

On the Inside

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President's Message

Swim with the sharks or sleep with the fish?

You've probably heard that sharks must continue moving, or they risk drowning. The same may be true for technical communicators.

With that in mind, how much time are you spending wondering about whether your technical communications skills are Y2K compliant?

Are co-workers who once turned to you for help with Microsoft Word now turning to someone else on the team for help with Frame? What about that new employee? You know the one. She's at ease with every program she launches. Does she make more money and/or have a brighter future with the company than you have?

Perhaps you are simply wrestling with the question of what class or computer-based training you will sign up for next.

This month's chapter meeting at the downtown Nashville Sheraton Hotel could help you with any or all of the above. The meeting topic: "Understanding the Marketability of Your Skill Set in the Information Age."

The meeting, our last official chapter meeting for the 1999 calendar year, begins with networking opportunities at 6:30 p.m., followed by the panel discussions and roundtable from 7:15 until 8:30 p.m.

Audience participation is encouraged and the meeting is free to all.

Light snacks and punch will be provided, and there will be a cash bar for those interested in more spirited refreshment.

As an added inducement, there will be two door prizes: gift certificates to Barnes and Noble/Davis-Kidd

Booksellers.

Join us in our informal round-table discussion with panelists of HR representatives, managers, and technical communication recruiters to consider questions such as:

- * How marketable are your areas of specialization?
- * Do you need to think broader or become more focused?

* What skill sets are employers demanding?

* How much experience do you need in specific areas to meet an employer's needs and expectations?

If you're interested in the answers to these or other questions regarding marketing your skill set, then you can't afford to miss this meeting.

So, don't forget to bring those résumés and business cards!

Getting there: The hotel is at 623 Union Street. Ask at the desk for directions to the meeting room. Parking in the garage adjacent to the hotel is \$5 for the first hour and \$1 per hour thereafter. Street parking is usually free after 6 p.m.

Mark Your Calendar

What: STC Meeting
Where: Sheraton Hotel
Time: 6:30-8:30 pm

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

So far, so good

This year is already proving to be successful. We have had one excellent meeting, and we are planning another one for October: "Marketing Your Skill Sets in the Information Age." As we press forward, I want to explain in a little more detail what our objectives are, as I understand them.

As I have mentioned before, some of the goals of the officers are to provide:

- valuable information that will add to our members' skills sets
- a venue conducive to information sharing and networking
- a fun time

It doesn't stop here. This is simply where it begins. I am sure we will receive criticism here and there for spending some of our budget "frivolously" on meeting rooms and food.

The fact is, our first meeting at Union Station cost us \$340. In return, our members left the meeting with invaluable knowledge. Full-version help software and a training ticket to this year's Help University in Dallas, totaling a value of more than \$2300, were given to our members. Everyone received sample CDs of help software and brochures regarding the night's topic. And we had fun.

I believe that if STC can continue delivering this kind of value and service to our membership, members will return to meetings. Others who have not come will hear about what they have been missing and will join us. As we increase activity, our chapter will grow. As we grow, so can our involvement with local educa

(see President's Letter, page 3)

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Colophon—This document is based on a design by Jim Giordano and is produced using Microsoft Word™ and Adobe Pagemaker 6.5.

Good for the résumé: Submit your work, win a prize

Want an objective, professional critique of your work and a chance to boost your résumé at the same time?

If so, enter the 4th Annual Technical Publications Competition of the Middle Tennessee Chapter of STC. Your work will receive a thorough review by judges selected for their professionalism and knowledge of technical writing. Winning an award in this local competition, and with it chance to move on to national and international competitions, makes a nice addition to your résumé.

Award winners in the international competitions will be recognized at STC's Annual Conference in Orlando, Florida, May 21-24, 2000. You don't have to be a member of STC to enter the competition. If you're feeling really confident, you can enter the same material in more than one contest. For example, the Atlanta Chapter is seeking entries. Like the Middle Tennessee Chapter, they have an October 22 deadline.

If you miss this year's deadline, it's never too early to start thinking about the next one.

Contest entries are reviewed for writing, editing, design

and graphics, and integration. Each of these elements is judged in the context of the purpose, content, and organization of the document.

The Middle Tennessee competition includes 17 publications categories and four awards categories—Best of Show, Distinguished Technical Communication, Excellence, and Merit. Best of Show winners go on to national competition.

Middle Tennessee entries must be received by October 22 for judging by the Austin chapter of STC in mid-November.

If you'd like to test your mettle but don't have an official entry form, the Middle Tennessee version is on page four of this issue. For further information, contact the Kathy Collins or Margie Myers, Publications Competition Managers for our chapter. Details on how to locate them or other officers are on page two of this issue.

For information about the Atlanta contest, visit their website, www.pobox.com/~stc-atlanta. You can also contact competition manager Genie Vidal at 678-441-4326 or gvidal@mindspring.com.

President's Letter

Local chapter off to a good start, Prez says

(continued from page 1)

tional and charitable institutions.

All of the topics of our meetings were chosen by our members via the poll we conducted with all members at the beginning of this fiscal year. In addition to our Tuesday night meetings, we are planning a workshop this coming spring regarding "Informational Web Design."

We will provide this to our membership at a **discounted** rate. As an avenue for reaching other information associations and organizations in

the Middle Tennessee area, we will make the workshop available to others. We hope to make a little money from this to add back to the Middle Tennessee STC bank account that will allow the officers to continue to deliver valuable information to you.

I want to ask two things from you. The first is: Participation. The only way to get something out of STC is to put a little into it. Come to the meetings and see what it does for you. Fill out a questionnaire and let us know what we could do to improve.

Second: Patience: Many of us are doing this for the first time. We are learning as we go. But like I said, we want your feedback as to how we can improve.

I look forward to our next meeting October 26th at 6:30 pm. The topic is "Marketing Your Skill Sets in the Information Age." Please see the article in this edition of the newsletter for more details about it. This will be the last official meeting of 1999, so please come join us, and let's have some fun.

Tim

This page contained a copy of the application for submissions to the chapter's annual publications contest. The deadline for submitting the form was Oct. 22.

Resist “dumbing down” for readers?

Simple writing is not really such a bad idea, after all

By Ed Gregory
Communiqué Co-editor

When was the last time you heard anyone say: “I hate dumbing down for our readers.”

Or maybe it was something like: “I could write this so much better if only they would let me be creative.”

In a previous career, I wrote for newspapers and for technology and financial magazines. I still feel the sting of the first time I heard a highbrow say, condescendingly: “It’s too bad you have to write to a ninth grade reading level.”

Rescue from those jibes came via the arrival of the personal computer and the Internet. I still have my DOS version of Corporate Voice, a style-checker that predated the addition of the Flesch-Kincaid reading scores to Microsoft Word. As an early visitor to the Internet in the days before HTML and graphical browsers, I thrilled at discovering The Gutenberg Project.

So what have these to do with creativity in technical writing?

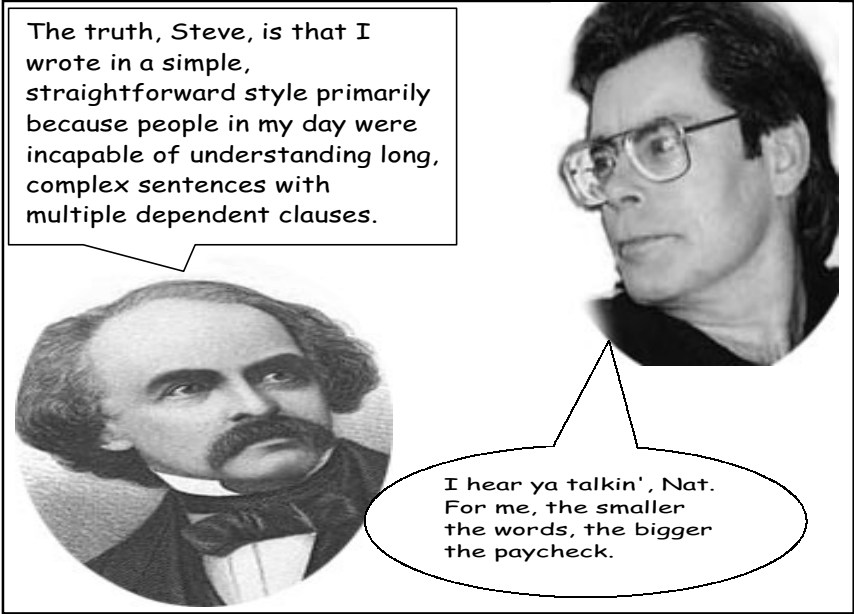
Nothing, or, perhaps, everything.

We often write about complex technical and procedural issues. With little effort, we can turn out documents worthy of a reading grade level of 12 or higher. The operative phrase here: with little effort.

Our end users and subject matter experts may understand quite well the nuances of C language, or fluid dynamics, or labor law. Their jobs require them to read manuals, white papers, trade press, regulations, and specifications.

But what do they enjoy reading?

Perhaps they prefer Nathaniel Hawthorne, Thomas Hardy, or Nicolo Machiavelli. They may have more modern tastes, preferring authors such as Faye Kellerman, John Grisham, or Stephen King.



The truth, Steve, is that I wrote in a simple, straightforward style primarily because people in my day were incapable of understanding long, complex sentences with multiple dependent clauses.

I hear ya talkin', Nat. For me, the smaller the words, the bigger the paycheck.

Did Nathaniel Hawthorne “dumb down” when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*? Download a copy from any Project Gutenberg site and feed it to your favorite grammar checker. Microsoft Word gives it a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 5. Passive sentences? None in the large sample I downloaded.

Is it possible that Hardy penned *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* for “dumb” people? It’s thick with the slang of 19th Century England, but still garners a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of just 8, with 7% passive sentences.

Nicolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, in translation, gets a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 5. Were the translators ordered to “dumb down” for the English-speaking/reading audience?

And what about those other more recent writers I mentioned? Grisham’s *The Partner* gets a Flesch-Kincaid reading level of 6, with about 10% of its sentences in passive voice.

Kellerman’s *The Quality of Mercy* is kind to its readers, earning a reading grade level of 4 with 2% passive content.

Okay. We aren’t writing classics or

New York Times best sellers. There’s no Pulitzer or Nobel Prize for quick reference cards. We can’t often choose our topics; the subject (or subject matter expert) can regularly dictate word choice, and even your best web page lacks the permanence of a hardback copy of Stephen King’s *Bag of Bones* (Flesch-Kincaid level of 3, with 2% passive sentences.)

However, there is plenty of opportunity to be creative in technical writing. Call it structure, or cadence, or rhythm. It may be only one of the factors in readability, but it’s a good place to start.

So, the next time I stumble across a discussion about whether English majors or engineering majors are better suited to our profession, I think I’ll cast a vote for poets and songwriters.

They understand, instinctively or by training, the role of structure in conveying meaning.

They not only go with the flow. They create it.

You can, too.

(Ed. Note - This article? Flesch-Kincaid of 8, with 4% passive sentences. I’ll try to score lower next time. I promise.)

STC Regional Conferences

Region 3

March 3-4, 2000

Currents: A Road Map to the 21st Century, the Region 3 annual conference

Atlanta, GA. For information, contact Cheri Pullar at (770) 650-8008, ext. 123, or cpullar@quwiz.com.

Or visit the conference Web site at www.pobox.com/~stc-atlanta.

Region 8

November 11-14

Driving Forces in Technical Communication, the Region 8 annual conference

Long Beach, CA. For information, contact Christine Stevens at (310) 216-0816 or cnl@iname.com.

Or visit the conference Web site at stc.org/region8/conferences/www/index.html.

STC Annual Conference

May 21-24, 2000

STC's 47th Annual Conference

Orlando, FL. For information, visit the STC Web site at www.stc.va.org. (Select "Conferences" from the sidebar.)

Other workshops and conferences

Nov. 1-4

Help '99, the fifth annual fall conference of Help University Inc.

Dallas, TX. More than 70 seminar sessions and roundtables focusing on help authoring, HTML and HTML-based help systems. Mini-conferences for developers and for managers. Visit the web site at www.helpuniversity.com.



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