

A Roundtable Discussion: Judges Talk About STC Competitions

By EMILY A. SOPENSKY, *Senior Member, Lone Star Chapter*, AND GREG YEARSLEY

For the technical communication profession, the STC Technical Publications, Art, and Online competitions provide a very important venue. Because technical communication is typically a behind-the-scenes activity and often a team effort, it is not always easy to recognize individual merit. Nor do those outside our profession always understand what distinguishes good technical communication. The competitions are a way of communicating merit and distinguishing expertise.

If you've never taken part in an STC competition, they may seem quite mysterious. What criteria do judges use in evaluating an entry? For that matter, who are the judges?

To address these questions, several judges (Emily Sopensky, Greg Yearsley, Leslie Bateman, and Margaret Mall) from the Lone Star chapter (Dallas) 1996 STC competition took part in a roundtable discussion. Selected comments from that discussion appear below.

As you can see, the judges are STC members just like yourself. We hope that, by sharing our thoughts on the competitions, we'll inspire you to take part in competitions either as entrants or as judges. Both roles offer unique opportunities for technical communicators to grow as professionals.

What Makes an Award-winning Publication?

Leslie: A document that is clearly written and tightly edited with the intended audience in mind gets my vote. Clear illustrations, uncluttered layout, and evidence of good proofreading are also positives. Concise, easy-to-follow directions, introductions that explain what is coming in the chapter or section, a thorough index, and multiple ways for the reader to find information also add value.

Greg: I love to see entries about which I can say immediately, "Boy, I wish I'd done that!" After fifteen years of writing and coordinating brochures, I think I can say that the good ones concisely explain product benefits rather than just listing features, and answer readers' questions logically, while making use of charts, illustrations, and photographs to support key points.

What Guidelines Do Judges Use?

Greg: The STC Lone Star Competition Judge's Guide, which is based on the Society's parameters, requires us to score each entry individually before we come together as a team. The object is to judge against a universal standard, not against the other entries for that year.

I look for the same elements that make any communication piece effective. Is it easy to understand? Is it well organized? Is it visually appealing? Is it well edited? Do graphics help explain difficult concepts? Is it creatively executed? Is the printing quality acceptable?

Emily: While judging is by nature a subjective exercise, the guidelines give each judge a detailed yet concise list of what to look for in each of the three competitions. The evaluation forms reiterate this information. With such great guidance, it's hard to stray from the standards.

What Other Elements Strengthen a Publication's Effectiveness?

Emily: Above all, it must be well executed. Some of us see incomplete entries. Some firms routinely enter whatever their shops produced that year, regardless of quality. However, this may be all right, especially if getting feedback is important.

Greg: I look for a proper sense of proportion and placement to present information. To me, the most important points should be the most prominent. In addition, type must be large enough for easy reading.

Margaret: When I'm looking at software users' guides, I ask, "Does the document make you really want to learn about the product and eventually purchase the product?"

Leslie: Using printing methods, binding, and color that are appropriate for the intended audience and the size of the press run.

What Things Do You Consistently See That Detract From a Publication's Effectiveness?

Margaret: Poor organization of the material. Too many steps that cover more than one or two pages. Inappropriate use of terms. Poor photos.

Leslie: In recent competitions, more than one document has exhibited the following problems:

- Busy page layout.
- Unusual, difficult-to-read font(s); too many fonts and point sizes.
- Information that is difficult to find because the table of contents is skimpy or the index is poorly done or nonexistent.
- Information that is scattered, forcing the reader to organize it.
- Illustrations that show cultural insensitivity, ignorance, or stereotypes.
- Cautions and warnings that are overused, e.g., "Caution: Observe all caution notices."

Why Should Anyone Enter a Competition?

Emily: Because technical communication is a relatively new profession that

spans many industries and disciplines, individual achievement is difficult to assess across the board. For instance, sometimes a manager has one view of what good documentation is and the technical communicator has another. For both, a third view can be quite useful. Getting objective feedback is an excellent reason for submitting a piece for competition.

Leslie: To have your work evaluated by other professionals can be very helpful, especially for your supervisor to see such comments as "Carefully edited" and "Very thorough index." Likewise, suggestions for improvements such as "Font difficult to read" may give support to your suggestions that the corporate style guide be revised. Another reason is that an award is a nice extra that certainly looks good on a resume!

Greg: All of us like it when our work is recognized for merit. As an entrant, I welcome impartial feedback that gives me ideas for improvement. Since STC judges have years of experience, I've found their comments to be very insightful.

Margaret: I used to think that some of the documents I'd produced or helped produce would not be acceptable in the competitions because they didn't look "professional" enough. However, that's not necessarily true. A document does not have to look slick or expensive to do an effective job.

What Do You Get out of Judging STC Competitions?

Greg: It's a lot of fun to see what other communication professionals are producing. It stimulates my thoughts for future projects and allows me to look more critically at my work. I believe these competitions also serve to raise the standards for our whole industry.

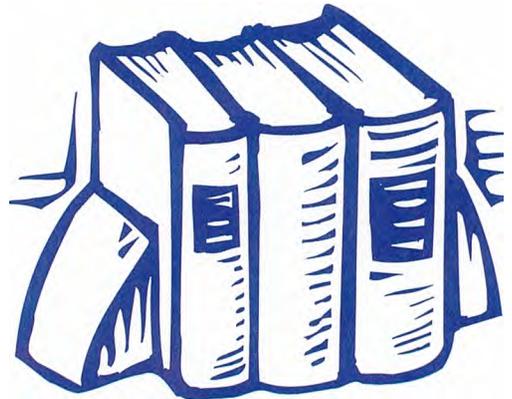
Emily: It is a lot of fun. As a freelance writer, I work alone a lot, so it's wonderful to be in a room with other experienced writers, to share insights, and to learn from the different opinions

expressed. In fact, when Jody Heiken spoke at this year's Austin awards ceremony, she thought that learning from others was the most rewarding aspect of being a judge.

Margaret: I like to see firsthand what other companies are producing. Judging makes me feel I'm making a broader contribution to the field of technical writing.

Leslie: Judging gives us the opportunity to give back to the profession and to the organization from which we have gained so much. Each judge has two roles: evaluating each entry and serving as an informal mentor by offering the entrant comments and suggestions. I'm also inspired when I see how someone has met a challenge. ■

Society to Develop Ethics Casebook



Readers of *Intercom* who look forward to reading or responding to the Ethics Case column by John Bryan will be excited to learn of the STC ethics committee's plan to develop an ethics casebook. This effort will include collecting actual ethical dilemmas in technical communication and compiling them into a casebook for use by Society chapters and individual members. The casebook is a way of helping STC members to be more sensitive to, and better equipped to deal with, ethical dilemmas that can arise in their professional lives.

To ensure that the documented ethics cases are useful, input from the membership is essential. Therefore, the committee will be gathering ideas from the membership over the next few months. Whether you have read about a situation involving questionable ethics or have been a participant in one, this is an endeavor to which all members can make a contribution.

Barbara Epp, of the STC ethics committee, is spearheading this effort. You can contact her at the following addresses:

BEA Systems, Inc.
385 Moffett Park Drive
Sunnyvale, CA 94089
(408) 542-4163
(408) 744-0775 (fax)
barbara.epp@beasys.com

Because of the sensitive nature of ethics-related topics, the origins of all case studies and the names of people involved in the cases will remain confidential. Respondents are encouraged not to include names of companies or individuals.

Supporting this effort are Constance L. Kiernan, chairperson of the STC ethics committee, and Lawrence D. Kunz, assistant to the president for professional development. ■