

Stimulus

May 2006



Remember to
renew your
membership!

Meet the new STCEO executive!

Behind all services provided for STCEO members is a small, yet dedicated group of volunteers who serve on the executive and help us keep our edge in the technical writing industry. The following list of this new season's executive members was provided by our 2005/2006 President, Barbara Jordan.

President - Mimi Richard-Golding

Mimi has always worked in the field of Information Science. Though the job title has changed over the years, the desire to remove barriers between information and the audience remains strong. She is currently a Documentation Specialist working for the Federal Government.

Vice President - Kitty MacAlpine

Kitty has been in the Ottawa high tech industry since moving here in 1995, working primarily with IBM and Bridges. She is currently a technical writer with Transport Canada.

When she's not at work, Kitty lives online where she runs a few non-commercial web sites, administers several forums, and volunteers as a meta editor with the Open Directory Project. She has also been the STCEO Webmaster since January 2006.

Treasurer - Margaret (Peggy) Vice

Margaret, known as Peggy to most people, migrated from a twenty-year career in Medical Laboratory Technology to freelance technical and marketing writing. A member of STCEO for the past four years, she has been the Treasurer for the past two years and anticipates a balanced budget. Peggy has held numerous volunteer positions with a variety of community and professional groups, many of these positions involving financial responsibility. Peggy looks forward to an exciting year and predicts another balanced budget.

Secretary - David Hitchcock


David has been working in the Ottawa high-tech industry since 1997 in software development, support, and consulting positions with companies such as QNX and Marconi Communications. Following the high-tech bust, David worked part-time with Silvercode developing web sites including sites for Canadian Society of Value Analysis (CSVA) and John Calder Consulting.

After rounding out his computer engineering diploma with the Algonquin College Technical Writer program, David has been working with software documentation at Silvercode, Entrust, and now as an intermediate writer at Fortinet. David's first experience with the STCEO was as co-student rep for the Algonquin TW class. Following that David volunteered as education manager, but due to wedding plans and work commitments had to step down. At Fortinet, David is an intermediate writer and has been enjoying learning and documenting the robust suite of Fortinet Unified Threat Management network appliances.

Program Manager - Barbara Long

Membership Manager/Past President - Barbara Jordan

Webmaster - Kitty MacAlpine

Stimulus Editor - Ted Slavin 

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Congratulations Jim Catton!

Jim Catton, Coordinator for Technical Writing at Algonquin College, was awarded *Teacher of the Year!* Nice work Jim!

“The Scoop” by Penny Lange

In April I was part of a Careers Panel for new grads at the University of Ottawa. The other panel members were a senior policy advisor on The Hill and a director at the University of Ottawa, so as a group the panelists well represented Ottawa's three distinct personas: seat of government, high-tech haven and university town. The majority of the students were most interested in high tech, so there may be some bright young things headed our way!

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. ☺

April program meeting report

by Christel Kurz

The April program meeting by Craig Piercey and Jennifer Rhyno from Tundra Semiconductor was super interesting. Who would have ever thought that single-sourcing could mean developers writing complex design specs and tech writers working in the same documents to produce the user documentation for on-time delivery despite last minute design changes?

Craig and Jennifer developed a process that was ideal for their type of environment at Tundra. Developers were already using FrameMaker for all their design specs and source-control software to manage versioning of all files. Also, the developers' design process was well established and modularized to match the hardware components. So the very small but extremely ambitious team of tech writers (Craig and Jennifer) convinced development to do some "real-time sharing" of their design specs!

Tech writers embedded the user information while the design was still ongoing and even being changed. Developers reviewed the additional content in real-time. Writers used the tricks of the single-sourcing trade, conditional text, text insets, excluded chapters, and of course, their editing and production skills to produce a living documentation suite that serves both the design and the user community.

Bravo, I say! ☺

President's message

President, Barbara Jordan

It has been a challenging but interesting year. Our biggest problem was finding volunteers to fill the executive and volunteer positions. Several of the executive members wore more than one hat in order to keep things going.

The highlight of the year was the Awards Banquet with keynote speaker, Saul Carliner. Saul gave a very interesting address on the topic of recognizing and encouraging excellence. He also talked about the role of research in the field of technical communication. Saul is a Certified Training and Development Professional (CTDP) through the Canadian Society for Training and Development, Research Fellow of the American Society for Training and Development, and Fellow and past international president of the Society for Technical Communication.

Our chapter membership this year has been around 190 members. However, I recently received a LONG list of members who have not renewed for 2006. Please make sure to renew **before June 15**. Our grant from STC headquarters is based on the number of members on that date. See **Benefits of Membership** on page 4.

Our student representative, Gerg, organized a mentoring program this year. Senior members were matched-up with students in Algonquin College's Technical Writing program.

I am looking forward to a well-managed chapter next year! We have a full slate of executive members and a dedicated team of volunteers. ☺

Write for
Stimulus!
- Opinions
- Articles
- Fun stuff

Programs & events

President/Program Manager,
Barbara Jordan

We had a full calendar of events this year. There was an event each month from September through May including the Wine & Cheese and Christmas parties, the Awards Banquet, and five informational events. (See list below.)

On the positive side, we had speakers come from Toronto and Montreal. A member of the Toronto chapter came all the way to Ottawa to attend one of our presentations! Our keynote speaker for the Awards Banquet was Saul Carliner, who is something of a celebrity in our industry.

On the negative side, attendance at program events was lower than previous years.

I am very pleased to pass my program manager's hat to Barbara Long, who will hold the post during the 2006/2007 year!

September - **Wine & Cheese**
October - **"Leveraging Technical Content as a Corporate Asset" presented by Ron Stone**
November - **"Going Head to Head with Communication" presented by Barry Clegg**
December - **Party and Cooking Demonstration**
January - **"XML" presented by Mark Baker**
February - **"Resolved: Search replaces indexing!" presented by Fred Brown**
March - **Awards Banquet with keynote speaker Saul Carliner**
April - **"Using FrameMaker in a Single Sourcing and Content Management Environment: Case Study" presented by Craig Piercey and Jennifer Rhyno**
May - **Annual General Meeting**

Did you know that you have the 13th best job in America?

It's true! The following announcement was posted by the Society for Technical Communication headquarters:

Money Magazine and Salary.com **have just released a new list of the 50 "Best Jobs in America" and technical writing landed at number 13!** What's more, two other job titles used by STC members - **curriculum developer** and **editor** - scored numbers 18 and 19, respectively.

In evaluating the jobs, Money used such criteria as salary, growth, stress levels and flexibility in hours. You can view the complete list at:
<http://money.cnn.com/magazines/moneymag/bestjobs/top50/index.html>

The list is targeted at those considering a career change, but how does it help you, the practicing technical communicator? You can use the list to publicize what you do and the current industry recognition it's receiving! Consider bringing the list to the attention of your manager or supervisor. Other recipients might include your internal or external customer organizations, and perhaps your company newsletter and web site as well.

At the very least, the list is a prestigious acknowledgement of the rising profile of technical communicators. So, spread the word! And, congratulations - you have one of the "Best Jobs in America"! ☺

- Maurice Martin, STC Communication Director

Managing writers for whom English is their second language

What do Heart of Darkness, Waiting for Godot, and The Maine Massacre have in common? They all are written by internationally respected writers (Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, and Janwillem L. van de Wetering, respectively) in a language that was not the writer's mother tongue. Samuel Beckett first wrote Waiting for Godot in French, and then translated it into English. Conrad was Polish, Beckett was Irish, and van de Wetering is Dutch.

by Gail Angel
gail.angel@cognos.com

What's my point? An individual can master another language to the point where they can use it with proficiency in a professional writing environment, be it creative writing (the hardest one to master for a non-native speaker) or other types of writing. This may contradict a common belief, especially in North America, that only native speakers can be good writers.

Okay, so you are a manager, you have ESL writers on your team, and you are reading this article. Some might argue you have a variety of things you need to be aware of: cultural differences, writing craftsmanship (grammatical choices, word choices), and communication imprecision. Some others might propose that the key attributes of strong technical writing are (in no particular order) research skills, problem-solving skills, analytical skills, organizational skills, technical knowledge of the product, technical knowledge of the authoring tools, and writing

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Annual general meeting gets new season underway

The STCEO's 49th Annual General Meeting took place on May 17, 2006 at Loblaw's Westboro. Brian Williamson, STCEO Nomination Manager, acclaimed the new executive. A lively discussion ensued, with incoming President, Mimi Richard-Golding, outlining her vision

for the the future of the STCEO.

The meeting concluded with several prizes being awarded. Ken Kicksee, STCEO Past President, generously donated several gifts from last year's STC Conference in Seattle. Rick Lorenz received the prize for

attending the most meetings in the current year (seven). Christel Kurz, Chuck Bain and Gerg Horvath all tied for second place, with five meetings each. Angela Coutinko, Mimi Richard-Golding and Kitty MacAlpine all won door prizes. Ⓢ

Financial report

Treasurer, Margaret (Peggy) Vice

Barbara Jordan, in her dual role as President and Program Manager, has once again kept program costs to a minimum, a good-news situation for our Community's finances. Despite

the strong Canadian dollar taking a large bite from the exchange rate on our head-office rebate, we will manage to post a surplus budget this year. The executive has chosen to set aside that surplus for the incoming executive to use for STCEO's 50th Anniversary celebrations.

I will be staying on the executive for

another year in the role of Treasurer. I look forward to working with the incoming executive to maintain our balanced financial position. I would encourage all members to get involved and attend as many events as possible. After all, we have been around for half of a century, not an easy feat for a volunteer organization. Ⓢ

Benefits of membership

If you are planning on renewing your membership please do so before June 15. Our local community receives funds from the head office based on our membership renewals at that time. We depend on the funds we receive from membership dues in order to provide services to our members, including our educational seminars, networking opportunities, the web site which includes the job listings, and our annual competition. Our local chapter will not receive any membership dues from memberships renewed after June.

“STC offers us opportunities to network with successful people in our field, show off our skills, and learn new skills, all in the company of people who truly understand what we do.”

-Brenda P. Huettner

To renew your membership please contact the STC at <www.stc.org/join.asp> **Benefits include:**

Education and professional development

- ✎ Quality programming (for example, Mark Baker's discussion on Lean Thinking)
- ✎ Monthly meetings from September to May
- ✎ Award-winning publications to keep you up-to-date on the latest trends, tools and practices (Intercom and Technical Communication)
- ✎ Local chapter news (Stimulus)
- ✎ Annual Technical Communications Competition provides an opportunity to be evaluated by our peers. (STCEO Best of Show 2004 won the international competition)
- ✎ STC's annual international conference offers more than 220 educational sessions on every aspect of technical communication
- ✎ Special Interest Groups (SIGs, over 24 to choose from)
- ✎ Telephone seminars
- ✎ Links from our web site to related organizations and educational opportunities

Networking opportunities

- ✎ September Wine and Cheese
- ✎ Christmas Banquet
- ✎ Awards Banquet

Services

- ✎ STCEO web site
- ✎ Job listings and notification
- ✎ Annual salary survey provides vital statistics on pay and benefits for technical communicators in the U.S. and Canada
- ✎ Membership directory

STC meetings

- ✎ STC meetings are often held upstairs in the Westboro Loblaw's
- ✎ Meetings are held monthly from September to May on a rotating schedule in order to best accommodate our member's schedules

STCEO award winners

Entry title	Contributors	Award
One-Tonne Challenge Employee Awareness Kit - Natural Resources Canada	Kari Lynn-Philipp, Denise Eisner, Steve Palmer	Distinguished Best of Show
Corel Paint Shop Pro X Learning Centre Palette - Corel Corporation	Doug Meisner, Allison Pankratz, Donovan Isdahl	Excellence
Installer Console Interactive Help Panel - March Networks	Leslie Bayford, Lisa Galley	Excellence
Corel Paint Shop Pro X Reviewer's Guide - Corel Corp	Corel Documentation Team	Excellence
R5 Administrator Console User Manual - March Networks	Lisa Galley, Leslie Bayford	Merit
Hummingbird Enterprise™ IM User's Help - Hummingbird Ltd.	Jeff Saunders, Jonathan Piasecki, Hummingbird Ottawa Doc. Group	Merit
Corel Painter Essentials 3 Reviewer's Guide - Corel Corporation	Corel Documentation Team	Merit
WordPerfect Office - Small Business Edition User Guide - Corel Corporation	Vanessa Gorham, Carmen Humplik, Jody Johnstone	Merit
Autodesk Civil 3D Getting Started Guide - Autodesk Inc.	Autodesk Civil Technical Publications Team	Merit
The Better Built Bondage Book - Mental Gears Publishing	Douglas Kent	Merit
Quickstart Guide: 10 Steps to Your First QNX Program - QNX Software Systems	Malte Mundt, Steve Reid, Ian Torrey	Merit



*Best of Show winners
Steve Palmer, Kari Lynn-Philipp,
and Denise Eisner*

Congratulations!



*Rick Lorenz with Student Award winners
Madeleine Camm and Allan Ball*



*Stela Kostova accepts
an Award of Excellence
on behalf of the Corel
Documentation Team*

Managing writers for whom English is their second language

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craftsmanship. Except for the last, all of these attributes are language-independent. Therefore, managing an ESL writer is not significantly different from managing a native English speaker.

When I was asked to write an article on this topic, my first thought was that I couldn't do it because my personal experience in this area is limited. But then I realized that I had many resources available to me, and I think that my limited personal experience with ESL writers has been very successful. ESL writers have all worked with me in the same office, for the same firm. For a few years, I once worked with a Hong Kong-born writer, and I have been working for 6 years, off and on, with a Polish-born writer. To supplement this personal experience, I interviewed a few other colleagues as I prepared this article:

Two Swedish technical writers (they live in Sweden, work in our Swedish office, but write in English). Also, one of these Swedes has many years experience as an English-Swedish translator.

The manager of these Swedish writers, a Canadian.

A Polish-born technical writer. She has a degree in linguistics and thus has a natural love of languages in general. She also speaks Russian fairly well and studied German and Latin at advanced levels. She works here in our Ottawa office.

A colleague who once taught technical writing to multi-cultural, first-year university engineering students, and who was our editor for many years.

In addition to my conversations with these people, and the benefit of their reviews of this article, I received reviews from a manager of Documentation Localization and a documentation architect whose academic experience includes study in cross-cultural communications.

Key attributes

It is often said that the hardest part of a technical writer's job is getting the information they need, and getting it when they need it. Tracking issues, following up with SMEs, and learning the product are fundamental to technical writing. The ability to organize material in a logical and natural flow is also fundamental. These key attributes are not dependent on your ability to write in English in a manner suitable for publication.

My colleague, the ex-teacher of engineering students, explained to me that if you don't have the organizational skills necessary to write in your first language, you'll write badly in any language. Bad technical writing is more often the result of an inability to organize the material well; and that can happen in any language. She felt that native English engineering students and ESL engineering students had an equally difficult time with the course. When an ESL student tried to blame their poor performance on their English, she would ask them how their writing was in their native language. Most often, they admitted that they had trouble with writing in their own language too. I have a story of my own. When I was studying English literature in university, I took a couple of programming courses as electives (no, I didn't know about technical writing at the time.) My professors noticed how my English essays were well structured, in large part I think, because of those algorithms I had to write: define your inputs, define your outputs, and plot the path to get there. I naturally applied that structure to any document I wrote: program and essay alike. In my experience, good structure is language independent.

I believe that an ESL technical writer can be successful if they are proficient in the key attributes I identified. However, can someone write competently when their first language isn't English? Let's look at that now.

Writing craftsmanship

The craft of writing is the ability to put words together in meaningful sentences that are easy to understand and apply. My Polish-born colleague said that editorial support was invaluable, not just to provide a greater degree of confidence to her work, but also as a coaching avenue. Support from her fellow team members means that she can take the time to be precise and choose her words carefully; not to feel rushed. She likes lots of examples to follow. In her opinion, the best way to introduce an ESL writer to a new project is to ask them to update existing documentation. They will naturally read the surrounding text for context, style, approach, and tone.

The growing movement to write in plain English may suit many ESL writers. My colleagues pointed out that they naturally avoid complex sentence structures. They prefer to use one clear term; they don't fight the urge to toss in a synonym for variety. They use plain words instead of Latinate ones, reducing ambiguity. If you use reading comprehension tools like Flesch-Kincaid, I am speculating that the grade level would be lower than a native English writer, on average. Because ESL writers don't struggle in these areas, it's possible that some ESL writers are better suited to technical writing than native English speakers.

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A recent thread on ESL technical writing concluded that editorial support is key. Editing ESL work isn't just a matter of grammar and vocabulary. Often, mistakes such as spelling can be one of common usage. The grammar may be correct, but "we just don't say it that way." In situations where an ESL writer learned English in a British environment, those writers, when working in North America, may have other adjustments to make. To overcome these challenges, some ESL writers may need a little more editing time in the schedule at first. Conversely, some editors on the thread noted that, in their experience, ESL writers are better writers because they work hard to compensate. My Polish-born colleague agrees with that.

Cultural differences

Just as obvious cultural differences exist between countries, there are differences within countries, such as between the American north and south. Are these differences part of the ESL experience, or are they normal parts of a team that any manager needs to notice? Sometimes differences can result in misunderstandings. However, without a common language, those differences may be harder to identify and explain. A well-known (and easy-to-read) book titled Beyond Culture by Edward T. Hall is mandatory reading in many university courses. This book is decades old now, but it's still used as a hallmark source to address cultural differences. Arguably, the difference that most affects business is the way different cultures manage the concept of time. Yet, business transactions the world over have deadlines and contracts. Today, working with a translation firm in Europe will be largely the same experience as working with a translation firm in the U.S.

In our increasingly global outlook, there seems to be a growing awareness of cultural differences. This awareness leads to an understanding of how these differences can be positive learning experiences that enrich our lives. My Swedish and British colleagues tell me that North Americans are wordier, especially in e-mails. My Swedish colleagues told me about the need to re-read e-mails to make sure they understood the point of the messages; otherwise, it could be lost to them. Of course, they readily admit that they might be generalizing too much about North Americans! While cultural differences exist, individuals within the culture are still individuals with their own personal style.

Communication imprecision

Misunderstandings can happen all the time, even within English cultures. Here's an example. Many years ago I was enrolled in a technical writing course here in Canada. The instructor was from the United States and had flown in to teach the course. When it came time for a break, she said: "Let's take a break and reconvene at a quarter of eleven." I didn't know what she meant. I thought to myself, "Well, a quarter is 15 minutes. The eleventh hour ends at 11:59, so a quarter of the eleventh hour must mean 11 o'clock plus 15 minutes, and that would be 11:15." But because it was 10:30, it seemed like a really long break. So I raised my hand and asked, "Excuse me, but do you mean 10:45 or 11:15?" She was rather perplexed and surprised at my question, and said "10:45." When I tried to explain how I understood her phrasing to mean 11:15, she didn't understand me. I had never heard that phrase "a quarter of" before. Everyone I knew would say "a quarter **to** the hour" or "a quarter **after** the hour", or better yet, 11:15! When I told this story many years later to an American, he said that he didn't use the phrase "a quarter of" either. I've since learned that it's used in the Canadian Maritimes. So apparently this is a regional difference. Imagine the ESL writer who thinks they've learned some colloquialisms only to discover that they vary depending on what part of the country someone is from! I know of many more examples of regional differences in English across Canada. The point is that we may not know when we are being misunderstood, and as managers, it's our responsibility to work harder to ensure our communications are successful.

Our Swedish writers note that an ESL writer will take the time they need to think about word choice as they write. However, through conversation and as the work day goes on, fatigue sets in, and speaking in English becomes more difficult for an ESL writer. This is compounded when time zones are working against the team. European afternoons are timed with North American mornings. The conversation is challenging when the ESL writer is feeling rushed or uncertain of nuances in word choice. As a manager, you can look for these dynamics and be more supportive and relaxed with the ESL writers. If the ESL writers are significantly outnumbered on your team, then your team may need to slow down their conversations. Also, try not to draw conclusions about the personality of an ESL writer too quickly; some writers may appear to be shy or introverted, when in their native language they might be more gregarious.

Conclusion

There are good and bad technical writers among us who are native English speakers and are well educated. There are wonderfully accomplished technical writers too, for whom English is not their first language.

As a manager, if you have an ESL writer on your team, you need to manage them the same as you would any other writer: develop their abilities, encourage professional development, and provide editorial support as evidence requires. Stay attuned to how cultural differences may impact the communication style of your team, foster team spirit, and keep communications clear and effective. (S)