

SAN FRANCISCO

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ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

August 20th Meeting

Technical Writing for the Biotech Industry

Presenter: Titania Buchholdt, RN, JD. Chiron Corporation

What and who do you need to know in order to be a writer in the biotechnology industry? And what do biotech writers write, anyway? Explore the general needs of a small start-up versus the many specialized positions available in large, well-established firms as our speaker discusses the pros and cons of working in biotech.

Born in California and raised in Alaska, Titania Buchholdt exercised her left brain at the University of Alaska, UC Berkeley, and Georgetown University. In 1995, she decided to work with people she could trust and respect, and quickly found her niche in the biotech industry. Currently, she exercises her right brain by studying, rehearsing, and performing music by ear, and in her spare time she writes for ethnomusicologists.

September 17th Meeting

Training Simulations with PowerPoint

Presenter: Bill Robinson

Your boss pulls you aside on Monday morning and tells you he needs a training session on your company's application for some customers on the East Coast—and he needs it in two weeks. What do you do? One method to consider is to use Microsoft PowerPoint to create a training simulation. If you have a scenario in mind, you can quickly create a simulation of the application with notes and voice-over and make it available over the Web or on a CD.

Bill Robinson worked in manufacturing, marketing, and the labs of Hewlett-Packard for 30 years. He spent the last half of his career as a technical writer working on manuals, online help, Web sites, and training. Most recently, he led a team developing training and documentation for a call management application to be used by 8000 people in HP worldwide. Bill is a past president of STC Sacramento and has been a member of STC for over 15 years.



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

SEE INSIDE FOR MEETING TIMES, LOCATION, & MORE DETAILS!

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sbecker@codewords.com
Reyn Johnson, reynj@cris.com

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Announcements

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Writing for the Web

by Ben Johnson

Use narrow columns for scanning and wide columns for in-depth reading, limit your sentence length to 20 words, and limit your vocabulary. These were just a few of the guidelines that Ron Person outlined in his presentation at the May 21st meeting.

As the founder of enMind, LLC, a Bay Area-based consulting firm, Person offered industry research-supported guidelines for providing context for readers and for optimizing the structure and style of Web-based material. Person also listed the advantages of Web-based presentations, including the Web's cross-system compatibility, accommodation of multiple learning styles, accessibility, mobile assistance, as well as its ability to lend itself to worldwide team authoring.

Create Meaning By Providing Context

When writing for the Web, understanding your audience is critical. Two key elements of this understanding are knowing your readers' motives for reading and how the material fits into their mental schemas. This information enables you to provide a context.

Person suggests building personae for your readers—brief profiles of their education, professional experience, and personal interests. Once you understand who your readers are, it is much easier to understand how to appeal to them.

To provide a motive for your readers, show them how your material is relevant to them. Fit your new information into their mental schema by relating it to what they already know.

Another way to maintain context is by keeping your readers oriented physically by repeating graphical elements across related pages.

Let the Medium Dictate

Your Structure

Web-based presentations require a different structure than the printed page. Guidelines developed by Sun Microsystems (www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/) include using 50 percent less text, creating headlines that are scannable, breaking-up sections into several pages, and using only the most common words.

In addition, limit your use of graphics. When you do use graphics, always accompany them with a descriptive caption. Also, write descriptive text for your links. Without text, readers have to guess a link's purpose.

Use a Writing Style that Appeals to Reading Habits

For style guidelines, Person drew upon a study (www.poynterextra.org/et/i.htm) conducted by the Poynter Institute (www.poynter.org) that analyzed the eye movements of online "news junkies." The study found that readers first skim text—scanning "shallow, but wide"—before looking at graphics.

To appeal to this style of reading, write short, descriptive headlines over very brief summaries on your opening page and present them in narrow columns for faster scanning. After the reader clicks a headline, present the article in wide columns to allow faster in-depth reading.

Resources

Resources you might find useful:

- Information Mapping (www.infomap.com)
- National Cancer Institute (www.usability.gov/guidelines)
- Usable Web (www.usableweb.com)
- WinWriters (www.winwriters.com)

Ben Johnson is the SF Chapter Treasurer and a technical writer for IBM in San Jose.

Tips and Tricks for FrameMaker

By Diane Amses

FrameMaker has achieved legendary status among technical writers. Many writers believe FrameMaker is the best tool for creating book-length documents. However, its steep learning curve often intimidates many potential users. During the June 18th presentation, Marc Smircich shared his expertise using FrameMaker over the years and demystified some of its issues. (Versions 5.5, 6.0, and 7.0 were discussed.)

FrameMaker Shortcuts

A combination of templates and shortcuts makes FrameMaker more user-friendly and much faster to use.

- To reapply all master pages type: <Esc><M><P>
- To shrink-wrap anchored frame around graphics object, type: <Esc><m><p> (The complete keyboard shortcuts list is at: www.microtype.com/)

Other Tips and Information

If users give each style a mnemonic name, only two or three keystrokes will enable them to select the desired style. For example, *paragraph styles* could be called:

- BD=BulletDouble
- BS2=Body BulletSingleIndent2

Character styles could be called:

- bcs=Bold CapsSmall
- is=Italic Superscript

FrameMaker has an indexing tool that uses the Marker box for managing markers. IXgen is an add-on indexing tool available from Frank Stearns Associates (fastools.com), which automatically corrects index entries. It can also create tables of markers that users can edit.

FrameMaker Quirks

Here is a list of some difficulties FrameMaker users might encounter, along with their solutions.

- Many commands are case-sensitive, as are paragraph, character, and table style names.
- FrameMaker may not automatically update a modified page. To view modifications, press <Ctrl><l> to refresh the screen.
- Spell check will not check text in variables for errors, nor will searches for specific words come up with the requested text in variables.
- Numbered lists require two styles—one for the first item and another for subsequent items.

FrameMaker forces users to think very carefully about design from the beginning. Users must set up design templates before creating content.

Tips for Template Design

Always sketch a layout with pencil and paper before approaching FrameMaker. Although this important step seems time-consuming, it saves a lot of time later because users can concentrate on content rather than formatting. Users should define all elements on:

- Master pages
- Reference pages
- Tables
- Paragraph styles
- Character styles

Smircich's presentation demonstrated that mastering FrameMaker is not a hopeless task. There are good reasons why it's the industry standard. It is worth taking the time to learn the program, but to use it successfully, be aware of its quirks, sketch out your master pages before starting templates, and always be on the lookout for shortcuts.

*Diane Amses is a contract technical writer in the Bay Area and a member of STC and AMWA.
Dcajersey@aol.com*

Our Meetings

When

Third Wednesday of every month.
6 pm: Networking and hors d'oeuvres; 7 pm: Program.

Where

Downstairs at the London Wine Bar:
415 Sansome between Sacramento & Clay.

Reservations

Make advance reservations at <http://www.stc-sf.org> (click Acteva)
Admission at the door is on a space-available basis.

Cost

With advance reservations:
\$10 STC members;
\$15 non-members; \$8 students.
At the door:
\$13 STC members;
\$18 non-members; \$11 students;
first-timers free with coupon
(from our Web site).

Directions

From BART

Get off at the Montgomery BART Station. Leave by the Sansome Sutter exit and walk straight ahead.

From the East Bay

Take the Bay Bridge (Hwy 80). Take the first exit, Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Go 1 block. Turn left onto Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right onto Sansome. Go 2 blocks.

From the Peninsula

Take Hwy 101 heading N. Continue on Interstate 80 heading NE. Take the 4th St./Embarcadero exit. Continue straight on Bryant for 1 block. Turn left on 3rd. Turn right on Folsom. Turn left on Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Bear right on Front. Turn left on Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right on Sansome.

From the North Bay

Take Hwy 101 heading S. Turn left on Broadway heading E. Go down Columbus heading SE. Bear right on Montgomery. Turn left on California. Turn left on Sansome.

Parking

The closest parking garage is at One Embarcadero Center. The entrance is located on Battery between Sacramento and Clay.

President's Notes and News

by Susan C. Becker

Susan Becker is a technical communicator and online help developer. She has 15 years of experience working primarily as a contractor in software development for the financial services and human resources industries. sbecker@codewords.com

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New Members

Caroline Carter
May Huang
George G. Visperas

Transfer and Reinstated Members

Mark C. Etheredge
Michael D. Washbrooke

Congrats on Senior Member Status!

James Hurd
Carroll Rotkel

Greetings from your new president. First, thanks to Marc Smircich, our president for the past 2 years. He's kept our chapter growing during some challenging times.

I've always said, "Never cross a tech writer." You may end up working with that writer (or for that manager) someday. I was reminded again of how small our community is when I saw that one of the new senior members this month is Carroll Rotkel, whom I have worked for as a contractor in recent years. In past months, I've seen former students, coworkers, and employers appear as new or senior members. I'm amazed at how many technical communicators I've known—just in our chapter.

So, what's the point? Read the newsletter, come to a meeting, volunteer, join a SIG and get on its listserv, send me email to tell me what you want. Be an active member. We are all resources for each other.

San Francisco Chapter Information

Web site: <http://www.stc-sf.org> Phone: (415) 820-1566 Email: info@stc-sf.org

Regional STC Chapter Meetings

San Francisco chapter meets the 3rd Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stc-sf.org

Silicon Valley chapter meets the 4th Thursday of each month.

For details: www.stc-siliconvalley.org

Berkeley chapter meets the 2nd Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stc-berkeley.org

East Bay chapter meets the 2nd Thursday of each month.

For details: www.ebstc.org

North Bay chapter meets the 3rd Thursday of each month.

For details: www.stc-northbay.org

Sacramento chapter meets the 1st Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stcsacramento.org

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P.O. Box 2706 • San Francisco, CA 94126

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