

Society for Technical Communication

AUSTIN CHAPTER

October 16-18, 1992

Austin, Texas

1992

Region 5 Conference

Proceedings



HIGH TECH IN THE HILL COUNTRY: STRATEGIES FOR TOMORROW



4 February 1993

Dear 1992 Region 5 Conference Participants,

We would like to thank all of you who attended all or part of our Region 5 Conference this past year for helping to make the conference such a satisfying experience. We did our best to enlist dynamic speakers with expertise in many areas that directly impact our lives as technical communicators : topics as diverse as "Multimedia Technical Training" and the "New Culture" for communicators. But, truly, it is the enthusiasm of the participants in a conference that creates the excitement, the synergism so obviously in force at the Omni Hotel last October 16-18.

Thanks to all of you for your participation in the workshops during the afternoon. We believe that format (simultaneous presentations on diverse subjects) worked well; we'd love to have your thoughts. And thanks for the intelligent listening that went on in the Capitol Ballroom during the plenary sessions on Friday and Saturday mornings. You were a great audience.

Thanks also to our speakers. Listener-evaluations show an almost 100% rating across the board in the "very satisfactory" range.

We present in these pages the first Region 5 Conference Proceedings. In the interest of bringing you this information as rapidly as possible after the Conference (an ephemeral goal, as it turns out), we have not attempted to produce a desktop-published document. You will find a variety of formats and styles. Some entries are papers, some are copies of slides shown, some are both. Our aim is to bring you the conceptual essence of each talk in the sequence of presentation at the conference. For various reasons, not all talks are represented here. For panel discussions and for the Chapter Leader's Workshop, we've added summaries of the ideas and suggestions brought forth at the time.

We hope this information is useful to you and that these pages recreate for you some of the vitality and intellectual richness of the Conference itself.

Make plans now for attending next year's Region 5 Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, October 15-17, 1993. See you there!

Sincerely,

Hillary Hart

Melissa Stevens

Conference Proceedings Committee

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Chapter Leaders' Workshop

Speaker Biographies

Jerry Amundson founded Amundson & Associates (Austin, Texas) in 1986. His company provides technical communication services. Jerry has been in the high technology business since 1980 and holds a Master's degree from Minnesota State University at Mankato.

Professional Title: *President*

David Armbruster, Associate Fellow of STC and member of the Mid-South chapter, has been involved with scientific and technical communications for more than 15 years. He serves as both an author's editor to faculty and staff and as a teacher of students and other faculty. His interests include ethics, internships, and practical communication techniques. He was President of the STC in 1991-1992.

Professional Title: *Head, Scientific Publications*

Kathy Brothers has been a technical writer for various companies for the past ten years. She has over 15 years teaching experience in secondary English, English as a Second Language for adults, and software documentation. She is a senior member of the Society for Technical Communication, IEEE, Kappa Delta Pi, and Phi Kappa Phi. Ms. Brothers holds a BA in English and History and an MEd in Educational Administration/Adult Learning and Leadership Development from The University of Texas at Austin. She is presently employed as a Senior Publications Engineer at Fisher Controls.

Professional Title: *Senior Publications Engineer*

Dr. Jeff Conklin, is currently President of Corporate Memory Systems, Inc. Austin, Texas. Author of several works on Artificial Intelligence and Hypertext. Former Researcher at Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corporation, Austin, Texas for seven years—Codesigner of the "gIBIS" system. PhD in Computer Science, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Professional Title: *President*

Dick Cutler is completing a PhD in New Communication Technologies at UT-Austin. television producer/director/writer 1976-78, 1980-87; Instructor in Film/TV and Arts Writer 1987-92.

Professional Title: *Research Associate*

Peter Daniels is the Quality Manager of the Automation College at Honeywell's Industrial Automation & Control division (IAC) in Phoenix, Arizona. As Quality Manager, Peter has established a metrics approach for measuring the quality of training and technical publications at the Automation College, and has promoted processes to improve the quality of information products, including benchmarking, audience and task analysis, usability testing, employee involvement teams, meeting ISO 9001 certification requirements, and using the Malcolm Baldrige award criteria to help the Automation College set goals and objectives.

Professional Title: *Quality Manager*

Johnny Dunlap has a BS in Engineering from North Carolina State University and an MBA from Florida State University. He has also held positions with Fisher as a sales manager, marketing manager, and engineering manager.

Professional Title: *Manager, Technical Communication*

Bruce Hahn graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University in 1973 with an AB degree in independent studies. Continuing with work on visual perception and cognitive reality, in 1975 he received his Masters degree from the School of Communication at the University of Texas at Austin. Mr. Hahn became founding partner in 1976 of a top revenue producing software company—HAL systems & Services of Dallas, Texas. In 1983, Mr. Hahn was the original founder of OZZ Research, a learning technology company specializing in the architecture of complex technical information.

Professional Title: *President*

Dr. Katherine Hammer has a PhD in English Linguistics, taught college for seven years, making a career transition to computer science in 1980. After ten years at Texas Instruments and MCC, she now serves as a President and CEO of Evolutionary Technologies, Inc.

Professional Title: *President and CEO*

Dr. Hillary Hart is a Senior Lecturer in Technical Communication in the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. She also conducts industry workshops on communication and consults on the development of training delivery systems. She was President of the STC Austin chapter in 1991-1992.

Professional Title: *Senior Lecturer in Technical Communication*

Jody Heiken, current STC Region 5 Director Sponsor, has held many national STC positions. She is a Technical Writer/Editor at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Professional Title: *Technical Writer/Editor*

Christopher Juliet, is the founding manager of STC's Consulting and Independent Contracting Professional Interest Committee. Chris has made a variety of presentations on consulting and self-employment at chapter meetings and conferences, and at STC annual conferences. He is currently STC Assistant to the president for Professional Interest Committees.

Professional Title: *Independent Consultant*

Cary Laird is a Senior Publications Engineer with Fisher Controls International, Inc., a manufacturer of process control equipment. Cary has developed a variety of hardware and software documentation and manages the documentation quality metrics program.

Professional Title: *Senior Publications Engineer*

Shirley A. Lerom joined IBM in 1976 in Rochester, Minnesota as a programmer. Shirley has held various management assignments in the Development Laboratory, Planning, and Marketing. Shirley was the Product Planning Manager for AIX and the RS/6000 from its inception through the product introduction. Currently, Shirley is the Business Manager responsible for the Launch and Enablement of the RS/6000 OEM buyers. Shirley has a BS degree in Mathematics from the University of Minnesota.

Professional Title: *Advanced Workstation Division Project Manager RISC Channel and the OEM Launch*

Rick Ligas has worked as a software interface designer, a media specialist, a video producer, a training specialist and an audio engineer. He graduated from Kent State university, Kent, Ohio in 1980 with a BA in English, Magna Cum Laude.

Professional Title: *President*

Chuck Mitchell is degreed in Psychology, History and English Literature with post-graduate work in Technical Communication. Currently Technical Publications Manager at Corporate Memory Systems, Inc., Austin, Texas, and President of the Austin Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

Professional Title: *Technical Publications Manager*

Laurie Modrey, a contractor with SEMATECH, has English degrees from Columbia University and the University of Wisconsin. A writer/editor since 1977, she also has 19 years of experience teaching English and technical communications in colleges and job sites. She has also served as Job Bank Coordinator for the Austin Chapter of the STC.

Professional Title: *Writer*

Dr. Lynn Peterson is Associate Professor of Computer Science Engineering at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research interests are artificial intelligence (natural language processing, knowledge representation, expert systems) and medical computer science.

Professional Title: *Associate Professor*

Dr. Judith Ramey, an Associate Professor in the Department of Technical Communication, College of Engineering, University of Washington, teaches courses in computer documentation and interface design, consults widely in industry on usability, and is currently developing the user interface for a major biomedical imaging software product.

Professional Title: *Associate Professor*

Holly V. Roff, currently at Novell, Inc., has over 13 years experience in technical communication, six of which involved managing technical communicators. She spoke at the 1987 ITCC on "Performance Evaluations for Technical Writers," at the 1988 STC Writer in the Workplace Conference in Sacramento on "Broadening the Skills of Today's Technical Writer," and at St. Edward's University in 1991 on "Careers in Technical Writing." Holly is a Senior Member of the STC, and is currently pursuing a Masters in Business Administration at St. Edward's University.

Professional Title: *Principal Technical Writer*

Susan Rogers, is Information Resource Specialist in the Technology Transfer Division at SEMATECH. She is responsible for providing access to information produced by the Technology Transfer Division, including abstracting, indexing, and database design and development. Over the last three years she has developed a thesaurus for semiconductor manufacturing terminology, written user requirements and specifications for an automated document control system, and supported the document publication process as an editor. She is currently working on a prototype project to provide electronic access to the full text and graphics of Technology Transfer documents.

Professional Title: *Information Resource Specialist*

Emily Sopensky is a freelance writer with 20 years experience, eight years in Austin, Texas, where she has worked for such companies as IBM, Texas Instruments, Fisher Controls, ROLM Systems, Tandem, Schlumberger, and small start-ups. Her degrees in business administration include an MBA from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Professional Title: *Writer*

Dr. Katherine Staples, is a founding member of the Austin Chapter of STC, is the Director of the Austin Community College Department of Technical Communications.

R.D. Talasek, Jr., has been involved in the development and use of graphic computer applications since their inception in the early 1970s, Mr. Talasek now concentrates on the use of Reduced Instruction Set Computers in multimedia advertising and marketing campaigns.

Professional Title: *Systems Analyst/Integrator*

Job Seeking Strategies for Technical Writers

by

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For a technical writer, the resume is usually the first and only view an employer gets of a potential employee prior to an interview. With the job market becoming more competitive, the resume becomes the single most important tool the technical writer has to display his or her skills as a communicator.

The resume

Your resume is your lifeline to a job; it is the most important document that you will ever create because it represents you and your abilities as a communicator.

Format. Is the format legible and efficient? Can different blocks of information—such as, tools, writing experience, educational background—be easily identified? Does each block have a heading? At a minimum, every resume should identify you by name, address, and home telephone number; computer equipment used; specific technical communication experience; and educational background and level. Some candidates may also list honors or awards and publications. Anything beyond these categories (e.g., personal interests, memberships, references) could indicate you do not have sufficient experience or focus.

For a candidate with 15-20 years of experience, a two-page resume is perfectly acceptable. Such a resume from someone with less experience may suggest that it has been padded with irrelevant information (e.g., hobbies, marital status, personal stats).

Also, beware of untraditional or unnecessarily creative formats (e.g., two-and three-column page layout, graphics). Although you may think the layout illustrates an ability to use certain software or to design a page, the result often detracts from readability.

Consider whether the resume invites reading. Is it laser-printed? Have proportional fonts been used? Is there enough textual highlighting (e.g., bullets, bold, italics, capitals) to make an attractive resume but not overwhelm the reader with variety?

Job Titles. Technical communicators work under a variety of job titles. Use the most common. Don't expect the title to indicate the breadth or depth of your responsibilities. Titles are not a reliable indicator of a person's experience. In some organizations, for example, an Information Specialist may be responsible for quality control and usability edits, while at another organization, that person may simply answer phones and direct callers to other staff.

Content. A professional communicator's work should be clear, concise, consistent, comprehensive, and correct. For example, avoid jargon and acronyms, such as OO-ness (Objective Orientedness) or Paretoize. A good technical writer should be able to explain work experience without resorting to shoptalk.

Efficient documentation is concise; so should resumes be. Don't tell readers you "wrote and revised." Revising *is* writing. Job functions should be described in phrases beginning with strong verbs: wrote, created, scheduled, coordinated, analyzed developed. Using complete sentences (e.g., At CPU, I was responsible for ...), describing what the organization—not you—did (Barkus, Inc. is the leading provider of data analysis and ratings of veterinarian supplies...), or writing an autobiography (I am an active

professional communicator with experience spanning the design of integrated circuits to needlepoint...) suggest you do not know how to select and organize important information. Lack of these skills is more critical in the long run than an oversight in punctuation or agreement.

Be consistent in style. This is, after all, something you want in your own documents. Do you use headings and bullets consistently? Are the tenses consistent or do you flip-flop between past and present? Do you describe job activities using verb phrases or do you vary your style (e.g., Responsibilities included scheduling and overseeing production...)?

In a poll of documentation managers, most say they looked for people with similar experience. However, one IBM manager ideally looks for similar and diverse experience. "A communicator is strengthened by diversity."

It is a plus if you are familiar with the entire publication process. This is particularly important if you are applying for a job as a team leader or the sole communicator. Skills in project management, scheduling, interviewing technicians and experts, usability testing, indexing, trademark and copyright research, and production (layout, experience with other production professionals: typesetters, printers, photographers) are just as important as being able to write well. If you prefer to work independently, showing that your work experience in technical communication is varied indicates flexibility and objectivity. One manager polled contends that "Breadth of experience is very important. A good communicator can write about anything."

Most managers polled are sensitive to errors in punctuation, parallelism, agreement, and spelling. Although many say they would not interview a person whose resume contains mistakes, one manager admits that mistakes do happen and do not necessarily reflect the candidate's job performance. In short, the principles that you apply to the documentation you write should also apply to your resume.

Education. In general, managers agree that work experience is more significant than academic credentials. The Austin Society for Technical Communication 1991 salary survey revealed that 85% of those employed as technical writers have a bachelors degree or higher, while in the 1992 national survey this figure was 91% and one-third have a masters degree or higher. Be sure your resume emphasizes your work experience first. Avoid listing your formal education at the top of your resume. Most likely, you are not applying for an academic position.

Technical/Tool Skills. Experience with the company's tools is desirable and often critical to getting a job. Some managers do not want an applicant who is unfamiliar with a particular operating system, software, or hardware. But many of these skills are transferrable. Knowledge of various wordprocessing and graphic packages indicates a capability to quickly learn new tools. Also, employers often are looking for someone who can jump right in without a long learning curve required to master new, complex tools.

If you have not had experience working with a tool that is popular among employers, such as Interleaf, then we suggest you take these actions:

1. Learn it now.
2. Immerse yourself in books and papers that tell you how to use it.

Then—and only then—indicate on your resume that you have experience—or at least "a familiarity with" the tool. *Do not try to fool potential employers.* If they discover later that you really do not know what you are doing, you will have lost very precious trust between you and your employer.

The interview

Once an employer has accumulated enough resumes, expect him or her to narrow the selection by using the telephone to eliminate those not available or not interested. If you are called, use the opportunity to elicit valuable information, such as project duration, type of job, and pay range.

Using a process of elimination, draw up a list of questions and answers that are not in your resume. Expect questions from the interviewers about the following topics if you are applying for a contract or permanent position:

1. Problem-solving

Describe the time you felt you were most resourceful in solving some problem or coming up with an improvement.

2. Following through

Describe the biggest project that you had to see through from beginning to end.

3. Organizing

How do you organize your work and schedule your time?

4. Handling detail

Describe the last project in which you had to make sense out of the mass of complex or difficult information.

5. Working independently

Tell me about the last time you worked independently on a project.

6. Working with others

Describe a situation in which you had to collaborate with other writers. How did you assign roles? How did you coordinate work schedules? Describe working with other professionals, such as engineers, artists, technicians, or printers.

Do not expect to be told how much the position will pay, but do not be afraid to ask. This is important to you and the employer. If the employer puts a different value on the job than you do, both of you are wasting time. However, do not hesitate to point out why your value of the job differs. Perhaps, the potential employee has not correctly assessed the difficulty of the task.

Bring samples, but don't leave them unless you absolutely must. The initial impression of your samples is often worth much more than the sample itself. Package them well. You can almost be guaranteed that someone fresh and new to your samples will, within seconds, find the first and only typo in your work.

Conclusion

In conclusion, you need to assess your capabilities in the following areas and to present them accurately and emphatically:

- writing, speaking, and human interaction skills
- knowledge of the entire documentation process
- understanding of the basic technical concepts in your industry.

End-Product	Duration		
	< 3 months (freelance)	3-18 months (contract)	> 18 months (permanent)
Audio-Visual:			
presentations			
video			
multi-media			
Computer-based training			
Online reference			
In-house:			
reports			
grants/proposals			
procedures			
Publications:			
manuals			
users/consumers			
programmers			
in-house			
mil-spec			
promotional materials			
technical papers			
training modules			

Matrix 1

- Check off what you have accomplished as a technical writer
- Determine end-product and timeframe
- Determine level of expertise required
- Determine type of position(s) you have held

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Scope/Process	Freelance	Contract	Permanent
Designing user interface			
Designing the look of the publication			
Composing online text			
Establishing the outline			
Editing			
Writing			
Illustrating			
Training			
Collaborating w/other writers			
Managing/Coordinating:			
Testing			
Deadlines			
Production			
Distribution			

Matrix 2

Determine scope of work

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Industry/Work Experience	Freelance	Contract	Permanent
Aerospace/aircraft			
CAD/CAM			
Computer Software			
Computer Hardware			
Consumer Products			
Education/Teaching			
Electronics			
Engineering/Construction			
Financial/Investments			
Health/Biological/Medical			
Manufacturing			
MIS/DP			
Publishing			
R&D			
Scientific			
Telecommunications			
Training			
Other			

Matrix 3

Technical/Tool Skills:

- Assignments (writer, editor, distribution, production, etc.)
- Industries of work experience

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