

# Observations on Judging

Patrick Lufkin

## ***Advantages of judging***

Judging offers you a chance to:

- See excellent work of a variety of different types.
- See and think about what works (and what doesn't) free from the insularity, politics, and pressures of the workplace.
- Work with other knowledgeable technical communicators

## ***How to judge***

1. Follow the advice given during training and in the judging handbook.
2. Judge in stages.
  - Start early. You should take some time to live with the entry. If you start early, you can think about the entry, set it aside, and return to it later.
  - Your thoughts may change as you spend more time with an entry and as you see other entries. Learn during the experience.
  - Look over the entries to get a general feel for what you are being asked to judge. Read the submitters' statements of audience and purpose.
  - Ask yourself questions about each entry: What is the entry? What is its purpose? What is its audience? What does an entry of this type need to accomplish?
3. Read in the entries. How clear is the wording? How helpful are the illustrations? Do icons, if present, make sense and help the communication, or are they just graphical noise?
4. Think of ways of testing the entries. Think up a question or two that such a document should answer. Is it answered? How easy or hard was the answer to find?
5. Start planning your judging response. Go through any available category guidelines including those you developed above and those available from the STC. Draft comments. Think about award levels.
6. Try to cycle through the above steps several times before you make a final commitment to comments and award levels. Doing so will make for a more well thought out response.
7. Fill out the judging forms. Review your comments with your partner(s). You may find out that they have noticed things you have missed, and that you want to reconsider your responses.

## Writing comments

When writing comments, keep the following in mind:

- Your comments may be the most valuable thing an entrant gets from the competition.
- Judge against a standard. This is not a horse race where only the fastest win and the rest lose, regardless of merit.
- Be kind. You're not a movie critic. You don't need to show how clever you are, or that you are so sensitive that you can find faults that no one else would notice. Be sober in your judgments and wording. Your purpose is to acknowledge excellence where it is present, and to help the entrant see how to achieve it where it is not. Flippant and unkind remarks do not accomplish this end; they only make people sorry they submitted their work to be judged.
- You don't need to comment on everything that might be wrong. The most important things to comment on are the things that seriously affect communication. If something is confusing or misleading, point it out; but if something is just an isolated error and there is nothing to be learned from pointing it out, why notice it? When choosing what to notice, ask yourself: will pointing it out help the entrant do better next time? Is there a lesson to be learned? If noticing something serves no purpose but to embarrass the entrant, skip it.
- Be as ready to praise what is right as you are to notice what could be improved.
- Be specific wherever possible. Your advice won't help if the entrant can't understand what you are referring to. I often cite page numbers and may even quote from the passage, if I think it is needed.
- Proofread and double-check your work. You don't want the entrant wondering about the quality of the judging because your comments contain errors. (You don't want to be like the editor in an old New Yorker cartoon who tells an aspiring writer, "You sure write good.")
- Finally, have fun and learn from what you judge.

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Patrick Lufkin is an STC Associate Fellow and has been involved with the Northern California Technical Communication Competition (Touchstone) since 1993. He has been a judge, a lead judge, a trainer of judges, and a quality control judge.