

SAN FRANCISCO
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ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

October 16th Meeting

How to Develop Technical Communication Skills

Presenter: Michelle Cadieux

This presentation explores resources for technical writing, computer-based training, and multimedia for professional development. Resources include a number of sites with training tools for software used by technical writers and trainers, including online courses. Topics discussed will include links, resources, statistics, and bibliographies for FrameMaker, Flash, Internet resources, and video production.

Michelle Cadieux is a technical writer and trainer. Currently, she works for Silicon Valley International Society for Performance Improvement (SVISPI). Previously, she ran her own business. She performed research, journalism, and marketing work. In addition, Michelle has completed all but the thesis for an MBA at San Jose State University.

November 20th Meeting

Beyond Javadoc: Producing API Reference Guides in FrameMaker

Presenter: James F. Bisso, CTO, Bitzone LLC

Technical communicators write API reference guides with the help of programs such as Javadoc. Javadoc uses Java source code, including comments, to generate the API reference guide. When first released, Javadoc generated only HTML documents, but now it has exposed its own API, the Doclet API, which expands Javadoc's capability. Sun developed a Doclet that generates Frame MIF files instead of HTML. This talk covers the tools, APIs, and processes for producing API reference guides in HTML and FrameMaker.

Jim Bisso has worked in the computer industry for over 14 years as a technical writer, product manager, and trainer at Taligent, Oracle, Inprise, and Lutris. He specializes in developer documentation for Java and C++ and has taught computer science and technical communication at Golden Gate University, UC Berkeley Extension, San Jose State Extension, and Mills College. He has an undergraduate degree in linguistics and a masters in computer science.

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



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Ancilla Allsman, allsman@attbi.com

Susan C. Becker,
sbecker@codewords.com

Reyn Johnson, reynj@cris.com

Publicity

Announcements

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Newsletter

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Production

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Competition Liaison

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Information Architecture and the Web: Designing the User Experience

By Susan J. Hernandez

At the July chapter meeting, we heard that forty percent of job applicants fail to complete online applications; 77% of potential customers abandon online shopping carts; and 42% of online information searches fail. The problem, according to Caroline Drakeley and Anne Marie Smith, information architects and principals of InfoPros, is that most sites are designed for ease of maintenance, not user convenience. Information architects strive to enhance site navigation so users can easily find the information they seek.

Information architecture is the process of deciding what your site should do and then constructing a plan before coding begins. The process consists of seven steps:

1) Define the site's audience and goals—Ask what the company's mission is and how the web site will bolster it. Learn the short- and long-term goals for the site, the tasks users should be able to do, and the content that the site should—and should not—contain. Apply both qualitative and quantitative descriptors. Once the site's goals are prioritized, documented, and published, learn who the intended audience is, why they will visit the site, and why they will return. What are their problems, background in the subject matter, and demographics? Create a table, ranking the audience in order of importance and identifying each audience's three most important information needs.

2) Define the user experience—Anticipate users' questions and expectations by writing detailed scenarios using tasks from the audience table and goals list. How would users complete a given task via the site? Brainstorm questions customers might ask.

3) Specify content and functionality—List the site's content and functional elements, considering goals of the site and of users. Sort the elements and name each resulting group, ranking each group in order of importance. Drakeley and Smith recommend asking six users to sort and rank the content elements as well then comparing the results.

4) Create the site structure—It can be exact, for example alphabetical or chronological; ambiguous, for example task-oriented, topical, audience-specific; or a hybrid. From the results, the architect creates a high-level site map to ensure consistency and structural integrity across the site by seeing how topics relate to each other site-wide.

5) Refine content labels—Clear, consistent content labeling is key to successful site navigation, according to Drakeley and Smith. Better long and clear than short and vague, so users need not rely on the site's search function.

6) Define the navigation system—Your navigation structure should show users where they are, where they have been, and where they can go. For optimum usability, limit the number of global navigation elements to nine and provide several navigation schemes.

7) Develop the visual design—Wireframe diagrams, created using PowerPoint, Visio, even paper and pencil, complement the site map by illustrating the overall layout of major pages. These should be rough, quick, and easily changed. Allow space for global and local navigation, the company's brand, content, advertising/ sponsorship if needed, and a footer.

Only after completing these steps do you begin coding.

Susan Hernandez is a senior member of STC. She has thirty years of experience in the field, and has been contracting for over 20 years.

Touchstone Award Winners

By Keith A. Albert

The Northern California Technical Communication Competition (Touchstone) is a rewarding process for both entrants and judges explained Patrick Lufkin and Richard Mateosian at the August chapter meeting. The contest, organized by a standing committee of the Northern California Chapters of the Society for Technical Communication, is held every year and draws anywhere from 200 to 400 entrants. As part of their presentation, Lufkin and Mateosian brought along a number of noteworthy entries from the 2001 competition for the audience's inspection.

The general purposes of the Touchstone competition are to advance the profession of technical communication, to promote the STC and to fund the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship for Technical Communication students. Furthermore, the entrants get to see the work of their fellow technical communicators and receive detailed peer reviews of their work. Entrants must submit five copies of their work to be judged, along with a \$100.00 fee for STC members or \$125.00 fee for non-members, by October 9 for the 2002 Touchstone competition.

In return for their volunteered time, the judges also receive benefits. Like the entrants, they have the opportunity to review the work of other technical communicators, but from a different vantage point. A number of the audience members had been former judges and stated that the experience of judging had helped their work. Marc Smircich said he often found himself asking what further steps he might take if he were submitting his work to Touchstone. Susan Becker claimed that it enabled her "to put a little extra polish" on her work, while Kris Hahn doubted whether she would have received her two Touchstone competition awards without the experience.

Training for the judges commences on October 19, 2002. According to Mateosian, the most important attributes of a judge are the ability to express oneself and being able to explain what further changes the entrant might have undertaken to benefit the intended audience.

A judge's workload, whether that of a team judge reviewing individual entries or that of a lead judge supervising other judges, is approximately 40 hours. The competition embraces about 24 different categories of documents. Among them are software manuals, quick start guides, and online help. A team judge can expect to be assigned one or two different categories to evaluate and will divide his or her time evenly between each of the entries.

When a single category has garnered so many entries that a single judge cannot review them all, the entries will be divided amongst different judges. After the various judges have submitted their critiques, the Quality Assurance team reviews and, if necessary, revises their comments if they deem the judges to have been too lenient or too harsh on the entries. This supervision helps maintain a consistent standard of critique for the competition. There are four levels of distinction issued. In ascending order, they are Achievement, Merit, Excellence, and Distinguished Communicator.

Next, the written comments are distributed to the entrants. Finally, the winning entries are announced and the awards distributed at a gala luncheon in February.

Additional information about the 2002 Touchstone Competition can be found at <http://www.stc-touchstone.org/2002/index.htm>.

Keith A. Albert is a technical communicator in the Bay area.

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

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 Marc Smircich

*Marc Smircich is a Senior Technical Writer for Quintessential School Systems in San Mateo, California. He has 14 years of experience documenting financial and human resources applications.
Email: info@stc-sf.org.*

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New STC Members

Rae Anderson
Gary Barrera
Maria Breaux
Lise Carlson
Larina Dacanay
Adrienne Dair
Debra Garrison
Keady Phelan
Rhonda Sims
Marc Schnapp
Gina Wentzel

Transfer and Reinstated Members

JuLee E. Burdekin
Michelle L. Cleave
Gary Drenan
Alice Heidinger
Ann Marie Junglas
Elizabeth Medel

The title of the October presentation, which is "How to Develop Technical Communication Skills," made me stop and think. I've been doing technical writing for a long time, and I've seen a lot of changes.

As Dirty Harry says in one of his movies, "A man has got to know his limitations." For example, I have many years of experience in a proprietary main-frame platform that, to use the marketing jargon, is being obsoleted. But I don't want to become obsolete along with it. So I'm taking an introductory class in Unix this semester and planning on taking the follow-up class in Unix system administration in January. There are many other things to learn, but I can take only one or two classes at a time, and learning is a lifelong activity. What are your limitations? What are you doing to do to overcome them?

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

SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

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

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