

Stimulus

October 2005



Send in your entries for the Annual Technical Communication Competition!

Welcome to the 2005/2006 STCEO season!

President's Message
by Barbara Jordan

We have a small but committed group of executive members and volunteers to bring you events this year.

Ken Kicksee, our past-president, has volunteered to serve as Competition Manager for another year. Rick Lorenz, our past past-president is doing public relations for us. Margaret (Peggy) Vice is overseeing our finances as Treasurer again, Deborah Sooley is continuing as webmaster, and Ted Slavin is editing *Stimulus*. The new executive members are Kathleen Jette and Christine Cuthbertson. Kathleen has come forward to serve as Secretary and Christine is our Membership Manager. Larry Sherman is using his programming skills to automate production of our membership directories.

Programs & events

President/Program Manager,
Barbara Jordan

All events listed below will take place in the meeting area upstairs at the Westboro Loblaws (Richmond Road at Kirkwood).

Wednesday, October 12, 6:30 p.m.
"Leveraging Content as a Corporate Asset"
presented by **Ron Stone**.

Tuesday, November 15, 6:30 p.m.
"Going Head to Head with Communication"
presented by **Barry Clegg**
(Note: An article by Mr. Clegg appears on page 3 of this issue)

Thursday, December 8, 6:30 p.m.
December Bash
Food, Drink, and even a Cooking Demo!

If you have topic suggestions, please send them to Barbara at program@stceo.org . ☺

If you would like to join our group of volunteers, let me know! I'm sure we can find a job for you.

Be sure to check our website, <http://www.stceo.org> frequently for information on upcoming events! ☺

Local "Best of Show" entry wins international award for excellence

Past-President/Competition Manager,
Ken Kicksee

The leaves are falling and it's time once again for the annual STC Technical Communication

Competition. This is your chance to find out how the quality of your work compares against the best in the area, and indeed the world.

Last year, our local Best of Show entry earned an Excellence award at the international level. Congratulations to Tanya Pollard, Anne Waters, and Darryl Swerbrick of Cognos for their entry, *Cognos Planning 7.2 Quick Start for Users CBT*.

In recent years, entries from the Eastern Ontario chapter have won many awards at the international competition, including the Best of Show award in 2004. By entering our competition, you can help us continue our proud tradition of submitting high-quality documentation internationally.

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“The Scoop” by Penny Lange

On October 6, **Penny Lange** guest-lectured to the students of the Algonquin Technical Writing Program on technical marcom writing. In 2006, Penny will present the second of her two annual presentations to the students, on freelancing. (This is the presentation that either lures them to The Dark Side or scares them away.)

Christel Kurz asks, “Have you ever met anyone who actually uses your docs?”

P.L. - Maybe you did when you went on customer visits or to beta sites, back in the old days when even tech writers were sent out to meet and greet customers. However, as a seasoned member of the tech writing community, I've become pretty used to thinking that no one really ever reads the stuff, and have of course developed the skill of writing so that it doesn't need to be read! You know what I mean.

Well, what a surprise it was to me when recently, at a garage sale in our neighbourhood, I actually met a user of one of my docs. A neighbour I hadn't seen for a long time asked me where I was working these days. When I told her I had spent my summer on a contract with Elections Canada, she wasn't just being polite, she was really interested in what I did there. It turns out she works as an Assistant Returning Officer for our polling division and I had just written the installation and user guide for the system she was now trying to learn!

I guess you never know what you'll find at a garage sale that makes it well worth the trip.

If you have an item you'd like to share in this column about a new job or contract, a conference you've attended, or other newsworthy events, please send an email to stimulus@stceo.org. ☺

Wine and Cheese

STCEO's annual Wine and Cheese had 38 people come out and sample the goods on September 29th at Dow's Lake Pavillion. Included in the gang was most of Algonquin College's Technical Writing students. *Stimulus* didn't get many pictures of the event but this one begs a creative caption from the readers!

Ever put words in peoples' mouths when you can't hear them? Now's your chance to see it in print! Send in your creative captions for this photo of gentlemen conversing to stimulus@stceo.org and we'll print the best one in the next issue. Note: as with all things at a good wine and cheese party, contributions in bad taste will be discarded. ☺



Golf scores? Latest *Desperate Housewives* episode? Techno-babble? You decide!!!

Volunteers Needed!

Membership Manager, Hello fellow
Christine Cuthbertson members, I am the
membership@stceo.org new 2005/2006
membership
manager, Christine Cuthbertson. I hope everyone has had a lovely summer and is ready to begin a new year with lots of exciting and interesting STCEO events and seminars.

The STCEO is looking for volunteers, so if you are able, we would really appreciate it! The volunteer positions are as follows:

Competition Helpers - help in the sorting the competition entries and organizing them for the judging teams.

Competition Judges - experienced technical writers and editors to judge the print and on-line entries.

Program Manager - to organize the program meetings.

Greeters - greet each member at the door at an STCEO meeting and introduce them to other members.

The STCEO would like to thank you for previous volunteer work, and hope you are able to continue as we appreciate your help in every way. ☺

Synagogue, Pond, & Ducks

Special Feature

by Barry Clegg
barry.clegg@sympatico.ca

As exercises in creative reading, where only imagination can extract sense from ambiguity, advertisements for real estate provide excellent material. These ingenious little gems of persuasion, though ostensibly written in English, challenge the intellect on four fronts through use of dubious grammar, dubious punctuation, dubious math, & dubious sense.

Real Estate Agents work under great pressure. There are after all a great many of them competing for our very occasional business. This internecine struggle leads them to treat language with reckless inexactitude.

"The three most important considerations in buying real estate are Location, Location, & Location." Agents are at all times conscious of this trusty truism of the trade. No matter where their property actually stands, they will find a way of describing its location in the most glowing terms.

Here is a home which has been given unique appeal: *in a demanding area, close to synagogue, pond, & ducks.* It has its peculiar charm, no doubt, but if a demanding area is in any way comparable to a demanding child, who needs it?

In their efforts to satisfy tastes at both ends of the spectrum, agents strain the very fibres of reason. *No car? No problem! Only minutes from subway. Immaculate home with double garage.*

For people seeking a new home on retirement, the choice might lie somewhere between the calm of village life and the bustle of a hectic social scene. One Agent has the all-embracing answer: *Retire to this busy tourist village. Animal lovers can relax in old Thornhill - walk the dog down tree-lined streets.* From what I know of dogs & trees, I'd say a leisurely outing is guaranteed.

A similar satisfaction of extremes is achieved in this home: *Hidden away on a quiet cul-de-sac it is surrounded by Warden Subway Station, Woods Mall, green belt ravine park, buses, all schools, and arena.*

Publication deadlines often leave little time for the niceties of punctuation in advertising copy. This gives rise to extraordinary concepts like *a fully tenanted new gas furnace*; for the motoring enthusiast a *spacious 4-bedroomed brick double-garage*; and for compulsive hoarders who never throw anything out, *a home which includes parking five appliances.*

Some advertisements are abbreviated to the point of virtual incomprehensibility. No sales here to new Canadians! *This lovely t/house has lge. m/b w/ens 4 pc & w/o to deck. Mn. flr. 1dy/den/fam. rm. w/brick f/pl.*

Math is another discipline sacrificed on the altar of expediency. *6 room bungalow, 3 bedrooms, 2 kitchens, 2 bathrooms.* Sometimes the attempt to quantify is abandoned altogether. *Four bedrooms and many baths.* One Agent appeals desperately to the neighbourhood-party type, with a *32x167 ft gas barbecue.* Not to worry, though, it comes with a *large back yard.*

Even the most zealous Agent is sometimes unintentionally candid. *Beautifully renovated home, new wiring, new roof, won't last.* In another example the difference between renovation & improvement is subtly acknowledged: *The present owners have done much of the remodelling of this classic home. Much of the original beauty remains.*

Typos torment anyone who uses a keyboard, but Real Estate Agents should proofread with particular care. Sale potential is not improved by describing a property as *seami-detached* or *spilt-level in a grime location.*

"Publication deadlines often leave little time for the niceties of punctuation in advertising copy."

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The Matrix - Redocumented

Special Feature

by Andrew Brooke
abrooke@insystems.com

The concept behind the film “The Matrix” is greater than the film itself. If you are one of the three people on the planet that who have not seen this film, here's a quick summary:

In the future, machines have conquered the world and need electric power to stay alive. They have enslaved humanity in a giant computer-generated simulation called The Matrix, and are using humans as batteries for their power source. The Matrix appears so real that no-one knows they are in it. However, some people have escaped the Matrix and are battling the machines to free humanity.

It's a fantastic premise. Unfortunately, the film gets bogged down in endless action sequences and bizarre dialogue. It's as though the directors put a science-fiction film, a martial-arts film, and an artsy philosophical film into a computer, scrambled them all together, and then spit something out.

The character of Morpheus speaks in endlessly confusing allegories, metaphors and allusions, and everyone is too sheepish to ask “What the hell are you saying?” He's not exactly a Plain English advocate.

Morpheus would have been a most annoying tech writer. I imagine a conversation between him and his manager:

Manager: Morpheus, I had some questions about that last draft you sent me.

Morpheus: The answers you seek are all part of the questions you already know.

Manager: Uhm, ok, whatever...First, there seems to be some blank pages here.

Morpheus: Are the pages really blank? Or is it your mind that is “drawing” a blank.

Manager: Just get me the missing content. And another thing, this index is not in alphabetical order.

Morpheus: Why must things be in alphabetical order? Is the universe in alphabetical order? Does “Earth“ come before “Saturn“?

Manager: Well, I'm giving you an “order” - fix it. Also, there's a procedure here that doesn't make any sense.

Morpheus: You need to stop trying to read it and read it.

Manager: Look - I need all this fixed by the end of the week.

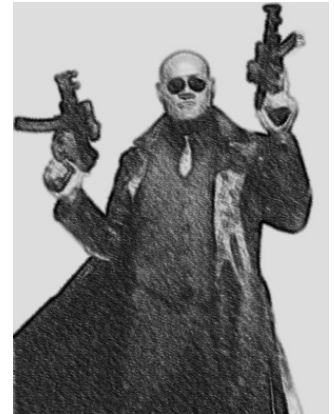
Morpheus: Do you really believe that documentation is limited by something as non-existent as time?

Manager: That's it - you're outta here! Get your things and go!

Morpheus: I was never here...and neither are you.

Neo: Whoa....

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Morpheus: Saviour of humanity's future or most annoying tech writer ever?

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I close this brief look at the literature of Real Estate with a volley of vague exaggerations & incentives-to-buy, each touched with unintended charm. *Finished basement with family, could be for you!* - if you should happen to want another family. *Special features plus extras miles long* - this is not the property with the quarter-acre barbecue. *Floor-to-ceiling penthouse* - so much more satisfactory than the half-height version. And, if a bung is what I think it is, the ideal home for Hansel & Gretel: *Raised bung, tasty ceramics in entrance hall.*

A Professional Engineer with a BA from Cambridge and an MSc in Solid Mechanics from Aston University (don't ask!), Barry spent 30 years in IT development and management. He now works as a freelance communicator.

Barry has written articles (serious and less than serious) for in-house & external publication - in user manuals, technical documentation, reports, newsletters, websites, conference papers, speeches, skits, poetry, & a coffee-table book. ©

The Matrix - Redocumented ...continued from page 4

There were three Matrix films in total: can we call these “The Matrices”? In any case, these films do raise an important philosophical question: what is reality?

The fact is, it is impossible to prove that we do not live in “The Matrix”. We could all be unconscious, floating in tanks somewhere, all connected to a massive simulation of the world that we think is the real world. Or perhaps we all came into existence this very second, with all the memories of our life up to this moment downloaded into our minds.

Why then, would so few people accept these scenarios? I think it is because deep down, people naturally crave simplicity. Whenever there is a choice between a simple solution or a complex one, most people will choose the simpler one. This idea is reflected in a principle called Occam's Razor, which states you shouldn't make any more assumptions than you need to in order to explain something. When there is more than one explanation available, the simplest one is preferred.

“The ability to remove unneeded information is as important as the ability to create useful information.”

Applying Occam's Razor to information development, we would say: if there is more than one way to document something, choose the simpler way. The ability to remove unneeded information is as important as the ability to create useful information. It is so important that there are people who perform only this task - they are called editors. However, all information developers must also be editors, at least part-time.

Scientists continually strive to apply the principle of Occam's Razor. Atoms have been revealed to be over 99.999% empty space. That is, most of everything that we think of as real or solid is literally nothing. We perceive things to be solid because our senses are not acute enough to detect the emptiness: our minds fill in the blanks.

You can easily experience this by seeing the pixels of a TV image up close, and then moving away from the TV. As you back away, the dots merge together to form a vivid image.

Strangely, at the same time our minds are adding the missing pieces, they are also filtering out the excess data that we perceive; the data that we cannot process because it would overwhelm us. Therefore our minds are doing two seemingly contradictory actions: they supplement what we perceive with extra information, and simultaneously screen out excess information. This means that we actually do live in “The Matrix”, because the world we perceive is not the real world, but is both an abridged and edited version of it.

In technical communication, there are also additive and subtractive processes at work. When users read instructions or information, they screen out what they think they don't need, often focusing in on the key areas of information they think they require. At the same time, they are adding their previous experiences and ideas to the information they are absorbing, sometimes with unexpected results.

For example, many users are used to the idea of an “undo” function in software, a function that allows them to reverse a previous operation. They may assume they can “undo” anything. However, sometimes, this is not the case. They may read a procedure about how to delete an object, thinking they can undo it. They are literally “reading in” their experiences and assumptions into the text. When they learn they cannot undo a deletion, their perceptions clash with reality, and that is called pain!



So, for both documentation and reality in general, what we perceive is what our minds have been programmed to perceive. In other words, perception is reality. This has huge implications for information development. If perception is reality, then nothing really exists in the traditional sense of the word. In fact, it is especially documentation that does not “exist”. You are currently reading this document online - the question is: where is the document? Is it on the screen? If so, if you turn off the screen, does the document cease to exist? No, because

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*Contribute to
Stimulus*

*Articles,
Opinions,
Photographs!
stimulus@stceo.org*

Competition entries for 2005 now being accepted...continued from page 1

As in past years, we are accepting entries for two categories: Technical Publications and Online Communication. All entries are carefully reviewed and judged by a team of experienced technical communicators who provide constructive editorial feedback. Next Spring, everyone will be invited to attend our annual awards ceremony where we will showcase the entries and announce the winners. Our best entries are then forwarded to the STC's international competition.

The entry deadline is October 31, 2005. Competition rules, category guidelines, and information about entry fees are available through the Competition link on our chapter website, www.stceo.org.

Note: We are currently seeking competition judges. If you have at least three years of experience as a technical communicator or editor and would like to review some of the best documentation in Eastern Ontario, contact me at competition@stceo.org for more information about becoming an STC judge. We provide complete training and support to ensure consistency and to help you get the most out of the experience.

As a judge, you'll work closely with two other judges who will review the same documentation pieces. You'll evaluate the entries based on pre-defined criteria, and discuss the merits of each entry with other judges. Being involved in the competition is a valuable learning opportunity for judges as well as entrants. And it's fun. I hope you'll give it a try. ☺

The Matrix - Redocumented...continued from page 5

once you turn the screen on again, the document reappears. Even if you shut down your system completely, others can still read the document.

Continuing our search: is the document on a hard drive? If you were to crack open the hard drive, would you see the document? No - so where is the document?

The answer is the same: perception is reality. Just as the real world exists because we perceive it to exist, so too does the document exist because we perceive it to exist. Our eyes receive the various shapes of letters, screen out what is not required, process the information and then feed it into our brain. No perception - no document.

It is no coincidence that science and philosophy can teach us much about information development. As I described in a lecture last month, information development, science and philosophy are all different attempts to discover the truth. They do this by modeling reality in different ways: documentation describes a thing or process, science describes the physical world, and philosophy describes the meta-physical world.

So as an information developer, you must always ask yourself: how far down the rabbit hole are you willing to go, to document the concept we call reality?

Andrew Brooke ponders reality as a Senior Technical Writer at InSystems and maintains an information development and career management website. ☺

PUBLISHING AND LIGHT BULBS

Q: How many copy editors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: I can't tell whether you mean 'change a light bulb' or 'have sex in a light bulb'. Can we reword it to remove the ambiguity?

Q: How many editors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Only one. But first they have to rewire the entire building.

Q: How many managing editors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: You were supposed to have changed that light bulb last week!

Q: How many marketing directors does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: It isn't too late to make this neon instead, is it?

Q: How many proofreaders does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Proofreaders aren't supposed to change light bulbs. They should just query them.

Q: How many writers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: But why do we have to CHANGE it?

Q: How many publishers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Three. One to screw it in, and two to hold down the author.