

WriteUp

Answering "Position Available" Ads

By Lynette Pittman, Technical Writer, Baxter Healthcare Corporation

"Baxter is looking for a writer residing within the Tampa Bay area with 3-5 years of experience to proofread technical manuals. The work is sporadic in nature, and the ideal candidate must have the flexibility to work when needed. Candidate must have Word 2000, and the ability to handle large documents. Duties include editing for consistency, and following company styles and standards. Contact: Lynette Pittman"



You may have seen this ad back in January on the Suncoast Chapter's Web page or email list. I placed that ad on a Thursday afternoon and within 24 hours had received a dozen or so replies. I almost immediately put four on the top of the stack and eliminated a couple of others, leaving several in the "must review" stack. (These are virtual stacks, of course, since the whole thing was being handled via email.) I wanted to make sure I chose the right person, of course, and also wanted to be fair to those responding, so I began asking myself how I had made those decisions so fast. The insights I gained may be of interest to the rest of you.

Those that went straight to the top of the stack had three main points in common:

- They were thoroughly professional. The cover email was brief and to the point, and the resume was orderly and relevant.
- The applicants met all the criteria stated in the ad.
- Three of the four mentioned something we had in common. Let me explain what I mean here.

One person reminded me that we had met and talked at an STC meeting. Because I had enjoyed the conversation and been favorably impressed by this person, that gave him more credibility -- especially since that meeting had to have been four or five years ago. Obviously, he met the "3-5 years of experience" requirement! Another mentioned that he was familiar with our documents, and mentioned his connection to them. The name had seemed familiar, so I thought, "Oh, yes! That's how I know of him." Another said nothing, but I recognized her most current employer as a company whose products have enough in common with ours to enable her to easily understand our work.

Those who fell off the bottom of the stack had one or more of the following problems.

- They did not meet the geographic criteria stated in the ad. Yes, I do know that work can be done long distance. I telecommute three days out of five myself, and have worked as publisher on a project with the writer, editor

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Write Up

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Write Up communicates 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.

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From the Editor

By Diana Moran, Suncoast Chapter

With Easter past us, it is now time to look forward to the summer ahead! For many of you, one of the first events to enjoy will be the Annual STC Conference to be held this year in Chicago. To everyone attending, have a great time and a safe trip!

The next issue of The WriteUp will be my last. I have really enjoyed putting together the newsletter for the Suncoast Chapter. As a new STC year is about to begin, I'd like to give someone else the opportunity to participate in our chapter by working on the newsletter.

I'd like to make the next issue a great one, so everyone please contribute any ideas you may have. Please send any comments, questions, or ideas in the form of a Letter to the Editor. Any letters received will be printed in the next issue of the newsletter.

I'd like to welcome the new Suncoast Chapter officers for the 2001-2002 STC year:

Officers:

President: Laura McGrover

Vice President of Correspondence: Pamela Tremé

Vice President of Meetings: Colleen Adams

Secretary: Lou Martindale

Treasurer: Mark Lewis

Area Program Coordinators: Heidi Kelchner and Phyllis Hunt

Membership Coordinator: Shannon Cochran

Webmasters: Javier Berolo and Nancy Reach

Database Coordinator: David Lewis

Student Chapter Liaison: Pamela Tremé

Note: The Suncoast Chapter website has now moved to :

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



Hat Upgrades

By Jim Sands, Chicago Chapter

It has become common practice for HAT, or Help Authoring Tool vendors to upgrade their software periodically. These upgrades usually reflect recent upgrades in operating systems, word processing tools, or the Windows and HTML Help engines. These upgrades can be annual, or as frequent as three or four times a year if the vendor is in the habit of supplying HAT patches.

Unfortunately, these upgrades are sometimes painful, and I often receive calls from people regarding problems they encounter when they upgrade. For example, the most common problem is the loss of customized Help topic styles once a HAT upgrade is finished, which usually requires several hours (for each Help project) to repair. To avoid upgrade calamities, I suggest the following to all of my clients:

- Read all HAT vendor upgrade instructions before you begin. As technical communicators who sometimes write these instructions, we often paradoxically skip this step. Pay particular attention to references to the transfer of existing style sheets during the upgrade. If needed, call vendor support to clarify any questions you have, before you begin.
- Back up all Help projects and style sheets. Copy the backups off-line before you upgrade.
- Determine how (or if) your customized style sheets will transfer during the upgrade process. You may have to rename some of your style sheets, especially if you have previously customized the default HAT style sheet. Remember, when the upgrade occurs, the old default HAT style sheet is normally overwritten.
- Install and test the upgrade on a single machine. Open up a copy of an existing project and look for errors in styles, jumps, or indexing. Add a new topic to the existing project, and apply styles to several components. Failures during any of these tests are an indication that the upgrade has corrupted your project. Determine the cause of the error before you commit to the upgrade.
- Once you commit to the upgrade, be sure to install and test the upgrade on all of the HAT machines that you normally use, to prevent possible version control problems in the future.
- Unless the vendor suggests doing so, never keep more than one HAT version on a single machine.

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.

The Funny Zone

Submitted by Mary Lauby, Suncoast Chapter

Humorous Headlines

from <http://e-Writers.Net>

Something Went Wrong in Jet Crash, Expert Says
Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jaywalkers
Safety Experts Say School Bus Passengers Should Be Belted
British Left Waffles on Falkland Islands
Eye Drops off Shelf
Teacher Strikes Idle Kids
Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim
Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
Plane Too Close to Ground, Crash Probe Told
Miners Refuse to Work after Death
Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
Stolen Painting Found by Tree
Two Soviet Ships Collide, One Dies
Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Counter
War Dims Hope for Peace
If Strike isn't Settled Quickly, It May Last a While
Cold Wave Linked to Temperatures
Enfields Couple Slain; Police Suspect Homicide
Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge
Deer Kill 17,000
Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery; Hundreds Dead
Man Struck by Lightning Faces Battery Charge
New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
Astronaut Takes Blame for Gas in Spacecraft
Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
Chef Throws His Heart into Helping Feed Needy
British Union Finds Dwarfs in Short Supply
Ban On Soliciting Dead in Trotwood
Lansing Residents Can Drop Off Trees
New Vaccine May Contain Rabies
Man Minus Ear Waives Hearing
Deaf College Opens Doors to Hearing
Air Head Fired

If you feel like hell, crawl to your room.
It feels good to be warm and in bed.

—Ernest Hemingway

February Meeting Recap

By Kimberly Nolder, Suncoast Chapter Member

The February meeting was a joint meeting of the STC Suncoast Chapter and the SSTC (Student Society for Technical Communication). The meeting was held at the Bayboro Café at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg campus. The meeting consisted of a panel discussion that included many experts with specialties in technical writing. The discussion was especially useful for the students who attended.

A representative from the Raymond James human resource department provided some valuable information on how to present yourself at an interview. She discussed what questions the Raymond James human resource department may ask a potential employee. The representative also told us that her department enjoys getting questions in return. One member asked what type of questions she likes to hear. She gave some great examples of questions to ask a potential employer.

- What is the corporate culture like?
- What type of projects do you work on?
- What type of tools and technology do you use?
- What is the background of the employees?

She also added that one should research the company you will interview with beforehand. Do not ask, “What does your company do?”

Other discussions at the meeting centered on ever-popular topics such as usability, indexing, and the difference between various types of Help systems.

All of the speakers on the panel were very enthusiastic and informative. Students in the technical writing program at the University of South Florida would benefit from more meetings of this type.

Here are some of the references that were given at the meeting:

Usability

- STC Usability SIG Web Site: <http://www.stcsig.org/usability/>
- usability professionals' association: www.upassoc.org
- Jakob Nielsen's Website: <http://www.useit.com/>

Indexing

- The American Society of Indexers: <http://www.asindexing.org/index.html>
- Australian Society of Indexers: <http://www.aussi.org>
- Society of Indexers: <http://www.socind.demon.co.uk/>

Ongoing issues for the STC Suncoast Chapter were also brought up. Pam Treme', the STC Suncoast Chapters' student liaison, took some time to ask for mentors for technical writing students. Eileen McPartland stressed that this is a very important role that professionals in the technical writing field could provide. Any amount of time you could give to a student will make a big difference!

Featured Face: Meet Nancy Reach

By Lore Eargle, Suncoast Chapter Vice-President

Background: Nancy Reach was the Suncoast STC chapter secretary for two years. She has worked with the Florida Technical Communication Competition (FTCC) several times over the years, serving as co-chair, Awards Coordinator, and as a judge. Last year, she was the publicity manager for the 47th STC annual conference.

The position involved her in the role of manager for three teams: individual writers for different publications, the team that created the STC Florida information website, and the team that wrote and produced the daily conference newsletter. She currently works for Nielsen Media Research in Palm Harbor as a Lead Documentation Specialist.

Before she got so involved in STC and began working at Nielsen, she attended USF. While there, she did career research and found that technical communication was for her. She completed her degree with a minor in technical communication and a major in geography. She said, "I found two of my geography classes extremely helpful in my technical writing career. A class in natural disaster management developed my communication skills as I studied how to inform the public about natural disasters. A cartography class—yes, drawing maps—provided valuable insight in communicating without words, what to include or exclude, when and how to use color effectively, and how to bring a project to print." She added, "I've been a writer for 9 years and haven't regretted my choice."

What she likes most in technical communication: Nancy's favorite projects are "new ones. I like challenges," she says. "My responsibilities now involve many areas including management. I'm the web manager for a multi-division project. I work with many novices as they try to prepare their web pages to go online. I'm also redesigning the look, structure, and content of our project's intranet site."

What does she see as the main issue facing technical communicators today?

"My answer is unusual but I think it's forgetting that writing is our most important skill," she declares. "So many of us worry about the technologies of today that we overlook the key ingredient to our job, writing! During the last few years, Nielsen writers have considered many, many candidates for new writing positions. The consensus is that we want someone with strong writing skills; we're willing to overlook some missing software skills, if only the person can write."

What advice does she offer to people who are new to technical communication?

- "Make sure your writing is top notch," she re-emphasizes. "Review a grammar and writing book if necessary. Spend some time in the book store and learn more about writing."
- "Spend personal time learning more about your craft. You don't need to spend a lot of money to learn new skills. I used Notepad for my web pages for over a year before I started using authoring tools."
- "Become active in STC—volunteer for a task that you know nothing about. It's an opportunity to grow." STC exposes you to individuals who do what you want to do. Ask questions. Learn.
- "Don't take edits personally when you've worked very hard to produce what you consider a perfect document and it comes back from editing with marks all over it. Learn from those edit remarks, ask questions about suggested changes you don't understand, correct your consistent errors. Use those edits to build a better document. Writers who've been around a while expect edits on their documents."

"Pay your dues. You need to learn and work on the basics before you can do all the new "cool stuff." If you want to learn about something new and it's not what you're working on at work, get a book and learn it on your own. Next time that item is mentioned, offer to show what you know. It'll get your foot in the door."

STC News: New Policy

Submitted by STC

NEW POLICY:

The STC board of directors, at its January meeting, has authorized STC chapters to restrict some chapter services to members only. For example, membership directory information and employment information may be restricted to chapter members or other STC members. This may be implemented by a "Members Only" section of the chapter Web site or any other method that the chapter may devise. Please note that this is a change in STC policy.

BACKGROUND:

Charitable Activities: Since 1968, when STC was reorganized as a 501(c)(3) charity, STC has devoted the substantial part of its efforts toward activities within the scope of its charitable purposes. These activities can be found in STC's Articles of Incorporation and its bylaws, e.g. publications, conferences, research, scholarships, etc. Further, STC, in keeping with its charitable status has made these services available to all--members and non-members alike.

Non-Charitable Activities: The IRS, however, recognizes that while conducting the daily business of a charity, there will be some activities that are essential to the charity's well-being that are not, strictly speaking, charitable in nature. The IRS allows these activities so long as they do NOT constitute a substantial part of the organization's activities. For STC, such activities have included selling advertising (magazine and journal), renting the mailing list, providing employment information (clearly not within the scope of STC's charitable purposes), etc. These activities have always constituted an insubstantial part of STC's total activities.

Restricting Services to Members Only: STC is fully engaged in many activities that are within the scope of its charitable purposes. And these services must be made available to the public at large--members and non-members alike. STC is also allowed to engage in activities that are NOT within the scope of its charitable purposes so long as these activities are insubstantial" (a minor financial burden). However, these non-charitable services can be restricted to members only.

Summary: In the past, STC took a strict line on allowing both members and non-members to participate in STC activities and benefit from STC services--ALL services, both charitable and non-charitable. From now on, however, STC will continue to make its charitable services available to all, but it will restrict, and it will empower the chapters to restrict some activities (those that are not expressly designed to further STC's charitable purposes) to members only. Examples of activities or benefits that can be restricted to "Members Only" include the chapter membership directory and the employment information data banks.

If you have any questions, please direct them to stc@stc-va.org.

STC Annual Conference

Planning to attend STC's 48th Annual Conference, May 13-16 in Chicago? Remember, early registration and hotel reservations will get you reduced rates. For details, see the conference Preliminary Program, which was mailed in mid-February with the March issue of Intercom.

If you did not receive a Preliminary Program, you may access the same information on the STC office Web at www.stc-va.org. On the main page, select "Conferences" for general conference information. From there, you can access registration information and deadlines by selecting "To Do" list. This site features the most recent, updated conference information.

If you would like a printed copy of the Preliminary Program for yourself or for a friend, you may request one by responding to this e-mail. In your e-mail, please list the name and address of the intended recipient.

We look forward to seeing you in Chicago!

(Ads, continued from page 1)

and proofreader all in Australia! However, on this one, I need someone local. (And even if I don't, I *think* I do, and in this case I get to choose.)

- One applicant's phrasing in her email indicated that English is not her first language. It was good enough that I would be delighted to have her on a development team, especially for a manual being published bilingually. For final proofreading, however, I want to come as close to perfection as possible.
- One applicant misspelled my name! For life in general, so what? However, this person is asking to be paid to proofread technical manuals where a capital letter versus a small one can make a difference of several orders of magnitude! (He also was not in the geographic area specified.)

In the end we decided that having just one proofreader available could be a problem. What if that one had another job to work on when we wanted something done on a rush basis? So we selected three to process through Human Resources and have available. Only one of the three was from the initial "top four"!

So what have I learned about the process of matching up technical writers with technical writing positions? Here, in no particular order, are a handful of tips.

- Join your local chapter of STC, go to the meetings, and network, network, network. That casual conversation may stick in someone's mind and make the difference down the road. Knowing what other companies do as compared to yours can be very useful information. Since moving to Wauchula, I have made maybe two meetings, but I obviously need to make the effort to attend more. The contacts are pure gold.
- Use our Suncoast Chapter's "positions available" listings. Ginger Doherty is doing a great job with it. I sent her an email on this position and she immediately went to a great deal of trouble working with me to get it just right. The responses I got were fast and of very good quality. (Even those I put on the bottom of the stack could probably have done the job.) If you need an employee, it's your very best bet. If you need a job, it's a great resource!
- Print out your resume, toss it on the table with some other papers, then glance at it. I printed out all that were still in the running to take into the office with me. Three returned a printer error message saying the margins fell outside the printable area. By contrast, I appreciated those that had wide enough margins for me to make notes in. As I glanced through the folder, I also appreciated those that had the name in nice bold letters across the top, and the information organized in such a way that I could immediately find what I needed.
- Now read your resume more closely, and from the point of view of the person to whom you are sending it. One clearly stated right at the top of the page that she was seeking a full time job. I'm looking for someone to be on call to work sporadically. If she gets a new full time position, will she still be available to me, or will I have to start over with someone else? Not a disqualifier, but certainly something that affected my final choice.
- The actual followup may be more valuable than the first impression, so make sure you *do* follow a resume with polite but persistent contact (telephone, email, etc.) until you are either hired or sure you are out of the running.
- Finally, when you respond to an ad or do follow up correspondence, proofread what you wrote! Make absolutely certain you spell the contact person's name correctly. Can't hurt to have the rest of it right as well.

WriteUp
12034 Kay Dr.
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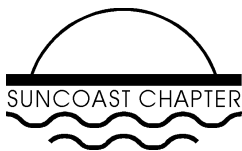
STC society for technical communication

Designing the future of technical
communication

WriteUp

<http://www.stc-southeast/suncoast/www/Default.htm>

Address Correction Requested
First Class Mail



Calendar of Events

Subject to Change

**Copy Deadline for
Next Issue:
May 30**

May 1

**Suncoast Chapter Meeting and Awards Banquet
Working with Difficult People**

Rob Houser, Region 3 Director-Sponsor
Banquet Masters, Pinellas Park
6:30 PM