



WriteUp



Newsletter Volume 18, Number 1

July/August 2001

Wanted: Authors and Reviewers

WriteUp welcomes columns, articles, book reviews, software reviews, and fillers from all STC members.

To submit material, contact Phyllis Hunt or Sheryl Nowak with your ideas. Submission guidelines can be found on page 2.

Material for the next issue must be received by the copy deadline printed on the last page of the newsletter.

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Conference Musings

By Lou Martindale

From the opening reception on Sunday night to the closing speaker on Wednesday afternoon, the 48th Annual STC Conference in Chicago was packed with opportunities to grow professionally, learn the latest trends and tools, and network, network, network.

Daily networking opportunities began with a continental breakfast each morning, continued with each break and luncheon, and concluded with receptions in the evening. All day and late into the night, everywhere I went, there were people willing to discuss the problems, solutions, and the art of technical writing. I had breakfast with someone from Australia, talked to people from Sweden, England, and France during the breaks, spoke with authors, and squeezed in visits to the vendor exhibits. And somehow I managed to find time to visit the international competition winners booth. Whew!

On Sunday evening, the conference theme, "2001: A Global Communication Odyssey," was presented at the Welcome Reception. Stepping through the fog-filled entrance, attendees were transported to a Star Wars/Star Trek/Space Odyssey: 2001 environment, complete with costumed characters, laser lights, props, food, and a live band. Not being a person who likes adventurous eating, I appreciated that the food was of earthly origin.

Monday morning the conference began in earnest with the opening speaker, Dewitt Jones. Mr. Jones has been a photographer for *National Geographic* for twenty years, directed two films that were nominated for Academy Awards, and worked on many

(Conference Musings continued on p. 3)



L-R: Heidi Kelchner, Martha Collins, Dina Stenz, Lou Martindale, Bill Graham

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WriteUp communicates Suncoast Chapter and Society news six times per year for the benefit of members and friends of the Suncoast Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Submissions

Meeting writeups, feature articles, and software/book reviews are encouraged (100-700 words). Preferred formats include MS Word e-mail attachment or text in the body of your e-mail message.

Reprints

Advance permission is not needed to reprint articles from WriteUp in STC newsletters. Please credit the author and publication, and send a copy of your newsletter to the WriteUp editors.

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Phyllis Hunt

From the Editors

Taking over the Suncoast chapter newsletter, WriteUp, has been a challenging experience. No matter how well organized the last issue was, the transition details can be overwhelming to the new planners. Phyllis and I appreciate the help we have received from Diana Moran (previous newsletter editor), the Administrative Council, and the many STC members who contributed articles, located information, and provided encouragement during this process.

This issue of WriteUp marks the return to a printed publication, although the newsletter will also be available online. Many members let us know that the mailed copy was important to them in their busy lives. However, mailing depletes the chapter budget. So, one of our first tasks will be to solicit sponsorship or advertising to support this additional cost. If you know of a company (perhaps your employer?) who might be interested in sponsoring an issue or advertising in the newsletter, please let Phyllis or me know.

August STC Meeting Preview

Join us on August 2 at the TECO Energy Technology Resource Center at the USF Tampa campus to examine Web sites with John Arnaldi, a human factors and usability engineer, Web designer, and technical writer. John will show us how to identify the Ten Fatal Flaws of Web Design, develop evaluation criteria, and conduct quick heuristic evaluations of Web pages.

Where: University Technology Center II, USF, 3650 Spectrum Blvd., Tampa

When: Thursday, August 2. A buffet will be available at 6:30 p.m. The Presentation begins at 7 p.m.

Cost: \$8.00 for STC members; \$5.00 for students.

Whom: Contact Heidi & make a reservation by Tuesday, July 31 at kelchner@tampabay.rr.com.

September STC Meeting Preview

Details for the September 6 STC meeting have not been completed yet. Please check the Suncoast Web site for current information.

Membership Update

No membership information is available at this time. We will publish an update in the next issue.

(Conference Musings continued from p. 1)

award-winning marketing campaigns. His presentation included a multimedia display of his outstanding work. He was very entertaining while presenting his ideas for improving creativity and looking at the world with fresh eyes.

The regional receptions were held early on Monday evening. It was a good time to meet members from other chapters in our region, Region 3, and meet the Region 3 director-sponsor, Rob Houser.

Later on Monday evening, there was a private reception at the Field Museum. It was another great networking opportunity, while dining and viewing the exhibitions. Dinner was served buffet style in the main hall of the museum. The buffet consisted of several large round tables and each table offered food of a particular country. For example, there was a Mexican table, an Italian table, and a Chinese table. And, of course, there was a dessert table. Dining was conducted under the watchful eye of the biggest exhibition, "Sue," the world's most complete *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton. There was also an extensive ancient Egyptian exhibit, a large gem collection, and on and on and on. So much museum and so little time!

STC seems to have a Special Interest Group (SIG) for every interest. I belong to the Lone Writers SIG. Being a member of this SIG provides me with a way of seeking answers to my questions about technical writing.



Left to right: Heidi Kelchner, Bill Graham, & Lou Martindale

Writing Quotes

Cut out those exclamation marks. An exclamation mark is like laughing at your own joke. - F. Scott Fitzgerald

You must be aware that the reader is at least as bright as you are. - William Maxwell

There's not much to be said about the period except that most writers don't reach it soon enough.
- William Zinsser

Persons who are employed where there is a group of writers can get these answers from others in their group, but lone writers do not have this resource available. The Lone Writers SIG fills this void for me. During the conference, each SIG held a business meeting to discuss accomplishments of the past year and plan for the coming year. Some SIGs also met for happy hour or dinner and a SIG luncheon was held on Tuesday. Taking part in these activities gave me a chance to put faces with names I had only seen on an e-mail.

At the Honors Banquet on Tuesday night, we learned that the Suncoast Chapter won a Chapter of Excellence Award. Several chapter members were in attendance and accepted it on behalf of our chapter. Following the banquet, I was invited to a reception in the penthouse suite given by none other than our own Mark Hanigan, the outgoing STC President. The guests included the movers and shakers within the STC organization. More networking, lots of networking!

Wednesday afternoon Richard Lederer presented the Conan the Grammarian session. Mr. Lederer is in the process of editing *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* and is an author of over 2,000 books and articles about language and humor. As part of his dictionary research, he conducted hand votes on trends in acceptable grammatical usage, such as using "they" as a third-person singular pronoun. One of the words that he asked us to consider was "e-dress" to be used in place of e-mail address. I confess I had never heard the word e-dress and I suspect he might have made it up just to emphasize how rapidly words are changing. But, who knows, it might catch on and then we can say STC members had an influence on its usage.

Mr. Lederer also spoke at the closing session, which was entertaining, light-hearted, and yet informative about the English language. It was a perfect closing to a great conference.

English usage is sometimes more than mere taste, judgment, and education—sometimes it's sheer luck, like getting across a street.
- E. B. White

Short paragraphs put air around what you write and make it look inviting, whereas one long chunk of type can discourage the reader from even starting to read.
- William Zinsser



AntiVirus Upgrades

By Jim Sands, Chicago STC

Last month I discussed upgrades to HATs, or Help Authoring Tools. Since then, a virus scan upgrade problem was brought to my attention. I want to share this problem (and the solution) because it is a situation commonly encountered when you do not upgrade your virus software regularly.

When you buy an anti-virus program like McAfee or Norton, you are buying what is known as an anti-virus software engine. Once purchased, you can obtain free virus definition upgrades for that engine on a regular basis. These upgrades usually occur every month or so and are quickly downloaded off the Internet.

However, upgrades to the virus engine occur less often, and you sometimes need to purchase them separately. The engine upgrades often take a considerable amount of time to download, and subsequently, many of us don't upgrade the anti-virus engines as often as we should.

Now for the bad news. McAfee recently announced that its most recent virus definition files are not fully

compatible with older anti-virus engines, and will actually cause Windows 98 machines to start poorly, lock up suddenly, run slowly, save files improperly, etc. In short, they will do all of the things that my machine (with a one-year-old McAfee anti-virus engine and a one-month-old upgrade) has been doing recently. To avoid this, McAfee suggests that you upgrade your engine immediately and twice a year thereafter.

The moral to the story? Small patches and free upgrades sometimes become incompatible with software releases as they age. So, it's not a bad idea to ensure that all of your computer's software is completely upgraded on a regular basis.

Have a question about Help?

Jim Sands is an independent on-line Help consultant and welcomes your questions and comments. Send questions to: ohlp@msn.com, 847-918-8761, or to Sands & Associates, 650 Whitney Court, Suite 404, Gurnee, IL 60031.

All questions will be answered in *Help 101* rather than individually.

June Meeting Recap

During the June Suncoast meeting, Joe Franks from Avery Dennison demonstrated many ways their business solutions can save time and increase productivity.

Avery offers everything from the familiar labels to media software, tabs, dividers, display sheets, markers, and more. See the complete line of products and download free software at <http://www.avery.com>.

During the second part of the meeting, members offered their suggestions and improvements for the chapter during round table discussions on the following topics: the chapter Website, student involvement in STC, publicity, employment, FTCC, WriteUp, and meeting attendance.

The leadership compiled the suggestions and used them in planning the year's activities during the June leadership retreat.

May Meeting Recap

Rob Houser, our Region 3 director-sponsor, spoke at the May Suncoast chapter meeting about "Working with Difficult People." The difficult people in our lives at home or in the office developed those default behaviors in their first five years of life. Rob reminded us that we can't change those patterns, so we should learn to cope with them more effectively to reduce our own stress.

The Sherman Tank, the Sniper, the Exploder, the Know-It-All or the Think-They-Know-It-All, the Super Agreeables, Indecisives, Clams, Complainers, or Negativists generally share a common trait: they are motivated by a positive intent to complete a job.

To deal with them, don't trigger the behavior if possible. If you do, acknowledge their positive intent before trying to move forward. See Rob's Web site at: <http://www.userfirst.net/rob/>. Select "Papers" for more information.

April Meeting Recap

By Karlene Robinson

At the April meeting Mark Lewis, principal of Hyperwriters Inc., presented the new STC Region 3 website which he put together in collaboration with Melissa Lamb, the webmaster at that time for Region 3 and membership coordinator for the Suncoast Chapter. See: <http://www.stcregion.org/region3>

When Mark and Melissa began working on the Region 3 website, their objectives were to highlight region-specific content and to provide better access to some of the excellent online resources already available at both chapter and organizational level.

Mark explained that, to help meet these objectives, he created a prototype table of contents using Robohelp. This comprehensive table of contents now appears in a frame to the left of the screen and forms the basis of the entire Region 3 website.

Mark would like to continue refining the current table of contents into a robust website framework that could potentially be used by other regions or chapters.

Mark is seeking feedback from members. He would like to hear what information members would expect to find on a regional website and specific feedback on the structure and content of the existing table of contents. To make it easier for members to provide feedback Mark has provided an outline of the website in a word document which you can download (<http://www.hyperwriters.com/stc/presentations>).

The document is already set to track changes so you just need to type any feedback directly into the document and e-mail the document back to Mark (malewis@hyperwriters.com).

STC Websites:

- Suncoast: <http://www.stc-southeast.org/suncoast>
- Region 3: <http://www.stcregion.org/region3>
- Society: <http://www.stc.org/>

FTCC Competition Tips

By Sheryl Nowak and Phyllis Hunt

The Florida Technical Communicators' Competition (FTCC) has always welcomed submissions from "newbies." If you or your company are thinking about entering the competition for the first time this year, consider these suggestions from some veterans.

Cathy Outlaw and Jack Duffy have won several of the awards that Paradyne Corporation has garnered over the past fifteen or so years. They appreciate the judges' written comments and use them as the basis for future improvements in their documentation and graphic design work.

In fact, Cathy said, "One of the reasons that we justify the cost of entering STC competitions is to get the comments." Judges can be very thorough—even picky—and that's good since all of us get too close to our own work to see the areas where improvements can be made.

If you are entering the competition for the first time, examine the categories carefully when the competition booklet arrives. For each category that applies to your material, select the best work you have published in the past year. Pick printed pieces with plenty of graphics. If you have two superior documents in the same category, submit both or review the categories to see if one fits equally well in another area.

Ask other departments such as marketing or training if they are interested in submitting material, too. If your writers have followed the department style guide and used tools like the department glossary, list of abbreviations, and common usage of terms, you should do well.

With a few competitions under your belt, you may want to get involved as a judge.

Leadership Message

Suncoast Chapter Officers & Job Descriptions

- **Laura McGrover, President**
Hosts all chapter events; serves as the principle chapter contact for prospective members, members from other chapters, community contacts, and STC leadership; reports to Society leadership, principally the Region 3 Director-Sponsor, on the status of the chapter; provides support for other chapter volunteers and for the activities of the chapter as needed; communicates regular news and information to the chapter through various media; authorizes chapter expenditures approved by the administrative council; and recognizes the efforts of chapter volunteers
- **Pamela Tremé, Vice President, Correspondence**
Works with the president to manage chapter correspondence and Society reports, manage relationships with other local professional groups
- **Colleen Adams, Vice President, Programs**
Attends all chapter events, serves as host at events in the absence of the president, coordinates presenters at monthly chapter meetings (working with the Area Program Coordinator)
- **Mark Lewis, Treasurer**
Receives, keeps, and disburses the chapter's funds; maintains detailed records of chapter income and expenses; reports on finances to the administrative council monthly and the Society treasurer each July
- **Lou Martindale, Secretary**
Attends and keeps minutes for administrative council and chapter business meetings, prepares chapter correspondence as needed
- **Heidi Kelchner, Area Program Coordinator**
Leads the monthly chapter meeting team, arranges meeting locations, prepares and mails meeting announcements (online and hard-copy)
- **Shannon Cochrane, Membership Coordinator**
Receives and maintains an accurate list of all current Suncoast members, working with the Database Manager; sponsors and supports activities to increase membership, such as the October membership drive; welcomes new members into the chapter (for example, new members column in the *WriteUp*)
- **Dave Lewis, Database Manager**
Maintains current Suncoast Chapter member list

Do We Have to Hide Behind the Words We Write?

By Rob Houser

Have you looked at the computer section of your local bookstore lately? The shelves are bulging with books that supplement the documentation currently shipped with products. What are these books so successful? Do these books have anything to teach us?

The computer books in the bookstore are combination strategy guides and “how to” instruction manuals. They are written in an informal or even irreverent tone and provide instructions using common, everyday speech. They incorporate graphics, including cartoons, and lots of tips and tricks.

These books are successful because they explain how to do real work using the product. They provide examples of the final output, scenarios that illustrate the successful use of the product, and the vocabulary of their users. The authors can provide this information because they have analyzed the way users work and organized the information about the tool within the context of user experience.

The supplemental computer books provide more direction and advice than the product documentation. Official product documentation lists all features, often without ranking them by importance or usefulness. In contrast, supplemental books point out the best way to do a task, rather than all of the possible ways. Successful computer books point out the proper direction, call attention to possible problems, and make recommendations about how to reach the final destination.

Another interesting aspect of supplemental computer books is their tone. The authors of these books do not attempt to mask their personalities. Instead, they identify with their readers, building a strong sense of trust. They use humor and frankness to encourage users to approach the subject without fear of failure.

In most cases, I believe our users would like us to step out from behind the words we write. They want us to help them get their work done, to provide direction and advice, and to make our products more approachable and even interesting.

(Do We Have to Hide...continued on p. 7)

(Do We Have to Hide...continued from p. 6)

To do this, we have to get closer to our users. While many say they support investigating users, few invest money and time to gather real information about users, tasks, and environment. If we cannot reflect the “real world” application of our products, we lack credibility with our users.

Once we know our users, we must provide direction and advice to help them use the product successfully. Too many products provide multiple paths and vague signals to users, not to accommodate different user styles but to avoid making any suggestion at all. Users don’t want options so much as they want to get the job done effectively.

Finally we should not forget that user documentation could be boring without tone. While tone may not work in all cases (especially for international audiences), it does help put users at ease with the product. We don’t have to take the “us versus them” persona used in supplemental books. Rather, we can project a tone that says, “You and I will get the job done quickly, effectively, and as painlessly as possible.”

Take a look at the supplemental computer books in your local bookstore and see what kind of lessons you can learn from them. The market clearly thinks they are a good idea.

Suncoast Wins 2000-2001 STC Society Award!

Chapter of Excellence & Chapter of Merit are earned awards announced at the annual STC Conference. For the 2000-2001 year, there were sixteen Chapter of Excellence and seven Chapter of Merit awards.

Congratulations to the Suncoast Chapter for winning a coveted Chapter of Excellence Award!!

Communicators in Concert

The STC Region One/Two Participatory Conference

By Rich Maggiani, Conference Manager

Regions One and Two invite you to attend a conference that emphasizes participation. Session leaders will present a wide range of insights, tools, and techniques, and devote at least a third of the session’s time to audience involvement. You will then participate in discussions with these session leaders and your peers. We envision a lively dialog in which our collective thoughts, ideas, information, and experience raise everyone’s expertise and awareness of the challenges and opportunities found in technical communication.

As technical communicators, we must keep pace with an ever-changing business environment. To remain competitive, we must master emerging skills and technologies while managing our careers in a highly demanding field. This is especially true today, when an uncertain economic future requires every firm to consider carefully the business practices, direction, and resources needed to meet their goals.

Communicators in Concert: A Participatory Conference can help you find answers. It will be held from Thursday, January 17 through Saturday, January 19, 2002, at a site (still to be determined) in northern New Jersey. Thursday is scheduled to be STC Leadership Day; all members currently in an STC leadership position and those interested in becoming leaders are encouraged to attend. Friday and Saturday are scheduled for concert sessions.

Convenience was a key factor in our early planning. Thus, we chose a date that would not conflict with any other STC regional event. We selected northern New Jersey because it offers a central location and ease of access. In addition, the conference hotel will be served by public transportation.

For your entertainment, Friday evening will feature a dinner/dance with a live performance by a local ensemble. The following Monday, January 21, 2002, is a holiday (Martin Luther King Day), so you can take time to explore New York City. Conference planners will provide information on area attractions and events.

If you would like to be a session presenter and help build the foundation for this exciting event, submit your proposals to Mary Precourt at mary@pdicreative.com by July 31, 2001. You have probably received our Call for Proposals in your email. If not, email the conference manager, Rich Maggiani at rich@pdicreative.com and he will send you the form.

So save the date. And talk up the conference among your peers. The greater the attendance, the greater the participation, the greater the value.

WriteUp

Suncoast Newsletter

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Address Correction Requested

First Class Mail



Calendar of Events

Subject to Change

Obtain meeting updates at our Web site:

<http://www.stc-southeast.org/suncoast/www>

**WriteUp Copy Deadline
for Next Issue:
September 10**



**Mission Statement:
Designing the future of
technical communication**

August 2

Web Site Usability with John Arnaldi

6:30 P.M. Buffet Dinner

7:00 P.M. University Technology Center II,
3650 Spectrum Center, USF, Tampa Campus

September 6

Pending

RSVP to: kelchner@tampabay.rr.com