

Handbook for Local Judges

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SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Each year, the Society for Technical Communication (STC) sponsors international competitions that provide technical communicators with the opportunity to receive recognition for their work. STC chapters and local areas hold preliminary competitions from which Distinguished winners advance to the international level.

Judges are the backbone of the competition process. This handbook is provided to help recruit and train judges, and to ensure consistency of judging between competitions. Each year issues arise because judges do not clearly understand what is involved in the judging process. Managers should incorporate this information into their training programs, and judges should use it as reference material.

Information and resources

Competition rules

Managers and judges should start by reading the competition rules. Copies are available from the STC office and Web site (www.stc.org).

Competitions that exchange entries should read the information on competition exchanges available from the STC office and Web site (www.stc.org). Competition managers should explain their competition exchange agreement and expectations to judges so that expectations are clear and uniform.

STC officials and volunteers

The officials and volunteers listed below are valuable sources of information. Their job in STC is to help you be successful.

International competition managers

International Technical Publication Competition Managers

Brian Lindgren

Deanne Levander

International Technical Art Competition Managers

Karla McMaster

Jane McCarney

International Online Communication Competition Manager

Virginia "Ginny" Gilstorf

Competitions liaison in the STC office

Lloyd Tucker

STC Competitions Manager

Karen Baranich

Defining “technical” communication

What is technical communication? It seems like the answer should be simple and obvious, but sometimes it’s not. The first task of a judge, after unpacking his or her entries, is to determine if the entries are indeed “technical communication.”

STC generally does not place restrictions on the content of materials submitted to its technical communication competitions, provided the entry meets the criteria for the specific category. STC also trusts the judgment of local competition committees and judges in making decisions about whether a particular entry is acceptable. However, competition committees and judges might have questions about whether an entry qualifies as “technical” communication.

Technical communication (and this encompasses scientific and medical communication as well) has come to mean two quite different things.

- A piece can be technical because it is **about a technical product, service, or subject matter**. These are often, but not always, computer related. Examples: computer software and hardware manuals, illustrations of equipment, and online help for software applications.
- A piece can be technical because it **comes from** a technical organization. The piece itself need not describe technical aspects of the organization. Examples: newsletters, annual reports, policies and procedures, and employee guides. *However, an entry produced by a technical organization that has no relationship to that organization would NOT be acceptable. An example would be a technical organization producing a poster for a local street fair.*

It is impossible to answer the question of what is “technical” to everyone’s satisfaction. STC recommends a liberal interpretation in which “technical” encompasses any entry having to do with a mechanical or scientific topic, or with practical, detailed methods, processes, or means of accomplishing objectives. Such entries will typically contain specialized information in a wide variety of subject areas for audiences that might range from the general public to subject matter experts. Under this definition, the content might seem to be nontechnical (cooking is an often-cited example), and yet the communication about it would be technical if the intent is to inform or instruct.

Note the important distinction that “technical” applies to the content of an entry, not to the delivery mechanism. That is, the delivery method alone (for example, Web pages) or the tool used to produce an entry (for example, a sophisticated drawing application) is not enough to qualify an entry as technical. A book of fairy tales produced on the most elaborate publishing or online system is still a book of fairy tales.

Who decides whether an entry qualifies as technical communication?

Submitters are responsible for ensuring that their entries meet all criteria.

Competition committees are responsible for:

- Providing descriptions in their call for entries for each category
- Screening entries before distributing them to judges; if necessary, disqualifying entries before they are distributed to judges
- Resolving questions about entries raised by judging teams
- Contacting the international competition manager for guidance if needed
- Returning disqualified entries and entry fees to the submitters, along with an explanation of why the entries were rejected

Judges in their teams are responsible for:

- Identifying entries they feel should be disqualified
- Notifying the competition committee of their concerns

Planning, Organization, and Management

Roles and Responsibilities

Judging manager or competition manager

- Recruit judges
- Follow up with a letter confirming the schedule and their commitment
- Develop a judging schedule
- Work with the arrangements manager to plan the consensus judging
- Train judges
- Coordinate with the entries manager in distributing entries to judges ahead of time for private evaluation (might not occur for all competitions)
- During the period of private evaluations, work with team leaders in monitoring the progress of judges
- Send thank you letters or other acknowledgments or gifts to the judges (coordinate certificates or awards with the recognitions manager)
- Review completed judging forms
- Evaluate judge performance
- Prepare a final report for the general manager

If your chapter is sponsoring more than one competition, and/or you expect a large number of entries, you might consider having separate judging managers for each competition, although many of the activities and materials can be shared.

Lead Judge or Team Leader

Most competitions appoint one member of each team as a team leader. The team leader is usually someone with previous experience as a judge; or, for a new

competition, someone with a wide degree of experience. This person has a few additional responsibilities designed to make the judging run more smoothly:

- Monitor the team's progress.
- Answer team members' questions about the entries, the judging process, and so on. If needed, the team leader acts as a liaison between the team and the competition committee to resolve problems (such as miscategorizations) and questions raised by team members.
- Make sure all team members have judged all their assigned entries by consensus judging day. It's suggested that team leaders check with their other team members regularly through the evaluation period.
- Lead the consensus meeting and make sure entries and evaluation forms are delivered to the competition committee.
- If judging is being done remotely (phone or e-mail), schedule meetings.
- Review evaluation forms to make sure that comments are professional and acceptably thorough.
- Communicate award levels and any Best in Show recommendation to the competition committee.

Judges

Judges are responsible for evaluating every entry they receive. They must provide feedback to each entrant. The evaluation is not simply a check list, but provides clear, impartial, and constructive feedback. Duties include:

- Review of each entry
- Provide constructive feedback on each entry
- Meet with team members for consensus on awards (this can be by e-mail, phone, or personal meeting)
- Return entries in good condition (judges may not write in entries) by the specified date and method
- Contribute to the writing of any Best of Show recommendations
- Complete and return judging forms by the specified method and date

Recruiting judges

Recommendations

There are several approaches to recruiting judges:

- Specific invitations
- Formal, mailed (or e-mailed) call for judges

- Open invitations through such avenues as the chapter newsletter and Web site

The best approach is probably a combination of all three. Asking for volunteers in a general form rarely gets results. Whatever approach you take, emphasize that it is an honor to be a judge.

Advice: Don't use specific invitations as your only way of recruiting judges. STC recommends that competitions use an open recruitment that provides for the addition of a few new judges each year. Allow anyone to apply. You can screen out unqualified applicants through a qualification process (more about this below). This means, of course, that you must have first established those criteria and made them known.

Start recruiting early. Even if you don't have all of the details worked out, start approaching people. Let them know what you think is likely to happen. For example, you might say, "You'll have three weeks to evaluate entries on your own, and then there will probably be an all-day meeting on a Saturday, either October 5 or 12."

Determine potential judges' qualifications before formally asking them to judge. If you publicly ask for volunteers, be sure to establish a qualification process. A suggestion is to develop a judge information form you can send to potential judges for completion (see the sample in this section). On the form, ask them to select categories in which they have experience as providers or customers. You might also want to include the qualifications that you have established. For the online communication competition and online art entries, have candidates list the equipment they have available, if you plan to have them evaluate entries remotely.

Explain to prospective judges that the structure is loose so that you can be flexible. Give them a rough idea of when you expect to need their services and determine any times within your projected window that they cannot be available.

For online communication and online art entries, try to find judges who are familiar with the platforms that you expect to be working with. Look for an assortment of judges to provide a breadth of knowledge about each of the online categories.

Line up more judges than you think you will need. There are bound to be schedule conflicts when you finally set up a judging date, and last-minute emergencies will undoubtedly take their toll.

When you have recruited a judge, assign a judge number to that person and obtain the person's name, work and home phone numbers, e-mail address, and an address to use for shipping if necessary. The judge number will be used on evaluation forms to keep the judging anonymous.

When the dates and sites have been established, contact the people that you have recruited and confirm that they are available. If you will be doing home evaluations, confirm that each judge will be able to review the entries between the distribution date and the review deadline; explain how entries will be distributed.

For those interested but who do not qualify, recruit them to assist in some other way. Perhaps they could help with consensus judging day—for example, by acting as scribes, if your judging process includes them.

Treat your judges special and they will want to do it again.

- After judging is over, send letters to their management that praise their contributions to the profession
- Give gifts or certificates of appreciation
- Send them special invitations to the awards event, prepare special nametags, list them in the program, and publicly acknowledge their valuable help

Judge qualifications

STC recommends that a set of professional qualifications be used in recruiting judges. This will help to screen candidates in a fair and impartial way and ensure quality judging. The table below shows suggested qualifications for international and local judges. Judges do NOT have to be STC members.

In addition to the professional qualifications that you establish, judges must:

- Be able to perform judging tasks as a member of a team
- Have the time to complete the judging within the timeframe of the competition
- Be able to attend any meetings that are required

International	Local (Suggested)
Master's degree or higher in technical communication, graphic arts or design, or related field	Degree in technical communication, graphic arts or design, or related field
Senior membership in STC	Same
Seven years in technical communication, graphic arts or design, or related field <i>without</i> membership in STC	Five years in technical communication, graphic arts or design, or related field <i>without</i> membership in STC
For publications and online communication: strong publishing background (five articles or one book) For art: published graphic art or document design work	For publications and online communication: publishing background (two articles or one book) For art: same
Teaching experience in communication, graphic arts or design, or a related field (five years full-time or seven years adjunct or part-time)	Teaching experience in communication, graphic arts or design, or a related field (one year full-time or two years adjunct or part-time)

International	Local (Suggested)
Winner of an STC or other communication or graphic arts or design competition award	Same
Certification by a communication-related professional organization For art: certification by or association with a graphic arts association	Same For art: same

Additional suggestions:

- **Art judges**
Try to incorporate a mix of skills and experience within each judging team (illustrators, designers, artists, etc.), with at least one skilled in the visual aspects of technical communication. This last skill is important, to ensure that you don't get a team in which judges have only pure art backgrounds.
- **Publications judges**
Ensure that your mix fits your needs. For example, don't get a lot of judges with computer user manual backgrounds if you expect a lot of entries in other categories such as training materials, organizational manuals, and annual reports. Consider recruiting people who write product reviews for trade publications, magazines, or newsletters.
- **Online communication judges**
Media knowledge is important. The individuals you choose should be able to tell effective from ineffective in the following areas: writing, graphics, animation, sound, music, video, and combinations thereof. Judges do not need to be expert in every medium, but should be able to offer more than general opinions. Knowledge of online information delivery systems on several platforms is also important; at least one member of each judging team should have this knowledge.
- **Best in Show judges**
Judges you choose for Best in Show should be experienced professionals, preferably with previous experience in judging. You might consider using past Best in Show winners. Whoever you choose should have broad expertise in the competition medium (art, publications, or online communication) so that they are capable of evaluating entries in any category.
- **Lead judges**
Ask judges who have judged previously, are familiar with the judging process, and who can provide advice and direction to the team.

Finding judges

Judges do not have to be members of STC. In fact, you are encouraged to recruit respected nonmember professionals in your community.

Suggestions on how to find judges:

- Contact judges from past years. Ask them for recommendations.
- Contact past competition winners (particularly Distinguished and Best in Show).
- Announce the need for judges in your chapter meetings and newsletter.
- Contact teachers of communication-related disciplines in your community.
- Contact affiliated professional associations (the American Medical Writers Association, American Society for Training and Development, International Interactive Communications Society, International Association of Business Communicators, to name a few).
- Contact instructors of communication or art at local schools, and don't forget professionals at these institutions that are non-teachers (ex. editors of school publications, scientific photographers, journal editors, Web designers, etc.).
- Ask editors of local newspapers, trade publications, or magazines.

How many judges?

When you begin recruiting for each competition, estimate as best you can how many entries you will have to judge and in what categories. Use information from past competitions, if you have this.

A team of at least two, and preferably three, judges should evaluate each entry. (The international competitions use three judges and find this highly effective for reaching true consensus.)

The total number of judges you need depends on several things:

- **Which competition**
The art competition often attracts fewer entries than the other competitions, and one or two teams (three or six judges) is sufficient. The publications competition typically attracts more, and so a larger number of judges are needed. The time required for entries in the different competitions varies; also—online communication entries often take longer to judge than, say, most art and publications entries.
- **Within each competition, which category**
Within a competition, entries in some categories take longer to judge than entries in other categories. In the publications competition, for example, it takes longer to judge a software guide than it does a quick reference guide. So, you could have one team judge 15 quick reference guides; but you would not want to assign 15 software guides to one team.

- **How you have decided to structure judging**

You will be able to assign more entries to a team if they will be evaluating them on their own; less if all entries will be evaluated at a single meeting. For example, 12 publications might be a reasonable load for a judge evaluating them at home, spending 1 to 2 hours on each one; giving each publication the same attention during a 6-hour meeting would be impossible. So, the less time you give to judging, the more judges you need.

As you can see, it's hard to know ahead of time exactly how many judges you will need. Perhaps the best advice is to recruit more than you think you will need. If you don't receive as many entries as you expect, the judging load will be light, but that's not necessarily a bad thing! Judges will have more time to spend on each entry.

Forming teams and assigning categories

General

A team approach to judging is recommended. The advantages of this are:

- Judges learn from each other
- Teams can have a more balanced opinion
- Team members can compensate for deficiencies in each other's level of experience or background

Try to achieve a balanced group in terms of experience and background. For example, try not to create a team with people who are all from large companies, all consultants, all with only commercial art experience. Try to include one person on each team who has previous judging experience (usually you will want to appoint this person the team leader) and at least one person new to judging.

Assigning categories to teams

You don't need to make final category assignments until you receive all the entries. You won't want to commit ahead of time, because you will most likely need to do some juggling in the end.

If a category has few entries, you can assign more than one category to a team. This works best if the categories are similar as finding team members with adequate experience in dissimilar categories is difficult.

Conversely, when there are too many entries for a single team to handle, two teams can be constituted for a single category of entries. If this happens, it's fine to have each team work independently and assign awards at any or all levels to the entries they have received, without consulting the other team that has the same category.

Try to avoid assigning too many entries to any one team. If judges get more entries than they can handle in a reasonable amount of time, they become discouraged and will not likely volunteer again.

Preparing judges

Materials

Whatever approach you use for judging, your judges will need:

- Instructions/training
- Evaluation forms

How and when you provide these things depends on your judging structure. You can provide them in a judge packet that accompanies your distribution of entries, during training, at a pick-up meeting, or at the time of one-day judging.

Instructions	Packets delivered during training, or at a pick-up meeting, should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Description of the competition process and schedule• List of team members with the team leader identified. Include the judge's number and the team designation• Contact numbers for questions (team leader, judging manager, competition manager)• Copy of call for entries and rules• Explanation of evaluation forms and requirement for constructive comments• Explanation of award levels• Description of category or categories to be evaluated• List of entries each team will be judging, with place to record tentative award assignment If delivered at the time of one-day judging: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explanation of evaluation forms and requirement for constructive comments• Explanation of award levels• Description of category or categories to be evaluated• List of entries each team will be judging
Evaluation forms	Evaluation forms have been developed for the international competitions. STC strongly urges you to use these, as it ensures consistency in judging at the local and international levels. Provide the forms in electronic form to make it easy for judges to enter their comments (much preferred over handwriting). Make sure the forms identify judges only by number.

Training

STC strongly recommends training for judges, even those that have judged before. Inappropriate and missing comments by judges are the leading cause of complaints about the STC competitions. This is unfortunate, as the feedback provided to entrants is what sets STC competitions apart from those of other organizations. Consistent and detailed training of judges is a critical part of delivering quality feedback. This training can be:

- Combined with an entry pickup meeting or held as a separate session (on a weekend or an hour or two after work)
- Separate for each competition or combined for all competitions

Purpose	Provides an opportunity to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set expectations (for example, on providing evaluation comments)• Teach good judging practices• Have judges practice• Ensure that judges are all using the same standards
Suggested agenda	Competition process The judge's role Expectations Explanation of evaluation forms Definition of award levels Recommended judging practices Advice from experienced judges Evaluation exercise Evaluation of the evaluations

Work flow

Whatever judging structure you decide to use, the work flow for judging must be:

- Entries and information are sent to judges.
- All judges review each entry assigned to them and record comments on the evaluation forms.
- Teams come to consensus about awards.
- Teams make any recommendations for Best of Show from their category.
- Best in Show is decided upon (see the section on "Judging Best in Show" for a discussion of possible approaches for this process).

- All results are recorded.
- All copies of entries are returned.
- All individual evaluation forms are returned.

Consensus Judging

There are several methods that can be used to bring judges together for consensus judging and deciding on awards. The method chosen by a competition depends on a number of factors, including distance, weather, availability of judges, judge preferences, and finances. Consensus judging can employ one or more of these methods. Communicate plans clearly to judges before they commit. For example, if you plan to have a face-to-face meeting, judges must understand that they have to be available on the date chosen and the venue specified. Avoid surprising the judges after they have committed, but keep in mind that flexibility may be necessary if last minute issues arise.

Teleconferencing

Teleconferencing (coming to consensus about awards over the telephone) is a viable alternative for teams when geographical distance, weather, schedules, or illness prevents members from meeting physically. Teleconferencing is successfully conducted by international judging teams, and even those who were at first skeptical have reported that they did not feel the method compromised the quality of judging. One international publications judging team, for example, judged books from locations in California, England, and Illinois.

Advantages:

- Judges have great flexibility in arranging the time for the teleconference.
- Teleconferencing opens up opportunities for people to judge who might not otherwise be able to.
- Weather is not a factor.
- Saves travels costs and time.

Disadvantages:

- Team members must get entries on time and return them on time.
- If questions or problems arise during the teleconference, the competition manager isn't directly available to resolve the matter. Also, miscategorizations may be more difficult to resolve.
- Discussing the more visual aspects of entries is difficult.
- The teleconference call will cost (unless one of the team members' companies underwrites the cost).

Recommendations:

- **Judging or competition manager**
Assign a number of entries that can be handled comfortably in about 2 hours. Appoint a team leader who is an experienced judge, understands the consensus process, and who has good organizational and leadership skills. Contact the STC office for a recommendation for a provider of economical conference calls.
- **Team members**
Get to know each other before the consensus call (this is important for building rapport). Complete your evaluations *before* the call and have award recommendations in mind. Begin the conference call with a plan (such as, eliminate obvious nonwinners first, and have each caller in turn lead the discussion of the next entry). Don't set an arbitrary time limit for evaluations (this creates pressure, which might rush your decisions). Don't force an award decision when there is indecision, but come back to the entry later (there is the tendency to feel that you must decide the fate of an entry at the time you are discussing it, that you don't have the time to come back, or that it will be too confusing to do so). Take a break after a certain period of time (especially if callers do not have speaker phones), or schedule more than one session.

E-mail Discussions

E-mail discussion (coming to consensus about awards through e-mail) is a viable alternative for teams when geographical distance, weather, schedules, or illness prevents members from meeting physically.

Advantages:

- Judges do not need to judge at the same time. They can judge and send discussions when convenient.
- Cost effective option as there are no additional costs.
- The judging coordinator can easily be included in the discussion through copies and forwarded messages.

Disadvantages:

- Judges must have e-mail access.
- You have to get the entries to team members and arrange to get them back on time.
- Discussing the more visual aspects of entries is difficult.
- There might be difficulty in handling any Best of Show candidate that the team might recommend.
- Written comments may become lengthy, and some aspects of an entry may be difficult to explain.

Recommendations:

- **Judging or competition manager**
Appoint a team leader with judging experience, who understands the consensus

process, and who has good organizational and leadership skills. Make sure it is someone with a good e-mail presence (for example, someone who does not sound sarcastic or overly critical in e-mail). Make sure that this person understands that he or she needs to respond to team judges promptly. The lead judge should send an e-mail as soon as he or she receives the entries to make sure the team received the entries as well and to begin the rapport building (see below).

- **Team members**

Use e-mail to get to know each other before the consensus discussion takes place (this is important for building rapport). It is important to get a feel for each other's e-mail style. Complete your evaluations and have an award recommendation in mind before you send an e-mail about the entry. Don't force an award decision when there is indecision, but come back to the entry later. Consider dividing discussions of entries into manageable chunks. This may involve judging a single entry and deciding on an award before going to the next entry. Don't let the discussion become too long winded.

Judging Best in Show

Definition of Best in Show

Judging the Best in Show in a technical communication competition shares many characteristics with judging the Best of Show at a dog show.

Using the publications competition as an example, how do you compare the best annual report with the best software guide? How do you compare the best schnauzer with the best greyhound? How do you compare the best apple with the best orange?

The answer is that you don't compare the best of one category with the best of another. Instead, you compare it to the *ideal* in its own category. That is, the best annual report is compared with the ideal annual report, the best software guide with the ideal software guide, just as the best schnauzer is compared with the ideal schnauzer in a dog show.

Thus, the Best in Show judges must determine how close each candidate comes to realizing the ideal for its category. The entry that comes closest to the ideal for its category is the Best in Show.

Best in Show procedure

Often, local competitions select the Best in Show by a consensus or majority vote of all the judges. Sometimes the team that nominated a candidate champions the entry. The most impassioned sways the others.

STC recommends that you appoint a special team of judges devoted to the Best in Show. Ideally, the Best in Show team should not be assigned other judging duties, to prevent any possibility of bias toward entries that they have themselves judged and recommended as candidates. The team can meet later, after the teams have made their award decisions. This gives you the flexibility of being able to recruit outstanding individuals who might not be able to participate in the more time-consuming general judging.

Best in Show judges should be experienced professionals with previous experience in judging. They should also have broad expertise in the competition medium so that they are capable of evaluating entries in any category.

For each category with a **Distinguished** award winner, the category judging team may identify one candidate for Best in Show. If more than one team evaluates a category, you must decide if the teams can individually recommend separate candidates, or if they must reach consensus on which entry should be sent for their category. **Only Distinguished entries are eligible for Best in Show.**

Ask your judging teams to fill out a recommendation form for any Best of Show candidate. This recommendation form should synthesize the comments from the judges' evaluation forms for the entry, describing as specifically as possible how close the entry comes to realizing the ideal for its category. The statement should be detailed enough to help guide the Best in Show judges in their evaluation of the candidate.

When the Best in Show judging team has agreed on the Best in Show, have the team members write a citation for the winner that describes why the entry has achieved this distinction. That citation could be used on the award plaque as well as in the remarks about the winner at the awards event.

Note to Competition Managers

The judges assigned to review entries make the final determination on awards. Competition managers and committees may not revise award levels.

Information for judges

The information provided in this section is designed to help judges to have a positive and productive experience. Knowledge, work experience, and education vary among even experienced judges. The basic information that follows applies across judging teams and competitions. Remember, be flexible, willing to learn, and participate by sharing your expertise.

Expectations

Submitters and contributors enter STC competitions not only with the hope of receiving an award, but also with the expectation of receiving a thorough critique and constructive feedback from knowledgeable professionals. All judging evaluation forms (except any private coversheets) are returned to the submitters. Your judging comments, although anonymous, reflect the credibility of STC competitions and our profession. Remember, this feature is what sets STC competitions apart from other competitions and makes us unique.

Judges are responsible for providing **fair, impartial, and constructive** evaluation of each entry that they judge. Even when there are many entries from the same company that are very similar looking, you cannot assume they were produced by the same individuals. Each entry paid the fee to enter the competition and deserves the same, full evaluation as any other entry.

Depending on the size and complexity of an entry, you might find yourself spending one to three hours per entry. Please schedule your time accordingly.

Awards

There are three levels of awards (see the descriptions in the table). In descending order they are:

- Distinguished
- Excellence
- Merit

These awards do not represent first, second, or third places, but are levels of accomplishment with reference to a standard. It's true that the words do not necessarily indicate level. However, an argument against using numbers is that people are more likely to hang a certificate in their office that says "Merit" than if it says "Third Place." The words are better for the certificates and the image conveyed.

The following chart lists the award levels and gives a description of each. Judges may want to copy this chart and use it as a reference as they discuss awards for each entry.

Award Level	Definition
Distinguished	Clearly superior in all areas. The entry contains no major flaws and few, if any, minor flaws. It applies the principles of technical communication in an outstanding way , particularly in the way that it anticipates and fulfills the needs of its audience.

Award Level	Definition
Excellence	Consistently meets high standards in all areas. The entry might contain a single major flaw or a few minor flaws. The entry clearly (if slightly imperfectly) demonstrates an exceptional understanding of technical communication principles.
Merit	Consistently meets high standards in most areas. The entry might contain a small number of major or minor flaws, but still applies technical communication principles in a highly proficient manner.
No award	Contains work that is of average or less-than-average professional quality. The entry generally has many major and minor flaws. It shows a lack of understanding of technical communication principles, is poorly executed, is hard to use, or fails to meet the needs of its audience.

Major flaws and minor flaws are considered as follows:

- **Major flaw**
Substantially hinders the user. Examples: illogical organization; incomplete or missing content; consistently unclear style; no table of contents, headers, page numbers, or index; inaccurate page numbers in table of contents or index; procedural steps buried in text; a consistent pattern of spelling and grammatical errors; confusing terminology.
- **Minor flaw**
Might cause a momentary stumble, but doesn't slow the user down much. Examples: a few instances of spelling and grammatical errors, misplaced graphics, inconsistent capitalization, or confusing terminology.

For any entry to receive an award, it must be thorough, accurate, useful, appropriate, and well executed. Note that the size of an entry might affect whether a flaw is major or minor; for example, misspelling a client's name in a short marketing brochure would be a major flaw.

Judging criteria

Two judging criteria are basic in the competitions:

- Judge the work the contributors actually did.
- Judge how well the work does what it is intended to do.

These principles are obvious, but it is easy to lose sight of them. It's clear from these principles, for instance, that in a scholarly/professional article the writing ought to be the focus. But a judge whose specialty is information design and who doesn't really understand biology may fault a well-written, nicely argued scholarly paper on

cell temperature because it doesn't look glossy. Scholarly articles in technical writing rarely have imaginative graphics, and the authors don't have any control over the quality of the printing even if they do have graphics. If you are judging a category with which you are unfamiliar, consider using this as a learning experience and ask for advice from an STC member that does have experience with that area of technical communication.

Accuracy is an essential aspect of technical communication. Sometimes it's very difficult to tell how accurate a piece is unless you are actually working with the product or have a sound background in the subject matter. It's okay if you can't verify accuracy or don't understand the complexity of the content. You can, however, judge how well the communicator appears to have organized and presented the information, and you can certainly judge the quality of the writing.

Let's talk about complexity of content a bit more. The more complex a subject matter, the more difficult a task the producers have to deal with that subject matter successfully. And, it also is more difficult for judges to assess how the producers dealt with the topic. Unfortunately, entries that deal with complex subjects do not always get the full consideration (or comprehension) of the judges and therefore suffer in the resulting evaluations. The technical complexity of the content must be considered in judging. Not that you should be judging "good" science versus "bad" science, but you should factor in the difficulty of the task faced by the contributors and how well they dealt with the difficulties. Keep in mind that communication and usability are central to your evaluation.

General guidelines for judging

There is no limit to the number of awards you can give at any level (except Best in Show, of course). If an entry deserves a Distinguished, Excellence, or Merit award, give it that award. Likewise, an award does not have to be given at each level nor in each category if entries do not meet the standards.

Be objective, impartial, and helpful. Make **detailed** comments on the evaluation forms, but remember that your comments will be mailed to the submitter, and that this feedback is often shared with the submitter's employer. Be frank, but tactful. Constructive criticism is valued, especially when a work has been given a below-average evaluation.

Look for effectiveness, appropriateness, and professionalism. Try not to be swayed by production qualities, such as color, expensive paper, or fancy binding. Read all comments made on the attachment to the entry form (if an attachment has been written), particularly those covering the production of the entry or other pertinent considerations.

Your comments should correspond to the award level. For example, you might have very few suggestions for improving an entry you recommend for Distinguished, but you should have several suggestions for improving an entry you recommend for Merit or no award. Even Distinguished entries should receive feedback. In this case

your comments should highlight those things that set the entry apart. Comment on why the entry received this award and provide positive reinforcement for a job well done.

If your competition allows handwritten comments on the evaluation forms, please write legibly! Use black ink. At the international level, all evaluation forms must be submitted electronically.

Do NOT write in any of the entries! They need to be in show condition—for display at the STC Annual Conference and for their journey in the traveling exhibit during the following year. If you want to comment on specific pages during consensus judging, use “sticky notes” as placeholders (be sure to remove them when you have finished your judging).

Confidentiality

While it is okay to show other technical communicators the entries you are judging, please keep your evaluations and personal opinions about them confidential. If you have any questions concerning confidentiality while judging, talk to your competition manager.

Please treat all information about awards to be given (or not given) as confidential until the competition committee has sent notification letters and evaluation forms to those participating in the competition. Companies and communicators have paid the fees to enter their work, and they deserve to hear the results directly from the competition committee, rather than through the grapevine. (The official notification process usually takes about one month.)

Changes and emergencies

Personal emergencies, unexpected workload changes . . . they happen. You don't need to apologize for them. If anything comes up that prevents you from starting or completing your judging assignments, call your team leader (or competition manager) as soon as you can. Backup judges have usually been arranged who can step in and assist.

Conflict of interest, personal feelings

When you look over the entries you are assigned to judge, you might recognize the work of friends or employees, or of companies with which you have a previous or current business relationship. If for any reason you feel you cannot evaluate a specific entry due to a conflict of interest or personal feelings, please notify your team leader (or competition manager) immediately. No explanation will generally be required.

Miscategorizations

If you feel that an item is miscategorized, contact the other members of your team to discuss your concern. If your team agrees, the team leader should contact the competition manager for guidance on how to handle the situation. If your team cannot reach agreement, the decision of the competition manager is final.

Recommendations for evaluation comments

Write *useful comments* for all entries, even if they do not win an award. Your comments are one of the main benefits to the entrants and are what sets the STC competition apart from others. Many technical communicators enter the competition not only with the hope of winning an award, but also to receive a meaningful critique of their work from respected peers. In fact, some people enter solely for the feedback. Some uses for this information are to provide justification for recommended changes to a process or product, employee recognition, and to gather ideas for subsequent releases, to name only a few. Your comments are important!

Try to include at least three compliments and three suggestions for improvement, no matter how good (or bad) you judge the entry to be. (One or two short comments make it difficult for submitters to justify the cost of the entry fee to management.) The more comments you write, the easier it is to determine the winners. The more constructive your critique, the easier it will be for the contributors to acknowledge and incorporate your suggestions.

Keep these other recommendations in mind as you comment on the entries:

- List the high points first.
- Use specific examples.

Instead of: "Graphics are well done."

Say: "Graphics make good use of call-outs – for example, on pages 5 and 10."

Instead of: "More entries are needed in the index."

Say: "You could improve your index by adding entries with alternative wordings. For example, on page 3-25, you have a heading Sending a File. Your index has an entry for *sending a file*, but does not have an entry for *file, sending*. The entry would benefit users who look up the word *file* in the index."

- Keep your comments to the point. Don't lecture or go off on tangents.
- Give concrete suggestions for correcting problems. For example, "The all-caps headings in the Table of Contents are difficult to read. Uppercase and lowercase would be better." Put yourself in the submitter's place and consider what you would want to know or how you would like to receive feedback.
- Give the location of any problems so the author can find them easily.

- Keep comments on the positive side – that is, phrase your feedback in a constructive way.
- Evaluate the work itself, not the subject matter. Don't make negative comments simply because you disagree with the contents or dislike the company colors.
- Beware of "reviewer syndrome," which is the preoccupation with finding small flaws. In the words of Lola Zook:

You know, "I've been given this thing to review and I've got to find something wrong with it or 'they' will think I didn't read it or I'm not well qualified." The results can be preoccupation with finding small flaws instead of concentration on a balanced and perceptive evaluation of the "accomplishment of the whole" as well as its parts.

- Consider production in relation to budget. Contributors do not always have control over the entire process. For example, some pieces might be produced on a limited budget or under production system limitations. Read all comments on the entry sheet to help establish what the contributor was able to do within these constraints. Consider how effectively available resources were used and how well the entry communicates the message to the intended audience.
- You have been chosen as a judge because of your expertise and the contributor expects to get expert advice. So give it. For example, if the contributor clearly has no idea how to index a manual, don't be reluctant to give some tips.

Here are some examples of judges' comments: (1) People can come to an index with many different words in mind for the same action or concept, so you should try to anticipate what those words might be and include them. (2) The more you use highlighting, the less effective it becomes, so you might want to reconsider your choice of highlighting all notes and tips. (3) One man in eight has difficulty distinguishing between red and green, so you should use another way to indicate the right way and the wrong way to do something.

- Do not try to be humorous. Some people have no sense of humor and will take offense at what they consider to be frivolous.
- Don't be influenced by your own company's standards for design and format, or by ways of doing things that you have come to prefer personally. Companies set standards to be effective for their particular use, and they will vary based on company need. And your personal preferences may simply be a matter of taste.
- Don't just use the check lists on the judging forms – provide useful feedback.
- Check your comments for spelling and grammar!

Steps to follow for individual evaluations

1. Make sure you have received all the entries for your category.

2. If you plan to hand write on the evaluation forms, make enough copies of the evaluation form for all your evaluations. (Copies of the forms are also available electronically.)
3. Examine all the entries to get a general impression of the work.
 - If you feel that you cannot be impartial about a particular entry, notify your team leader (or, if a team leader, notify the competition manager).
 - If you feel any of the entries have been miscategorized, bring the matter up with your team leader; if all on your team agree, the team leader will discuss with the competition manager.
 - Don't be too strongly influenced by this initial pass. It often turns out that the entries you liked best at first glance have problems that become apparent later on. Keep an open mind throughout the evaluation process.
 - Set a schedule for yourself for reviewing the entries during the evaluation timeframe, so you won't be rushed at the very end.
4. After the initial review, begin evaluating each entry. For each entry:
 - Prepare an evaluation form. Complete all information at the top of the form. Use the exact entry title that is on the entry form attached to the entry. Use your assigned judge number—never record your name on any of the forms.
 - Use additional sheets whenever needed. Do not write on the reverse sides as this makes them cumbersome to copy.
 - Don't be overwhelmed by the size or extent of an entry. Look at one area at a time and use the judging evaluation form as a checklist. You don't have to read absolutely every word in a large publication or follow absolutely every path in a complex online entry. However, you do want to acquire a solid understanding of the entry and its effectiveness.
 - Determine what your award recommendation will be, if any. Do not write this on the form. Your evaluation is only one of several, and the consensus judging might yield different final award recommendations than any of the judges originally expected.

Team consensus judging

Regardless of whether judging is on site, or remote, awards are given by a consensus of the judges. What is consensus?

Within STC competitions, consensus is a general agreement among the members of a judging team. Each judge exercises some discretion in decision making and awards. Achieving consensus requires serious consideration of each judge's opinion. Debate improves the process, arguing does not. Reaching consensus does not mean that the judge that can shout the loudest or longest gets his or her way. Rather, the final decision should be one that the entire team can agree on and live with.

View consensus judging as a peer-to-peer learning experience. Even experienced technical communicators do not know everything about all of the types of entries that STC accepts, nor are they able to review every word in a document. As you attend consensus judging, you will be pleasantly surprised at how much you agree and learn from all the things you missed and one of your team members found.

Surprise!

As your team discusses the entries, don't be surprised if you find:

- Wide differences in ratings
- Healthy disagreements
- Evaluations that place emphasis on very different things than you did
- Yourself reevaluating an entry in light of the other judges' opinions
- Yourself learning new things from the team – sometimes this is related to an entry, but often we have the opportunity to hone skills in teamwork, tact, assertiveness, and cooperation

Keep an open mind!

In general, this is what you will do during consensus judging:

1. Briefly review all entries with your team to see if you can come to immediate agreement on the entries that you all feel deserve no award. You can set these aside immediately.
2. Discuss the remaining entries and come to consensus about awards for them.
3. From among your Distinguished winners for each category, decide if you want to recommend one for Best in Show. If so, jointly write a statement on why you think it deserves the Best in Show award.
4. Team leader: Make sure you have complete sets of all judge evaluation forms; check that comments are professional and thorough. Submit all entries, forms, and the team's Best in Show statement (if there is one) to the competition committee.
5. Think of specific ideas to help the judging process next time, and share these ideas freely with the competition manager. Know that your expertise is valued!

FAQ

Does a judge have to be a member of STC?

No. In fact, you are encouraged to recruit respected professionals in your community to serve as judges. It is to the advantage of STC to recruit influential people who might write for trade publications, magazines, or newspapers.

Is there a limit to the number of awards that can be granted at a given level? Should only a certain percentage of entries receive awards?

There is no official rule about this. Only one Best in Show is awarded, but you shouldn't place a limit on any of the other award levels. Entries are to be judged against a standard. If an entry meets the standard for a level, it should receive the award for that level. This is the way international judging is handled.

Do we have to award a Best in Show?

There is no requirement that you must have a Best in Show. If you do not feel any entry merits a Best in Show, don't award one. If there are no Distinguished entries in the competition, there is no Best in Show.

If a chapter exchanges entries and the judging results are not what the chapter expects, can award levels be changed?

NO. The judges assigned to review entries make the final determination on awards. Competition managers and committees may not revise award levels even if they believe it is justified.

Please read the guidelines for competitions closely and discuss any potential issues with the exchange partner before exchanging entries.