

Devil Mountain Views

Newsletter of the East Bay Chapter of STC
May/June 2003

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An Online Project Information Solution

Don Huntington provides an example of a project web page as well as tips and tricks for using this reporting method.



Single-Sourcing, XML, Alphabet Soup – Help!

Kristine Hahn of the San Francisco Chapter writes about the acronyms involved in understanding XML and introduces a new tool for creating online help.



Dare to Be Dumb (and Write Usable Error Messages)

Rusty Jorgensen of the Northbay Chapter challenges writers to move from writing error messages to information messages by asking the hard questions.



Acting Locally, Thinking Globally in Literacy Outreach Project

T.R. Girill reports on the Technical Literacy Project and the national attention it is attracting.



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



2002-2003 STC Newsletter Competition

Best of Show and
Award of Distinguished
Technical Communication

Emerging Technologies: An Online Project Information Solution (Part 2)



by [Don Huntington](#)
EBSTC Member

In the [last issue](#) of the newsletter, I reported on an unobtrusive and always available online method I have developed for reporting project status to clients. I noted in the article how the method provides an uninterrupted channel of communication through which clients can see exactly the information I want them to know about my projects—and can see it any time they wish.

For every client project I create a separate web page showing current status. The status page then provides a handy reference tool for all subsequent client communications.

The Advantages of a Client Status Page



During phone conversations, the client and I can look at the status page on our individual computers while we discuss the project details together. I make changes to the page as the discussion proceeds and then, at the conclusion, I simply upload the changed page and the client can see the current status.

On some occasions I will upload the page during the meeting itself, instruct clients to refresh the page, and then discuss whether the changed status is what they had in mind.

A web-based client status page has the advantage of being connectable with other parts of the project. For example, if I am doing a book for a client, I will upload a draft to the client's subdirectory and link to it from the status page. The client can review the current draft at any time.

Of course, I can also create links to any place on the Internet, and include these links in the status page for reference purposes.

Creating and Placing a Client Status Page

You can achieve clarity of position and ease of access for all new clients by using the following simple process:

1. Create a sub-directory off the root of your business (or personal) web site.
2. Name the subdirectory with the client's or business's name.
3. Place the client status page at the root of the new directory.
4. Name the file *index.htm* or *index.html*.
5. Assign the folder an easy-to-remember login and password.

TIP: Consider using the name of the sub-directory for both login and password. (That way you will easily remember this information if your memory fails you—as mine often fails me.)

6. Create the *index.com* file.
7. Upload the draft(s) and create link(s) from the status page.

8. Update the index file every time the status changes.



Suppose, for example, I do a project with Frank Johnson at Intel. I simply name the subdirectory "frank" and give him the URL for his status page. In this case it would be *donhuntington.com/frank/*. His login and password, in this case, would both be "frank."

Note that not all clients will require password protection, so this can be easily removed at their request. Offering it as a default will perhaps increase the client's sense of your professionalism.

TIP: Whenever I create a link from a client status page to any other uploaded document, I insert "_blank" at the end of the link. This opens the target document in a separate window, thus permitting the status window to remain open on the client's screen.

Taking Out Some of the Work

I created a generic template status file—complete with placeholders and stubs. You can open this template at <http://donhuntington.com/dmv/>. Of course, the login and password are both "dmv."

The template is not pretty, but looks better when information is in place, all the brackets are removed, and you include your own logo. You can improve the template any way you like, of course. I hope that this template is a useful tool for you.

Best Idea

I can't tell you how pleasant it has been watching clients' reactions to their status page from week to week as they see the project unfold before their eyes. All of them have been so pleased!

This is the best idea I ever had (professionally) in my life. And I'm glad to share it with you. ▲

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Single-Sourcing, XML, Alphabet Soup –Help!



by [Kristine Hahn](#)
 San Francisco Chapter, *Active Voice*, Editor

This article is reprinted from the Active Voice, [San Francisco Chapter](#).

Today, we're asked to pump large volumes of technical content into the information pipeline. It's difficult to manage all this content without standards such as eXtensible Markup Language (XML), the eXtensible Stylesheet Language (XSL), Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), the Document Type Definition (DTD), and others. "So many acronyms remind me of alphabet soup," says Ron Frankland, who spoke at our April meeting.

Ron demystified the acronyms as he described how XML solves the difficulties of publishing in multiple formats, such as print, Web, email, and CD-ROM. Using XML you can create multiple documents, differing in content and format, from a single, definitive source of information. You can reuse the content without modifying the source. If you're writing a report, for example, you reuse the information—long versions, short versions, for the Web, for print. Using XML, you can provide users selective access to information.

Tools for Single- Sourcing



Some of us have tried combinations of Word and RoboHelp, or FrameMaker and WebWorks, for single-sourcing. The bugs in Word and the steep learning curve associated with FrameMaker and WebWorks have limited their popularity. AuthorIt, specifically designed for single-sourcing, hasn't received wide acceptance, perhaps because it is based on Word, and manifests many of the problems of Word.

XML-based tools have advantages over these systems and others, such as ArborText and content management systems (CMS), for single-sourcing. For example, XML separates the data from the presentation (formatting), making it possible to apply different formatting to the same data easily. XML also lends itself to program control. For example, a program can limit access to information, by user role or by other variables, when there is just too much information for everybody to sort through. XML enforces a consistent document structure, so writing groups can adhere to a schema. You write the content just once, and maintain a single copy.

The XML Process

The first step in the XML process is creating a namespace. An XML namespace is actually a collection of names, identified by a Uniform Resource Identifier (URI). Constructs of XML documents need universal names, which have a scope extending beyond the containing document. This XML namespace is such a mechanism. The next step in the process is to create a schema or use an existing DTD. Next, you create the XSL to apply a style to the XML content. You write content, and then apply the XSL to it.

Rascal Software

Ron Frankland founded [Rascal Software](#) in the summer of 2002 to create Veredus, an XML-based tool for authoring Help. You write content, including API documentation, just once, and then you reuse it for multiple output targets including HTML, compiled help systems, and print. You produce document variants using rule-based conditional text. Ron's company intends to be a leader in Help authoring by staying responsive to its customers and following up on their needs. We appreciate Ron explaining XML and single-sourcing. ▲

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Dare to Be Dumb (and Write Usable Error Messages)

by Rusty Jorgensen
 Northbay Chapter

This article is reprinted from the March/April 2002 issue of northbay news, Northbay Chapter.

It's a tough time to be uninformed, dumb, or stupid: this is the Information Age, three centuries beyond the Age of Enlightenment. For most of us, the possibility of receiving a comment such as "That's the most stupid question I've ever heard" is embarrassing and possibly threatening. Such comments inhibit our inquisitiveness and keep us from daring to display our ignorance.

But inquisitiveness and curiosity are the foundation of good technical writing in general and good error message writing in particular. These days, you can't stifle dumb questions and write well: the process of technical writing should influence product design as much as the final design influences the content and format of its documentation. To explore the relationship between dumb questions, good design, and good technical writing, consider "error messages" (on line, on screen, on paper).



From Error to Information Messages

In recent years, error messages have evolved from cryptic puzzles to readable messages; we've moved from "Error #911" to "Disk not ready." Now it's time for tech writers, armed only with dumb questions and a thick skin, to graduate from error to information messages.

Error messages often are ambiguous and force users (and should force the writer) to ask dumb questions, such as "Why isn't the disk ready? What's 'ready' mean? Now what can I do?" In contrast, information messages are specific, sufficient, and answer users' questions ("What went wrong? What now?"), but not without effort on the part of the writer.

No Time for Fear



The effort involved comes in setting one's ego aside (this may be a small or large challenge), daring to be dumb, and asking the product designer, "What does 'Disk not ready' mean, and what should the user do?" The designer may say, "The disk is either absent, unformatted, or write-protected." Based on that, the error message evolves to "Disk not ready: Make sure the disk has been inserted, formatted, and is not write-protected."

To redefine the nebulous "not ready" as absent, unformatted, or write-protected is a good step forward. However, the user still has only one chance in three of doing the right thing; two times out of three, he'll see another error message, possibly the same one.

No time for fear now. The next question is "Can we determine which of these three possibilities is the current problem?" If the designer answers, "No," that may be the end of it. But, it's nice to confirm what one has been told: "So the machine can't tell whether a disk is absent or present in the drive, right?" "Well," says the designer, "actually we can determine that. We haven't implemented the code yet but could pretty easily." Assuming the code is implemented, we are left with two information messages: (1) "Insert the disk in the drive," and (2) "Make sure the disk is formatted and not write-protected."

The next question, of course, is "Can the machine tell the difference between an unformatted disk and a write-protected disk?" "Sure," says the designer, "that's easy." The writer thanks the designer and writes three specific, enabling information messages.

Contributing to Product Success

As a result of a few dumb questions, the writer contributes to the success of the product in several areas:

- Product improvement: less reliance on the documentation
- Documentation improvement: less of it; no need to explain or augment understandable, complete information messages
- Process improvement: stronger working relationship between writer and designer
- Individual improvement: better understanding of product.

Dare to be dumb, it's the smart way to work. ▲

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Acting Locally, Thinking Globally in Literacy Outreach Project

by [T. R. Girill](#)
 East Bay Chapter, STC Fellow

T. R. Girill currently manages the East Bay STC's Technical Literacy Project. For more details about this initiative, check the [EBSTC](#) web site.

Overview

From January to the end of April, 2003, long after the deadline for this article, EBSTC (and cosponsor Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory) continued our technical literacy outreach project with weekly technical writing workshops for all grade-10 students at Maynard Communication High School (one of the "new small schools" into which Oakland's old, underperforming Fremont High School is splitting). Because the participating English classes occurred in the first and last period of each school day this year, separate visits were needed to cover each one. Hence, the total number of trips to the campus doubled from 2001–2002.

Acting Locally



One side effect of these extra visits was that I could clearly see the influence of the newly required California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) on curricular themes. CAHSEE's 90% emphasis on *nonfiction* prose has the Maynard English classes busy reading *Fast Food Nation*, studying the *World Almanac*, and drafting business letters to the school district (about classroom inadequacies). Technical writing complements and reinforces this new focus beautifully; teacher Michael Jackson pointed out to the students that every technique featured on our poster of description-writing guidelines was also tested on one or more CAHSEE questions. With more (and more frequent) classroom experience, I have tuned several exercises to give the students more active participation sooner in the treatment of each topic (especially students whose weak basic skills might otherwise prevent their participation at all).

Yet another side effect of the added visits was growing mutual respect. Michael twice this term has allowed the workshops to continue on days when he was absent himself, so that only a slightly amazed substitute teacher was available to assist. And on February 27, in a touching sign of current confidence as well as anticipated future collaboration, he gave me my own gate key for the 10-foot-high chain-link fence that encircles the campus and separates it from its Fruitvale neighborhood.

Thinking Globally

We now not only have a well-developed set of technical-writing exercises in play in an Oakland school, but we share them with any interested teacher or parent worldwide through the [EBSTC technical literacy](#) web pages.

Links from elsewhere to this site reveal its growing influence. Among the most interesting are:

- University of Washington's [EServer Tech Comm Library](#), with over 3200 cataloged educational resources in technical communication, where users rate our instruction-writing exercises as "great" (averaging 4 out of 5 stars).
- California Department of Education's list of [Educational Support Resources Outside CDE](#), where we are one of 26 featured online resources.
- The new international STC [Secondary Education Outreach Committee](#) web site, where we are one of only three featured projects.
- Web site of [Newington High School](#) 3000 miles away in Connecticut, where our exercises are one of 11 featured sites on "Reading and Writing in the Content Areas" to help local teachers. ▲

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Editor's Message



by [Ashwini Tharval](#)
 Managing Editor

Hello Readers!

Welcome back to Devil Mountain Views. We are a bit late with this issue and I apologize for the delay. But we have some great news.

Best of Show

Our newsletter won an award for the second year in a row! And it's not an ordinary win either: we are the *Best of Show* in the International Newsletter Competition for the year 2002–2003. You can see the results for yourself on the [STC web site](#). Thank you everyone for your support and feedback. I would personally like to thank the newsletter team and the contributing writers for their hard work and dedication.

Becky Rude, our newsletter designer, has been highly elemental in our current win. She does a great job with the design (as you can see) and the delightful graphics. Kudos Becky! We look forward to your leadership. For those of you who are not aware, Becky is the President-Elect for the coming year. The board will change hands this summer with **Susan Harlan** as the new President and Becky as the President-Elect.



Farewell

It is also time for me to bid goodbye. This is my last issue as the Managing Editor. I thoroughly enjoyed this job for the past 2 years, first as the co-Editor with Becky and then as the Editor. I am proud to be associated with *Devil Mountain Views* and two amazing awards. I feel it's now time for someone else to benefit from this opportunity. The new Editor has not been named yet, so keep your eyes on the [EBSTC web site](#).

Thank you to the excellent newsletter team: **Becky Rude, Hasmig Vasgerdsian, Elaine Parrish, Angelina Nachimuthu, and Don Huntington**. I had a great time working with you and learning from you. Thank you also to **Margie McCutcheon, Melody Brumis, and Susan Harlan** for supporting me. Special thanks to **Gwaltney Mountford** for all her feedback. Thank you **Janet Bran** for all your web help. Thank you **June Schaefer** for your help with the archives. I am sorry I haven't returned those old newsletters yet! I also appreciate all the help and feedback from newsletter editors of other STC chapters.

In Store

For this issue, we have gathered interesting articles from our sister chapters. Read about [XML and single sourcing](#) from the San Francisco Chapter and about [error messages](#) from the North Bay Chapter. Rahel Bailie, Director-Sponsor of STC Region 7, talks about the shifts in the TechComm job market in [Employment News](#). We also have [Part 2](#) of Don Huntington's article on reporting project status.



Hope you enjoy reading this issue. I will see you sometime within these pages as a contributing writer. And I hope you will extend the same goodwill and cooperation to the new editor as you have to me. *Devil Mountain Views* will be taking its customary summer break and will return in September.

Thank you,
 Ashwini ▲

President's Message



by [Melody Brumis](#)
 EBSTC President

Do what you feel in your heart to be right—for you'll be criticized anyway.
 You'll be damned if you do, and damned if you don't.
Eleanor Roosevelt

—More quotations on [The Quotations Page](#).

This is my favorite quote. And, I've found it to be true in almost everything I do. I start with it to applaud all of the East Bay STC volunteers who have made this year so successful. The setting was strained—terrorist threats, high unemployment, and even a war—and yet we persevered.

Many of our members have been looking for work. Some of these job seekers formed the Employment Networking SIG, which meets for lunch and has an active Yahoo group. The [Jobs page](#) on our chapter website continues to post new jobs. And, we have been promoting our profession and personal skill sets with informative programs and even a Dreamweaver class.

Our chapter, which is known as the “friendly chapter,” hosted a well-attended membership orientation. There I had the opportunity to meet new and transferring-in members, as well as long-term members who wanted to get more involved. We also published a member directory.



Our [web site](#) is always evolving—of late a powerful search feature was added. Do a search and you might even access articles from our award-winning newsletter. Our [Technical Literacy Project](#) continues to be effective. See T.R. Girill's article [Confronting Illiteracy with Scientific Communication](#) in Exchange, the quarterly newsletter of STC's Scientific Communication Special Interest Group (SIG). Finally, our chapter participated in both the NorCal Leadership Conference and Sacramento's Writer in the Workplace Conference.

The Fun Continues

This is not a definitive list of all our accomplishments. You can see, though, we've been busy! Good news is that the fun continues. New East Bay leaders are ready to take over. If you have ideas for doing something new or better, come join in. I am sure the new year will be exciting. ▲

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Confronting Illiteracy with Scientific Communication

by [T. R. Girill](#)
 East Bay Chapter, STC Fellow

T. R. Girill currently manages the East Bay STC's Technical Literacy project. For more details about this initiative, check the [EBSTC](#) web site.

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What if the techniques and principles of effective scientific communication that we routinely apply at work also had an important outreach role in schools? Improving the literacy of underperforming students in urban high schools is one of today's great educational challenges. Language arts lessons grounded in research-based technical communication techniques offer an innovative, "authentic" way to improve how these students read and write.

This approach addresses literacy problems on four levels at once:

1. The *professional model* for "expanding the literacy" of high-school students.

Although many schools offer specialized, quasi-vocational work in journalism (or public relations), a broader approach based on technical writing concepts and practice would be more appropriate for more students. In the U.S. alone almost five times as many people work as technical writers than as journalists. More important, even entry-level jobs of *all* kinds now demand some ability to critically read and write technical text. And some state high-school exit exams confront students with this need before they can graduate.

2. The *strategic* contribution of technical writing to school literacy programs.

Most school literacy work assumes a background in *literature* (fiction, poetry, drama) and focuses on writing interpretations of literature. Technical writing offers a rich alternative focus, on crafting nonfiction prose that meets the demands of life (for clarity, safety, etc.) as well as career (for useful description, effective collaboration, etc.). Scientific communication is much more than vocational training: it develops cognitive maturity and critical awareness in students indifferent to or unprepared for literary studies. In many situations, it promotes the thoughtful integration of learning English and learning science as well.

3. The *tactical* relevance of technical writing to the school writing curriculum.

Fledgling writers (and readers) today need more than the usual language arts emphasis on grammar and stories. Equally valuable is active knowledge of the "*science* of effective prose," namely, the psychological, linguistic, and engineering principles of text usability. Just revealing to students that such empirical research exists about text design and audience analysis can give them an exciting, first-ever look at the practical value of literacy and at specific new ways to achieve it. Using working professionals as mentors and involving classroom teachers who lack science writing experience themselves are the big challenges in implementing these tactical benefits.

4. The specific benefits of technical writing *techniques* for micro-level high-school writing instruction.

Empirically validated, widely adopted text-design techniques (psychologist Richard E. Mayer's many ways to "increase problem-solving performance" of scientific prose, for example) can reshape and improve classroom writing exercises and other literacy-practice activities. Technical writing exercises

can support struggling learners with scaffolding, can focus on specific student weaknesses (coherence signals, audience-appropriate detail), and can cultivate that invaluable sense of responsibility that every writer needs to help his or her readers succeed. Fine-grained practice building or analyzing nonfiction text also directly prepares students for state mandated proficiency tests.

Classroom applications

For these four reasons, the same technical writing techniques that we consider industry best practices now offer an urgently needed "second harvest" in high-school writing classrooms. The transfer from standard scientific communication to literacy development is not trivial, but it is rewarding.

Since 1999 the East Bay STC chapter (collaborating with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory) has tried this approach in English classes at Oakland's Fremont High School (rated in the bottom 10% of all California schools in academic performance). The preliminary results are encouraging. The description-writing exercises we used are freely available (with commentary) at <http://www.ebstc.org/TechLit/trgintro3.html>.

Mary Sue Garay and Stephen A. Bernhardt's *Expanding Literacies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) offers a book-length exploration of many of the same issues mentioned here.

[Authorized reprint (with minor additions) from *The Exchange*, Newsletter of STC's Scientific Communication Special Interest Group, vol. 10, no. 1, February 2003, pp. 1, 3. Copyright 2003, Society for Technical Communication] ▲

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Chapter Meeting Information

Upcoming Meetings

Attending meetings is a great way to learn new things and connect with technical writers around the East Bay. East Bay programs are usually held at Crow Canyon Country Club in San Ramon. For details on meeting location and reservations, see the [meetings page](#) on the chapter web site.

Date	Speaker	Topic
June 5	Denise Asplund Director, Technical Publications, Siebel Systems, Inc.	<i>Managing a Technical Publications Department through Changing Times</i> Denise will speak about the current economy and how their technical publications department is managed through changing times.



May door prize winners:

Ted Fleischman (left) won the book "[Get Rolling](#)" donated by STC member Liz Miller. Thanks Liz!

May McKoon (center) won a pen donated by Sue Phelan and ChevronTexaco. Thank you!

Susan Unger (right) won a \$10 gift certificate to Borders.



April door prize winners:

Kris Hahn and **Bill Vlach** won t-shirts from Becky Rude and Clickmarks.



March door prize winners:

From left to right

Nan Breedlove (certificate to Dreamweaver class), **Susan Harlan** (book), **Janet Bran** (book), **Sally Wright** (certificate to Dreamweaver class), and **Steve Peterson** (grand prize of Dreamweaver software).

Chapter Activities: Congrats to New Members



Let's welcome our new, transfer, and reinstated members!

- Greg Bailey
- Mary Bishop
- Mark Blockinger
- Susan Curtzwiler
- Jennifer Garrison
- Allison Hunt
- Linda Nunes
- Laura Phillips
- Alexandra Robinette from Sacramento
- Jayashree Srinivasan
- Diane Stephens from Silicon Valley
- Beverly Tarantino
- Randy Thompson
- Sally Wright

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The Year in Photos 2002–2003



Touchstone judges

Joe Humbert, Judy Herr, Richard Riopelle, and Margie McCutcheon

April chapter meeting

Holly Gallup (presenter), Peggy Shepard, and Kris Hahn



New member orientation

Hillary Russak, Melody Brumis, and Sally Wright

Touchstone winners!

Marinela McClea and April Erland



Nomination Committee

Gwaltney Mountford promoting the nomination committee

Orlando

Orlando Turrietta, now living in beautiful Santa Fe. We miss him!





NorCal Leadership Day

Back: **Sue Phelan, Peggy Shepard, Hillary Russak, Becky Rude, Ken Evans**

Front: **Angelina Nachimuthu, Gwaltney Mountford, Janet Gray, and Susan Harlan**

February chapter meeting

Robert Fish (presenter) and **Liz Miller**



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Networking



There are six active Northern California STC chapters. Each chapter meets on a different Wednesday or Thursday so you can attend all the meetings. Contact the respective presidents for more information or visit the chapter web site.

Wednesdays	Chapter	President
Week 1	Sacramento	Charlotte A. O'Hara
Week 2	Berkeley	Kathryn Munn
Week 3	San Francisco	Marc Smircich
Thursdays	Chapter	President
Week 1	East Bay	Melody Brumis
Week 3	North Bay	Chris J. Muntzer
Week 4	Silicon Valley	Beau Cain

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Society News

STC's Mission "Designing the Future of Technical Communication"

STC's 50th Anniversary Web Site

This year, the Society for Technical Communication is celebrating its Golden Anniversary! The anniversary [web site](#) is your guide to all the festivities.

Select the links on this site to read about the Society's history, the exciting events planned for this celebration, and ways that you can participate.

- Read [anecdotes](#) from long-time STC members and "[share your own memories](#)" with the Society.
- Check the [Timeline](#) to see how far both STC and technology have come in the last 50 years.
- Got some good ideas of your own? Share them with the [Planning Team](#).
- Check back often. New information will be added as the anniversary celebration continues to develop.

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Employment News: The TechComm Job Market: Past, Present, Future

by Rahel Anne Bailie
 STC Region 7 Director-Sponsor

This article is reprinted from the Willamette Galley, [Willamette Valley Chapter](#).

Before I launch into my opinions of trends for the technical communication field, I feel I should provide a bit of context for my comments. I entered the industry in the late 1980s, when the PC market was just taking off. In fact, I worked for a PC manufacturer, working on the documentation launching their line of 286 computers. I've worked in the field through the economic downturn of 1992, the boom years of the late 1990s, and the recent downturn of 2002. My experience has given me a long look at where we've been, which is important when looking at where we're going.

The number of technical writers seemed to grow exponentially in the 1990s. It was the "weatherproof" profession that grew, first because of the proliferation of software programs being created for PCs, and later because the need for technical communicators grew as the presence of the Internet became as ubiquitous as the presence of the PC.

Shifting Times

Four important shifts happened during that time.

- First, the vast numbers of technical communicators working in the software industry radically shifted the focus of the profession. New, exciting trends had the technical communication community exploring exciting new trends such as single sourcing, visual communication, and document design.
- Second, technical writers were expected to increase their depth of skills: learning word processing to input our own text, desktop publishing software to design our own documents, and even drawing our own graphics using graphic programs—we became technical communicators, with a wider skill set and a steep learning curve.
- Third, these changes brought new ways of working, shorter publication cycles, and a consolidation of tasks and increasing breadth of skills.
- And fourth, many of us moved into spin-off professions and though we stayed under the STC umbrella, we became content developers, and translation coordinators, defining ourselves in broader terms.

In the early 2000s, the downturn began in the telecommunications industry; it seemed like it would never bottom out. Companies made deep cuts, and technical communicators moved into adjacent career spaces to continue working in the industry—marketing communication, instructional design—or into new work such as interaction design, usability analysis, or information architecture. The STC has twenty-one Special Interest Groups, reflecting the range of work done by people who identify with some variation of technical communication.

Today, the biggest single issue seems to be unemployment. Technical communicators are looking for jobs, but the jobs aren't coming. They're not being listed on the job banks, and they're not being published in the newspapers. And though the job market in North America seems to have turned a corner, far too many technical communicators are still looking for jobs instead of working. So where is the disconnect?

Shifting Perspectives

One of the shifts I see in the marketplace is that while there is lots of work available, there are few jobs. Companies don't want to post an ad on a job board and get bombarded with hundreds of resumes. Right now, they don't even want to commit to having a job.

The software industry tends to be a young industry. Some of the engineers I've worked with are younger than my own child; I've reported to Engineering Directors and VPs with children the same age as my grandchildren. These professionals may have their first economic downturn, and are still smarting from the heavy lay-offs of the past couple of years. They aren't ready to commit to a new relationship, and their CFOs aren't confident enough about the financial picture to commit to the expense of a salary. As well, the documentation has traditionally been seen as a burdensome expense, a cost center that takes away from profits, much like accounting and human resources.

To meet this new shift in perspective, we need to shift our perspectives. Technical communicators need to think more like entrepreneurs, think of ourselves as "free agents," and prove how investing in us will bring a return on investment for the product. We need to prove this, not just in "soft and fuzzy" terms, but also in arguments that business people understand. We're more likely to find freelance, contract, and consulting opportunities than we are to find a job. We know that the users' point of view is important, and that we can affect the quality of the entire product, not just the documentation. But we haven't been very good at proving it in ways that can be quantified for the bean counters.

Control Shift: Practice Self-Marketing

I can hear the next question in your minds: Where are these opportunities, and how do I tap into them? Herein lies the conundrum. By nature, perhaps, and by numbers, certainly, technical communicators are introverts. On the Meyers-Briggs scale, the number one profession for INTPs is writer. This doesn't mean that we're shy or retiring, but it does mean that we tend not to like to engage in professional socializing. We shun small talk and would rather communicate by e-mail than by schmoozing with the executive crowd. In other words, we don't like to network. Ah yes, there's that word again, and here's how it plays out in the marketplace today and in the future.

We need to be able to look at our offerings differently, explain what we can contribute, and show how we enhance the product. We need to become comfortable with volunteering the cost-benefit analysis that makes companies want to write out a contract on the spot. We need to rewrite our resumes as profiles, to highlight what we can bring to the table, instead of documenting where we've been.

Once we've done that, we need to network with the people who can lead us to the opportunities that exist, and the opportunities that are still just a gleam in a software developer's eye. I notice that we tend to organize get-togethers with our peers: other communicators and job seekers in technology professions. This is socializing, but it's not networking. These encounters rarely lead to the decision-makers. We need to work our professional selves into the same rooms where arguments are made, and where decisions are made. We need to develop relationships with people who want to know more about what we do, not because they are doing something similar, but because they can assess whether their companies need our services.

Statistics put out by various governments continue to point to technical communication as a growth profession, and as the market becomes more stabilized, there will again be more jobs. But we'll never return to the heyday of the 1990s, when employers faced such a shortage of professional staff that they wore their desperation on their sleeves. Meanwhile, we are in a perfect position to learn yet another a new skill: marketing ourselves like the professionals we are. ▲

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Newsletter of the East Bay Chapter of STC
May/June 2003

Book Review: Designing Web Usability

by Josephine Giaimo
Philadelphia Metro Chapter



Nielsen, Jakob, [*Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*](#). Indianapolis, Indiana, USA, New Riders Publishing Company, 1999. ISBN 1-56205-810-X (paper), 432 pages, \$45.00.

This article is reprinted from the May 2002 issue of News & Views, [Philadelphia Metro Chapter](#).

Jakob Nielsen's book *Designing Web Usability* has been described as "the most important book on web publishing yet to appear" (SlashDot), a book that "should be read by any executive with responsibility for managing online operations" (Business Week).

I learned about Nielsen's work back in the mid-1980s while performing usability testing as part of an R&D effort to create computerized conferencing and communications software. In those days, people were "discovering" fax machines, and 1200 baud was considered fast. I mention this because some readers may not know how much research on usability was done decades ago, even before there was an Internet. Dr. Nielsen and others researched usability before web-based software became widespread.

Right for its Time

Nielsen's book is right for its time, reflecting his clear understanding of the goals and behavior of web users. This book focuses on the "what" of good web sites (his recently published book [*Homepage Usability*](#) focuses on the "how").

The book's first chapter looks at the main aspects of web design, including page design, content design, and overall site architecture design. Subsequent chapters discuss intranets, disabled users, international users, and other topics. Nielsen's thought-provoking final chapter looks toward the future of the Internet and web development.

This book offers its reader numerous design insights, tips, recommendations, and examples. Its content reflects Dr. Nielsen's commitment to basing web design on the actual user experience (and not, as one of his popular articles warns, on what users say they want). For those who have worked with at least one developer, writer, or marketer who "knew" what a user wanted, without having collected a shred of data, Dr. Nielsen's book is a refreshing alternative.

Invaluable Handbook

Anyone who seeks a simple, powerful web design or is intrigued by the usability conversation will find this an invaluable handbook. Numerous color, full-page examples of good and bad web pages are accompanied by clear explanations. Turn to a page at random, and you may find a layout of two web home pages. Each layout is accompanied by a brief evaluation and commentary, explaining how one home page is one of the most valuable Nielsen's seen, and how the other page is one of the least valuable. As you read his comments, you may find yourself agreeing with him.

Nielsen uses examples to report how long users are willing to wait for a page to load. (His own [web site](#) contains almost no graphics, providing users with fast page loading.) He recommends that all pages work on two-year-old browsers and versions of plug-ins and other software, so that you don't turn away 10% of your customers.

Nielsen reminds us that people go to the Web for content, not for window dressing. He suggests that, from a usability perspective, the site design is more important than the page design. Using examples of popular web sites,

About Devil Mountain Views

DMV Basics

The East Bay Chapter newsletter is named after a local landmark, Mount Diablo, in Northern California. With a few exceptions, all distances in California are measured from that point, called the Mount Diablo Meridian. The East Bay Chapter serves the cities along the 680 corridor and the east/west part of 580. City-wise it's Vallejo to Pleasanton, Tracy to Oakland and Fremont. We have members from each of those places.

PUBLICATION POLICY

We are always interested in sharing technical communication trends and information with our readers. For details, contact the Managing Editor, [Ashwini Tharval](#).

PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

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Articles may be reprinted provided credit is given to Devil Mountain Views and the author, and two copies of the publication are mailed to [Ashwini Tharval](#) or the mailing address listed below.

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DMV History **Note:** We will update this section as our chapter archives are updated. If you were a Managing Editor during a timeframe that is missing from the history, please [let us know](#).

Year	Notes
2002–2003	Managing Editor: Ashwini Tharval
2001–2002	Managing Editors: Ashwini Tharval and Becky Rude. The newsletter is launched online in Web format.
1999–2001	Managing Editor: Teresa Washburn
1997–1999	Managing Editor: Kelly Walker
1996–1997	Managing Editor: Melody Brumis. Name changed to <i>Devil Mountain Views</i> . Susan Moxley won the contest held to rename the newsletter. In July 1996, a spoof issue called <i>East Bay Flame</i> is published.
1995–1996	Managing Editor: Bruce Robinson. The <i>Twig</i> is published by President Gwaltney Mountford to supplement the <i>East Bay Log</i> .
1994	Newsletter name changed to <i>East Bay Log</i> .
1962	The <i>Pacifica News</i> was published in the fall in the year the <i>Pacifica</i> chapter was founded. (The chapter was renamed to <i>East Bay</i> in 1982 under President T.R. Girill.)

DMV Awards

Year	Award
2002–2003	Best of Show, Most Improved in the STC International Newsletter Competition. Managing Editor: Ashwini Tharval.
2001–2002	Award of Merit in the STC International Newsletter Competition. Managing Editors: Ashwini Tharval and Becky Rude.
1998–1999	Award of Excellence in the STC International Newsletter Competition. Managing Editor: Kelly Walker. ▲