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Welcome to a New Year!

Russell Willerton, STC Snake River Chapter President

This newsletter marks the beginning of our STC Snake River Chapter activities for 2008–09. I am honored to serve as chapter president.



As I grasp for words to write in this article, I keep coming back to the idea of community. STC provides a global community for those of us who work in technical communication. Within STC, of course, we have communities like special interest groups (SIGs) that primarily operate through virtual means, and we have our local chapters. I hope that you will feel at home as a member of our chapter, and that this community will be meaningful and valuable to you.

I teach in the English department at BSU, and our community has been stunned by the death of Dr. Mary Ellen Ryder in the fire that destroyed homes in Southeast Boise. Mary Ellen taught at BSU for 20 years, and I suspect that some of you might have been taught by her. But in the wake of her death, our department has really functioned as a community. People have taken overload assignments to teach her classes and fill her spots on committees; our office staff and department chair spent many hours working with her family to organize a meaningful memorial; and all of us have stopped to realize what a presence she had in the department.

Without that spirit of community, our semester could certainly take a turn for the worse; with it, I am confident that we will succeed. And while I certainly hope that no one in our chapter will face any similar type of calamity, I am certain that members would be generous and kind to anyone in need.

All the members of our administrative council want to make this community valuable and relevant to you. Please share your ideas and concerns with us. From our website to our planned activities, we want to provide resources that benefit you and your career. I am grateful for your membership in STC and in our chapter, and I ask you to help make this community the best it can be.

~Russell Willerton

October, November, December

October

September having come and gone, we're planning an October meeting to make up for it. Mary Jean Renstrom is well versed in industry-standard best writing practices. She brings her knowledge and experience together to discuss writing for localization and the general localization process.

Date: Tuesday, October 14th

Time: 6:00pm

Location: Boise State University, Building and Room TBA*

Cost: Free

Snacks will be provided

*If you are a member, you should receive an email from our programs manager, Amaya Berriochoa, a few days before the meeting to let you know the details. If you are not on the list and would like to attend, please e-mail her at programs@stc-src.org for information.

November

Our November meeting will be on virtual collaboration. As the managing director for Aquent Studios, Mike specializes in working with distributed teams. He utilizes his expertise in virtual collaboration to discuss ways of achieving top performance in physically dispersed team settings.

Date: Monday, November 17th

Time: 6:00pm

Location: Boise State University, Building and Room TBA

Cost: Free

Snacks will be provided

December

For the December meeting, we usually host a Christmas party during one of the first few weeks of the month. We would love to hear your ideas for dates, times, and general party fun. Please e-mail Amaya Berriochoa, our programs manager, with any suggestions you have. Her e-mail is programs@stc-src.org.

Suggestions and Contributions

If you would like to be a speaker or would like to suggest one for one of our chapter meetings, please get in touch with Amaya Berriochoa at programs@stc-src.org. Also, if you have any ideas, suggestions, or profound announcements to make on the subject of meetings, feel free to make them known to Amaya.

We want to make meetings worth your time by providing knowledgeable speakers who will discuss important topics of technical communication with chapter members.

So, Why Should You Be a Member, Anyway?

by John Hedtke, STC Fellow



John Hedtke

As a former Board member, I was often buttonholed by members to discuss what the Board was doing and our plans for STC's future. One of the most common topics of discussion was, "What am I getting for my membership and why should I renew?" I'm rather sympathetic to this line of questioning, as I have asked this myself in the past, sometimes rather vocally.

Why should you renew? Beats the heck outta me. But I can tell you why I renew, year after year after year.

The "elevator speech" version of why I've been a member for the last twenty-two years is simple: I've made an additional \$500,000 to \$750,000 that I wouldn't have made if I hadn't been a member. Have I got your attention now?

Being a member of STC has been very profitable. The first time I brought my resume to a meeting, I handed it to the job manager who read it, asked me a few questions, and hired me for a contract on the spot. People I've known through STC have hired me (and occasionally vice versa) for contracts and captive jobs over the years.

Things only got better when I started working with the STC job line and setting up STC job fairs for my chapter. We had vendors and clients bringing the jobs to us. For at least fifteen years, 80 percent of the contracts and jobs I had were a direct result of something I had heard about through STC.

Showing up at chapter meetings and participating in the job line and job fairs has been really good for my personal finances. But let us assume that you're a better, nobler, loftier person than I am (very likely). Given that you aren't as crass, let me tell you what else you can get for your membership dollars.

In conjunction with the previous point are the resources available to you for learning new skills and technologies. For example, attending chapter meetings and presentations at conferences over the years has taught me self-promotion, documentation project management, portfolio preparation, how to create effective web pages, and hundreds of other specific skills that were of value to me in my own career.

Speaking of careers, that's another thing I've gotten from my membership: career planning and training. Not only have I been able to talk to any number of peers to get information about career paths and choices, I've had a chance to try things out within the confines of STC.

Have you wanted to learn presentation skills? Giving presentations to STC chapters or at conferences is a safe way to experiment and get the feel of public speaking in front of a reasonably receptive audience.

Want to try management? Taking on a leadership role is a great way to learn. You'll probably make mistakes, but your job isn't hinging on this and you can spread your wings while still in a safe venue.

There are a multitude of opportunities to use STC communities as a sandbox. They've been worth a lot to me and I'm guessing they'll be worth a lot to you, too. The best thing is that this is a volunteer organization, so if you try and fail, well, it happens and you can always try again.

Networking is something else STC is good for. Networking keeps you in touch with trends in the profession, what skills and technologies are in demand, the state of the job market, and what other people are doing.

Still another benefit of STC membership is layoff insurance. If you've accumulated a lot of extra skills, you're more likely to weather layoffs because you're going to be more valuable to your employer.

Membership, Cont'd...

And even if you do get laid off, you're going to be able to get another job quicker than your compatriots. If nothing else, you'll have learned where the jobs are, how to package your portfolio and resume, and what skills employers are looking for.

I've been talking a lot about accumulating bucks here, so let me switch gears and talk about the social aspects of being a member. Many of my closest friends are people I've met through STC. These are people I hope to have in my life for the next forty years; these are people who know me better than anyone else and who have enriched me beyond words.

Being a member of STC can also bring professional honors and recognition. The easiest path for this is entering your work in competitions and getting awards. Continued service to STC will also enable you to get recognition such as a distinguished chapter service award. If you've been doing a lot for the profession, you may even become an Associate Fellow or Fellow, which is a huge moment in one's career.

One of the things that's important at this point in my career is payback. I've gotten money, jobs, friends, honors, and lots of good times—all because my first technical publications manager suggested I go to STC meetings. I believe I owe something to the Society for all of that. I have an obligation to return what I've gotten so that other people can be successful, too.

We all have to make choices about value and your mileage may vary considerably from mine. But if none of these reasons work for you, then consider my final reason, perhaps the most important of all: this has been fun. Being involved with STC has been a great ride so far. I'm looking forward to the next twenty years.

This article was originally published in the September 2008 edition of Tieline, The Society Leaders' Newsletter.

What Fiction Writing Taught Me about Technical Writing

by Andrea Wenger, Carolina Chapter Senior Member

In my job as a technical communicator, I rarely have the chance to write fiction. Occasionally, though, after the sixth time I've asked the subject matter experts for information and received no response, I'll make something up: "If you turn the knob to the right, the widget will enter Auto mode. If you turn the knob to the left, the widget will explode into a thousand shiny projectiles, destroying everything in their path."

Having something concrete to respond to generally spurs the team into action.

Yet technical writing and fiction writing aren't as far apart as most people might think. All communication has essentially the same goal: to transfer information from the writer to the reader. The mechanics vary little. By drawing on the craft of fiction writing, technical communicators can learn valuable skills and apply them to their writing as well.

Set the Scene

One of the first things a fiction writer must do when opening a story is to orient the reader in time and space. Readers will get annoyed if they spend the first three pages assuming the setting is contemporary, only to discover later that the story is actually set in ancient Egypt or in the futuristic city of Ninendor. They'll lose trust in the writer's ability to guide them through the nuances of the fictional world.

In technical documents, readers also need to be oriented to the material. What's the goal of the procedure? How long will it take? What tools will they need? Are specialized

Technical Writing, Cont'd...

skills or knowledge required? Anything out of the ordinary should be stated in the opening, to give the reader a feel for the landscape.

Use Effective Transitions

In fiction writing, a transition is generally needed when the setting changes or when the mood shifts. Effective transitions orient the reader relative to the preceding action. Does the new scene take place an hour later? A week? Twenty years? Has anything important happened during that interval? Which characters are present in the new scene? Has their outlook changed since we last saw them?

In technical writing, some sort of transition is usually required when ending one section and beginning another. If the procedures are closely related, the heading of the new section may serve as sufficient transition. But if, for example, the first procedure is required, while the second is optional, readers must be told this up front. Otherwise, they may keep following the instructions only to discover, after completing the procedure, that they didn't need to perform it at all. When you change direction, be sure to inform your readers, or they'll end up hopelessly lost.

Focus on the Action

Good fiction writers know that the best place to begin a story is in the middle of the action. Think of James Bond movies: do they begin with M explaining to James what his mission is, or with Q showing him all the fancy gadgets he'll need? No. That comes later. The movies begin with James in a life-and-death struggle. After the heart-pounding beginning, audiences are more receptive to the quieter explanatory scenes. But even then, background information should be kept to a minimum. Exposition is boring by nature, and audiences tend to tune it out.

User manuals should also be action oriented, omitting any information that users don't need in order to perform their tasks properly. If some background information may be helpful, but isn't required for specific tasks, consider placing the material in an appendix, rather than bogging down the procedures. If we as technical communicators don't work to keep our readers engaged, they may begin to skim, and inadvertently miss something important.

Own It

When readers open up a novel, they're essentially saying, "Lie to me, but make me believe you." They willingly suspend their disbelief because even though the particulars of the story aren't true, the essence is. Good fiction illuminates universal truth.

Fiction can only achieve this goal, however, if authors are willing to pour their humanity into their stories. If authors don't write with conviction, their words won't ring true, and readers will recognize this—just as an audience can tell when an actor is tentative, unwilling to commit to a character.

As technical writers, we can easily see our words not as ours, but as the company's or the engineer's or the product manager's. We don't, after all, own the material. But just as an actor is a conduit for the screenwriter and the director, we are the conduit for our content creators. We convey meaning to the audience.

To convey meaning successfully, we must understand what we're writing. We have to ask questions, even at the risk of exposing our ignorance. About half the time, when I ask a SME a question about something that doesn't make sense to me, I discover that the passage is either incomplete, imprecise, or downright wrong. The other half of the time, I'm confused only because I don't have the product knowledge that the SMEs have. But never has a SME treated me condescendingly when I ask a question because I lack knowledge. On the contrary, SMEs are generally eager to explain, because it allows them to show off their hard-earned expertise. Moreover, if I'm confused, there's a good

Technical Writing, Cont'd...

chance the customer will be, too. Don't let your fear of embarrassment get in the way of your role as reader advocate.

Find Your Voice

Voice is the single most important element in writing fiction. Think of Huck Finn or To Kill a Mockingbird or The Catcher in the Rye. Those novels have all the elements of great fiction, but it's voice that makes them unforgettable.

All writing has voice, whether we're aware of it or not. By controlling the voice in technical communication, we encourage reader trust. Attention to tone and word choice can help us achieve a voice that's authoritative, friendly, and consistent—or whatever our goal may be.

Consistency is especially important in co-writing projects. The voice should have the same overall feel, regardless of who wrote the section. Personal variation should be smoothed out for a seamless flow. A good editor can help with this. If you don't have dedicated editors on your writing team, a peer reviewer can fill this role.

Consider Motivation

For the fiction writer, the process of revealing character is like eating an artichoke, peeling back the tough outer layers to expose the tender heart. All characters in fiction, including the villain, must have a compelling, believable motivation for what they do, or they'll seem like caricatures.

In life as in art, people have reasons for the things they do, no matter how baffling their actions may seem to someone else. If your SMEs seem determined to thwart you, like the antagonist in a story, consider what may be motivating their behavior. Find a way to help them achieve their goals. Those goals may include some of the following:

- Advancing their careers
- Contributing to the team and/or being recognized as an expert
- Getting this task over with so they can go home
- Avoiding this task to focus on something more pressing or interesting

That last example, the desire to focus on something more interesting, may be the biggest challenge technical writers face. Most people in the company don't care about documentation with anything approaching the fervor we feel. For most of them, it's a nuisance. So the best way we can make allies of these people is to make documentation a way of simplifying their jobs, rather than an added burden.

In general, technical communicators enjoy working independently. We're creative, and we don't need a lot of detailed information to begin a project. We like using our imagination to figure out how to best present the information to the audience. Many SMEs, on the other hand, hate this. They try to assemble all the facts before they begin, because having the facts helps them see the big picture. At the beginning of a project, however, this can be an impossible task.

By clearly communicating to our SMEs what we need from them, and just as importantly, what we don't, we can take tasks off their hands that they'd rather not do. Then, they'll be more willing to spend time providing us with the information we need so we can do our jobs. If we provide a framework, it will be easier for them to fill in the facts later.

Creativity is an important part of technical communication, as paradoxical as that may sound. If you envision your writing as the unfolding of a story in a logical and engaging way, you may find that you improve both your effectiveness and your job satisfaction.

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ABOUT THE SNAKE RIVER CHAPTER



Ryan Martin



Angela Fleischmann



Russell Willerton



Danica Rhoades

Elected Council Members

President: Russell Willerton - president@stc-src.org

1st Vice President/Programs: Amaya Berriochoa - programs@stc-src.org

2nd Vice President/Membership: Danica Rhoades - membership@stc-src.org

Secretary: Theresa Sherman - secretary@stc-src.org

Treasurer: Angela Fleischmann - treasurer@stc-src.org

Immediate Past President: Ryan Martin - pastpresident@stc-src.org



Theresa Sherman



Darla Scott

Appointed Council Members

Web Content Manager: Jeff Carter - webmaster@stc-src.org

Newsletter Editor: Adrienne Martin - newsletter@stc-src.org

Employment Liaison: Darla Scott - employment@stc-src.org

ABOUT THE SIDEBAR NEWSLETTER



Adrienne Martin
Newsletter Editor

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