel USB pins go where on the motherboard. There is no standard for that yet. If you are not comfortable with concepts of anti-static chip handling or working with the parts, it would be better to spend the extra money or getting a little less computer than trying it solo or working off a for-dummies book.

Operating System. When you buy a PC, you almost always get an operating system on the hard drive.When you build your own, you need to buy one (about $100).

If your old PC is dead *AND* you got the operating system on CD *AND* the license is not tied to the old CPU *AND* it is a current OS, you may be able to save it. All of that is unlikely. You'll probably want XP (Home is fine for most of us, Pro only for heavy networkers). You decidedly do not want to put an old, lame OS (think Windows 95, 98 or ME) on your new box. Windows 2000 is a minimum but XP is much better.

Doing it. Unlike 10 minutes plugging in your purchased PC peripherals, it takes several hours to assemble a PC from parts. If you have never seated a CPU before, it can be daunting. It isn't for everyone, but when you finish, you can cruise www.thinkgeek.com and pick out an appropriate T-shirt, maybe the *Geek Inside* logo or the simple *übergeek*. **§**

Designing Context Sensitive Help

Review of the December Chapter Meeting

by Bill Gruener

I'm working with a program, and I need help, but help is the last thing that I choose. I am frustrated, angry, feeling childish and incompetent. If I don't find an answer immediately, I quit help immediately and return to the program—pounding keys, clicking buttons, double-clicking, triple-clicking, quadruple-clicking. Should I find an answer, I will spend five to seven seconds—at best—reading, paying attention, and attempting something. Then, I'll try something else. I'm a man, which means that if you offer me help, 25% of the time I'll accept, but if you offer me a tip, 80% of the time I'll accept. John Carroll understands how I learn and work:

> "*The problem is not that people cannot follow simple steps; it is that they do not. People are thrown into action; they can only understand through the effectiveness of their actions in the world. People are situated in a world more real to them than a series of steps, a world that provides rich context and convention for everything they do. People are always already trying things out, thinking things through, trying to relate what they already know to what is going on, recovering from errors. In a word, they are already too busy learning to make much use of the instruction.*" (John Carroll, *The Nurnberg Funnel*, MIT Press, 1990).

David Locke started his career as a college professor in Upstate New York. In the early eighties, he migrated to the Boston area hoping to find a tenured faculty position in American Studies. Tenured positions were few (very few) and far between; a growing family and hunger provided motivation to look beyond the classroom. Through networking contacts, David

found a friend who asked whether whether he could write. David knew that he could, having just moved from the publish or perish world. He landed a writing contract with a large hardware manufacturer, and his technical communication career blossomed. He is the principal consultant with Wordsmith,LLC, a communications consultancy specializing in building help systems and in training for ROBOHELP X5 and Captivate. David's life is busy with 50% training, 50% consulting, 50% creating: you get the picture. I suspect that if you asked David what he considered the most important aspect of building context-sensitive help, he would reply, "Cooperation."

David Locke was the guest presenter at the monthly meeting of the STC-Boston Chapter, Wednesday, December 15. His presentation was procedural: he opened with a definition to context-sensitive help, moved on to describing how to do it, and ended with two examples of context-sensitive help systems.

Definition: Formats and Types

Context-sensitive help (CSH) comes in several formats including HTML Help, which appears as a compiled HTML file known as "chum"(. chm) file; and, WinHelp, a Windows-based application that opens in its own window without the need for a Web browser. Additionally, there are two CSH types are (1) any guidance and (2) embedded help.

Plan, Design, Implement

Developing good CSH, requires close cooperation among the writers and developers involved in the project. As all of us in the audience appeared to be technical writers/communicators, David approached the subject from what writers need to know and do. Understanding is important: we need to understand users—their skills, their level of knowledge, their goals, and their environment for using the help. But, understanding goes past understanding just the user. It also requires understanding the process, which is defining information categories relevant to users, to programs, and to CSH. After understanding users and information categories, then we work with developers, draft the content,

the person in your documentation group who provides the most in-depth peer edits. Write an article explaining the process you go through to help get the best from your co-workers. Suppose your deadlines for delivering online help are impossible. Write about your strategies for writing fast, cutting corners, or getting speedy review turnaround. Perhaps you have just successfully completed a job search. Write about your experiences. What worked? What didn't? What bolstered your confidence? How did you deal with disappointment?

Alternatively, write about what you don't know, although this might seem like heresy. After all, how can you write about the unfamiliar? Simple. Think of a topic that interests you. What do you need to learn more about? What will help you in your current job or job search? Use article writing as a way to learn and improve yourself (and your resume).

Jobs and Contacts

Writing an article is a fool-proof way to gain experience, improve your resume, network, and possibly land a job. Think about it. Suppose you know nothing about data storage but lately you've seen a lot of jobs on Monster for documenting data storage systems. Do some research, call some experts, and write an article. The next time a potential employer asks what you know about data storage systems, you can say, "I just published an article about that very subject!" It's so much better than saying, "I know nothing but I'm a fast learner."

Be bold. You aren't afraid to call up experts, are you? It's not nearly as scary as cold calling about a job. Suppose you call John Doe at Company XYZ and say, "I'm working on an article about data storage. Can you tell me what you see as the coming trend in this industry? I'd like to quote you for the article." Mr. Doe will be glad to help you. It's a lot easier than saying, "Mr. Doe, I'm looking for a job. Do you have any openings?" Later, you can send Mr. Doe the article, follow up with a phone call, and

say, "Oh, by the way, I'm now looking for a job in this industry. Who can I call in your company about a technical writing position?"

Writer's Block, Shmiter's Block

I absolutely don't believe in writer's block – especially not for article writing. Maybe you can't think of a topic for a steamy best-seller, but surely you can share your expertise about something. If you have trouble getting started, just try writing down some disjointed facts in a list. They'll come together later. In grad school, we called this the "Brute Force Method" of writing.

Here's an example: Suppose you are the manager of a documentation group and you'd like to write an article to share some of the management wisdom you've learned over the years. You do your job very well every day, but now you just don't know how to pull together an article about it. You're sweating over not having a cohesive outline or a punchy opening. Forgettaboutit! Don't stress yourself out. Just write down your thoughts, no matter how unrelated, like this:

"I like to give my staff timely feedback…Remember that time Sally didn't call in when she was sick? I should say something about establishing rules…It's just as challenging to manage my own managers as to manage my direct reports…Man, I get a lot of flack when my writers get last minute changes…I miss writing, but it's fun to help develop people…Budgeting is hard. Always tack on a bit extra when asking for money."

Now that you've written down your thoughts, you know you have a lot to say and a lot to write about. Look at your "thought list" and organize it into a few main topics. Using our Management example, your topics might be: Managing the People, Managing the Process, and Managing the Money. The article will write itself now. Write out your thoughts and lead-ins; then use bulleted lists with explanations to drive home your points about each sub-topic.

It's Easier to Edit than to Write

Isn't it easier to change and edit text

than to stare at a blank screen and write? That's why I'm suggesting that you get your thoughts typed up ASAP. After you read through them, your natural writing/editing talents will kick in and you can turn what you've written into a cohesive article. Even if you write down something like "stuff about XML goes here," you'll feel better.

I can't tell you how many times I've wracked my brains about some white paper for a client who wanted me to emphasize the excellence of their software. After typing "marketing blah blah blah goes here," I could breathe a sigh of relief and continue writing the paper. Later, I was able to concentrate on turning "marketing blah" into the Gettysburg Address of features and benefits.

Making the Time

C'mon, you've got the time. I know you do because I've been secretly watching you all day through my magic 2-way computer that I told you about in my October article. I've watched you crank out that last minute procedure for the new software feature. I've watched you churn out those release notes that the Development Manager needed in one hour flat. I've watched you give up your lunch hour to write the Technical Benefits slide that the Sales Manager sprung on you 30 minutes before the customer meeting. If you can pull all those rabbits out of all those hats, surely you can write one article about something that interests you.

I know someone in STC who is absolutely passionate about a particular topic. (I can't tell you the topic because then you'd know who she is.) I asked her to write an article for the *Broadside*. Would you believe that this passionate STCer told me that she didn't have time to write because of a conference she was planning? Was she kidding? This was a great chance for her to promote her conference as well as share her passion. I'm sorry she missed out just because she thought she didn't have the time. Don't make her mistake.

If you're job hunting, don't even talk to me about time. Take two hours off from Monster and get started on an article. I

and develop a pilot. Locke is a fan of Michael Allen's quick prototyping and successful approximation method (*Guide to eLearning*, John Wiley, 2003) because you can find errors quickly and adjust. Locke recommends against building complete systems before presenting to users—too much time and money spent on something that gets thrown out.

Build Information Types

Understanding information types, the next step in the process, forces us to consider seven questions: what does this program do (scope); how do I do x (procedural); what do I need to know about y (reference); what happened when I …(troubleshoot); what's this thingee (context of the control); what do I do on z (context of screen); and how can I work faster. Answering these questions helps us to understand information types, and building information types is building a collection of answers to anticipated user questions.

Cement Partnerships

Once these information types are chosen, then the CSH builder needs to find the developer and cement the partnership. David warns, "Don't expect developers to be friendly." Cementing a partnership means deciding together what elements of the interface need to be linked to help topics, how those topics are "called," and who does the "map file." Developers need assurance that CSH is not an unknown black hole. Developers need access to resources like Microsoft Developers Network (MSDN), and developers need to know that you understand these resources. Very important for both developers and writers: clarify responsibility and how and where the dividing lines meet.

Design User Access and Program Linkage

Both user access (context-sensitive question mark, F1 key, help buttons) and program linkage (API calls, Javascript functions, and hypertext references) constitute the last decisions in designing the help system. Once

designed the three components of CSH are pretty simple: these components are one, the application, two, the linkage mechanism, and three, the information presented. For a user, executing a CSH event consists of four steps: first, the user clicks the help button, which initiates an API call/Javascript function/ hypertext reference, which points to a help file, which is displayed by the system. Choosing between an API call and a Javascript function/hypertext reference depends not on the help system being built but on the choice of using a Windows-based help system or a help system that displays on any browser on any operating system, and that choice depends on the product, vendor, functionality of the program.

Map Files; Track Files

Remaining are two more important and administrative elements to building CSH: creating both a mapping file (maps program controls to help topics) and a tracking file (keeps track of all the files and file numbers). Mapping files can be written in a text editor, Notepad, for example. Each line in the mapping file has a common structure. Each line links a program control to a help topic. Each file called has a unique ID. Therefore, with a large help system that generates long lists of call instructions, a tracking file is essential.

Summary

The preceding is a summary of David Locke's presentation. If you, dear reader, followed all the steps, you have done well. He created two demonstration help systems, one Windows based named "irs.chm" and the other Web-Help based, Aunt Minny's Jams. Both programs contain CSH systems, which provide context-sensitive help windows for key components of those programs; help topics are short and descriptive. If you would like to know more, send an email message to david@word-smith.net. **§**

Boston Chapter Special Interest Groups

*by Steven Greffenius,
General Coordinator,
Boston Chapter SIGs*

We've clicked through another digit on the cosmic odometer, which is to say we've made it through another twelve months. So it's membership renewal time for most organizations, STC included. By now you have your renewal form, and if you've looked at it, you've seen twenty-one SIGs under Communities of Interest. That makes you start to wonder, what's the difference between the society SIGs listed on the form and the local SIGs you hear about through the Boston chapter?

A SIG is a special interest group. It puts people with common interests in touch with each other for purposes of networking and professional development. When you sign up for a society SIG on your STC renewal form, you check off a

SIGs in Action. Ed Alexander prepares for his talk to the December meeting of the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG. Ed will return on March 1 for Part II of his talk, "Effective Marketing for Consultants."

box and you're a member. Whether or not you pay for your SIG membership depends on your STC membership status, and how many SIGs you join.

Chapter SIGs, or local SIGs as they're sometimes called, are not the same as society SIGs. Chapter SIGs are not even affiliated with the society SIGs. They are sponsored entirely by the Boston chapter, and your membership in the Boston chapter gives you full access to every one of them. Right now, the Boston chapter has six active SIGs:

Tools That Change How We Work

Review of the November Chapter Meeting

by Bill Gruener

Panelists: Ed Marshall, Kay Dixon, Herb Collins. Moderator: Gail Lyons.

Professional communicators constantly use software tools to share ideas, to present information, and to store data. As we work and grumble about our present tools and as we choose new tools, we ask ourselves: what features, what products, why? We want positive results and reduced frustrations. Can we, both with choosing and with using, optimize the experience? Finding effective tools is not an easy task. Equally important to finding effective tools is acknowledging the fact that tools and resources can affect our, and our organization's, performance. At the November meeting of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) and the STC-Boston chapter, Ed Marshall, Kay Dixon, and Herb Collins examined three views of how communication and learning tools affected performance.

Ed Marshall, an STC member who has a background in database management, and is an information developer at Compuware Corporation, introduced principles of file management systems and described how technical communicators of all levels can use file management systems to improve their efficiency and save their sanity. Ed mentioned corollary tools that enhance file management systems by "letting the computer do the work."

Ed opened by defining a source-code control tool: it allows single and multiple users to work on the same files, to track changes to those files, to store those changes, to store either ASCII or binary files, to retrieve any version of a file, to involve a database, and to lock for single-user access. The first step to using a tool happens before an organization adopts any tools: deciding what content involves the information set, what formats control the output, what

dedicated storage area holds the documentation, and what naming convention organizes the files. Ed noted that if you have the option to take a new tool out for a test drive before buying it, be sure to do so. We work with the tools in place. Therefore, safe file management practices can be instituted with an existing system: for example, before working on any file, retrieve it from the source-code control tool; next, copy the file to another directory; edit the file as needed; then, return the file to the source-code control tool. Ed encourages gaining extra protection by adding more
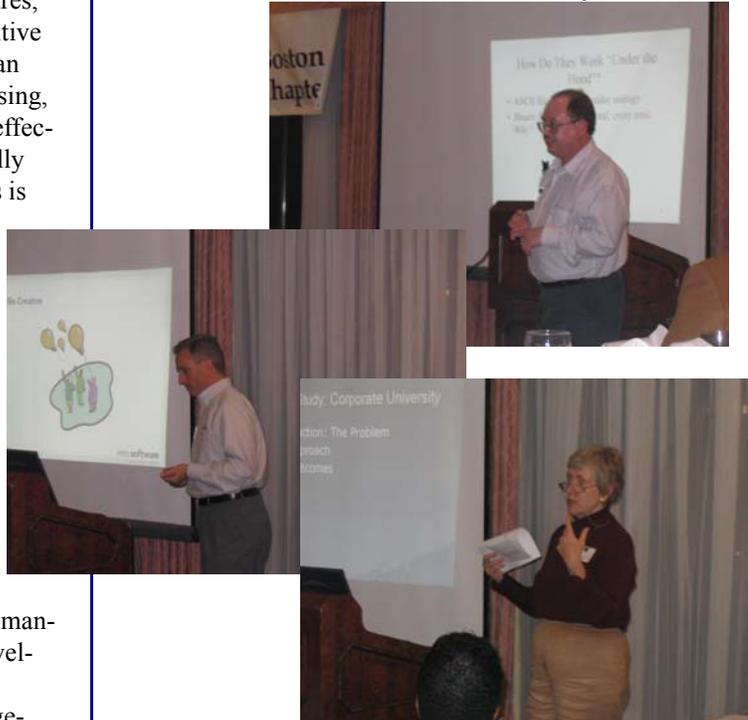
Explaining the tools. Speaking at the November meeting are (counterclockwise from top) Ed Marshall, Herb Collins, and Kay Dixon.

steps to the work flow. The common source-code control tools are Microsoft Visual SourceSafe, Perforce, Clear Case, and PVCS (changing its name as I write). Ed pointed out that there are some inexpensive and very effective third-party tools, software that enhances the source-code control tools: comparison tools, Beyond Compare and Araxis Merge; advanced text editors: NoteTab-Pro and EditPadPro; search and replace utilities: Funduc.

Kay Dixon, Senior Curriculum Developer at Seibel Systems, Inc., presented a case study showing how PowerPoint, the ubiquitous tool in courseware devel-

opment, worked and did not work for one organization who wanted massive amounts of content distributed to non-professional communicators: customers, partners, employees, purchasers of subscription information. To fulfill the task of distributing large amounts of information, the organization (anonymous) involved many people from many departments. The organization chose PowerPoint, a readily accessible tool available in the Microsoft Office Suite. PowerPoint is quick and easy (reasonably) to understand and use. Content experts, SMEs, and management could enter their content expertise into PowerPoint slides and send it to a central repository. Then, the organization could distribute. A job completed; a need satisfied.

Indeed, the result was a mass of information distributed to a large audience in a short time but presented in inconsistent formats and quality. The initial effect was impressive, almost overwhelming. The long term netted a questionable result: new content did not evolve as quickly as needed, especially for the paying subscriptions. Updating was a problem. Inconsistencies caused identification problems and decreased the power of the message. If she had the chance to redo the project or do it for other organizations, Kay suggested remedies: use SMEs and other members of the organization just to provide content; collect all the content into Word templates; use courseware developers for retrieving, writing, and presenting the content; deliver the content in a consistent, user-oriented format; use "talent" for audio recordings; introduce interactivity into the presentations and templates.

Herb Collins, Principal Course Developer at MRO Software, Inc., enthusias-

tically discussed tools for synchronous online collaboration, which means participants meet live and online but not in person. Synchronous online collaboration allows any organization to promote, accelerate, and capture communications within their organization, or with their customers and clients. Herb described working with both remote subject matter experts and geographically dispersed teams. He detailed ways to capture live session information for later reference and training. And, Herb stressed that one of the greatest values of synchronous online collaboration is that the organization can capture information and make that information accessible across the organization and beyond.

Herb listed the major efforts in moving towards synchronous online collaboration:

- Educate yourself about the tools and fundamentals
- Try before you buy
- Develop standards
- Be creative
- Re-purpose/reuse content
- Champion your cause
- Make the hand-off

Gail Lyons, the program coordinator and a member of ISPI, stated that there are six areas that affect the performance of a person: expectations and feedback, tools and resources, consequences and incentives, skills and knowledge, selection and assignment, motives and preferences. She stated that the November 10 program was about tools and resources. **§**

Editor's Note: *The Boston Chapter of STC proudly sponsored the November Chapter Meeting, "Tools That Change How We Work," in association with the Massachusetts chapter of the International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI).*

- Karen Giventer leads the Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG
- Marie-Anne de Warren leads the International SIG
- Zev Frutkoff leads the Online Information SIG
- Lori Gillen leads the AccessAbility SIG
- Judy Stitt leads the Technical Editing SIG
- Gaurang Kadakia leads the Idea Watch SIG

You can learn about these special interest groups at http://www.stc-boston.org/sigs/sigs.shtml. Click the icon for any SIG you're interested in, and you'll go to that SIG's web page.

The chapter SIGs do not charge annual membership dues. The cost to attend a meeting is $7 for Boston chapter members, and $10 if you do not belong to the Boston chapter. The registration fee covers the cost of the meeting room and the food.

So the relationship between the society SIGs and the local SIGs can cause a little wonderment. I didn't understand the relationship until I became active in the Boston chapter. But once you learn that the local SIGs are entirely under the Boston chapter's umbrella, and that they aren't affiliated with the society SIGs, the overall structure is pretty easy to figure out.

I should add that the local SIGs are an excellent benefit of belonging to the Boston chapter. My involvement with the SIGs has contributed much to my learning, and has given me an opportunity to get acquainted with many colleagues. People in STC are friendly and helpful, and the chapter overall is an outstanding organization. I learned all that from getting involved in the Online Information SIG two and a half years ago. Now I work with all the SIGs, and I've learned that every one of them is just as good as the one I was in!

If you'd like to learn more about the chapter SIGs, or attend a meeting, please contact Steven Greffenius at steveng@TechWritePublishing.com. **§**

guarantee you'll make more job contacts by calling experts to interview for an article than by staring at Monster job agent results.

Find Your Voice

The opportunity is there for the taking – the *Boston Broadside*. You don't have to search for a place to publish. We're among friends. So fulfill that resolution to write an article and get published. If you need help, contact me (Karen Giventer, Volunteer Coordinator, kkgg123@hotmail.com). I'll help you get motivated or get started. The *Broadside* editors want you to succeed and they want to help you share your knowledge with the rest of the group. You're smart, you're a talented writer, and you know something that others need to learn. I can't think of any better reasons to write. **§**

60% of Online Competition Entries Win Awards

by Linda Fritz,
Boston Chapter Online Public Relations

Awards were plentiful at the 2004 - 2005 STC-Boston/Northern New England (NNE) Online Communication Competition, held November 6 at Hewlett Packard's Nashua, New Hampshire facility. Sixty percent of all entries won awards.

The Online Communication Competition Committee reported that for the 2004 - 2005 Competition, it had 35 entries and 38 judges. Grouped in a team of three or four people, each judging team reviewed two to four entries. Using forms and criteria developed specifically for entry types (for example, Help, marketing, training, and Web), judges reviewed entries as a team. After each team completed its reviews, the team tallied the scores and determined awards.

Eight Entries Win Distinguished Awards

Awards included Distinguished (highest), Excellence, and Merit. This year's competition yielded eight Distinguished award-winning entries. The STC-Boston /NNE chapters send all Distinguished award winning entries to the International Competition. This year, STC is holding its International Competition on March 12 in Arlington, Virginia.

At the local level, our STC-Boston/ NNE Online Communication Competition proved to be a full day's effort for online judges. Competition Day began on November 6 at 8 AM and lasted until almost 5 PM. The judges devoted most of the day to judging individual entries and reserved the last hour and a half for consensus judging to determine Best of Show.

Attend the Banquet and Learn Who Won Best of Show

Judges always select Best of Show from the Distinguished award winning entries. All the online judges participate in the final consensus judging. This year, voting was tense and close.

Which entry won Best of Show? For that answer, you have to wait until the Competition Banquet, scheduled for February 16. Watch the STC calendar for details. Do remember to sign up to attend.

Special Thanks to Hewlett Packard and Progress Software

The Online Communication Committee thanks Hewlett Packard and Cindy Currie for hosting its competition. Additionally, thanks to Progress Software Corporation and Don Fournier for hosting the evening judges' orientation session for Online Communication Competition.

Each year the competition committees face the challenge of finding competition and orientation sites. If you think your company might be interested in hosting either a competition or a judges' orientation session for the 2005-2006 competitions, please contact Mike Ball at stc@michaelball.com or the competition committee chair people at stc-comp@yahoo.com. **§**

Company	Entry	Category	Developers / Authors
Hewlett-Packard Co.	HP Collaboration and Collateral Management Solution: Promotional CD	Online Support Tools	Doug Bonin Alex Hart Kristian Carey
Autodesk, Inc	Autodesk Revit Help for Release 6.1	Help System Document	Jody Bookless Justin Kelley
Progress Software Corporation	Database Administration	Web-based Training Online Tutorial Training	Margaret Collins Randall Uncapher Craig VanDerAa
Providus Software Solutions	RiskResolve V3.6 Control Self - Assessment Online Help	Online Help System Document	Allen Dean Ed Baechtold
BAE Systems	IEWS Infrared Imaging Systems (IRIS)	Web Page Online Technical Marketing	Joyce Reynolds Loui Welby Jennifer Lee
Philips Medical Systems	HeartStart MRx User Training Video	Online Tutorial/ Training	Paul Hamer Rob DeSimone Steve Cahill
Avid Technology	Avid Xpress Studio Online Library	Online Tutorial/ Training	Avid Technical Publications
Amicore, Inc.	Amicore Clinical Management Help	Online Help System Document	John Minniti Jennifer Lodge

Eight Distinguished Award Winners The 2004 - 2005 Online Distinguished Award entries included four tutorial/training pieces, three Help systems, and one online support tools document.

Chapter Membership Report

By Virginia Adams,
Membership Committee Manager

We would like to welcome the following people who joined the Boston Chapter in 2004.

New Members	Transferred Members	Reinstated Members
Erik Abel	Joan Silverio	Margaret Garcia-Nokes
Karin Borda	Stephen Nay	Gail H. McCarthy
John Bouchard	Christine McCaughin	Michael J. Radz
John Branco	Sara J. Matousek	Jay Talbot
Adele M. Hastings	Dirk Knemeyer	Michael J. Doyle
Sin Mei Ko	Peter Sweeny	David K. Gross
Elizabeth Bermudez	Allison L. Hartfiel	Hadar S. Hawk
Wendy Braun	Paula R. Berger	John M. Lannon
Linda Chuss	Andre H. Roussel	David G. Scham
Jozef F. DeVries	Kenneth Weber	Dave LaFontana
Joanna Esperas	Karen D. Melanson	Ann Neuburg
Kathy J. Langston	Beth L. Lew	Kristin Sanders
Mardi Scalise	Bennett L. Alper	Juston M. Eivers
Jennifer A. Scupi	Elizabeth A. Johnson	Jon R.C. Harvey
Loren Walker	Barbara R. Schieb	James S. Vigeant
Leslie Collins	David Golden	
Shirin Lee	Joan Silverio	
Barbara O'Brien	Marilyn B. Kloss	
Emily Ahmann	Carolyn S. Snyder	
Aiden Contreras	Karen E. Gulbrandsen	
Ariana L. Foley	Colum M. Lundt	
Kevin Gillis	Bev Thompson	
Lee Kolm		
Donna Mehley		

Senior Member		

Congratulations to the following members who achieved Senior Member status in 2004.

New Members (cont.)	Senior Members
Laurel Nelson-Cucchiara	Kimberly A. Coulter
Stephen Anthony	Karen J. Giventer
John Howe	Gaurang P. Kadakia
Catherine Murphy	Clare A. Mansfield
Anna Ortiz	Maria C. Muia
Emily Twaddel	Frances A. Vella
Susan J. Dias	Charlene K. Weisberg
Joel Lemieux	
Danielle C. Levy	

Write for the Broadside

The *Boston Broadside* encourages Chapter members to share their skills, thoughts, and ideas with other professionals in the Chapter.

If you would like to write for an upcoming issue of the *Boston Broadside*, send an email message to bostonbroadside@yahoo.com.