



Best of the Best: Competition Winners Coming to You

Where do I look for inspiration to enhance the excellence of my communications? How about my electronic thermostat's installation instructions, which featured such tiny type (in multiple languages) and cramped space that I missed a critical beginning step, requiring me to start all over again when I thought I was nearly done? I don't think so.

One source of inspiration is the competition winners of STC's international competitions. They are the winners of chapter competitions that have gone on to win at the international level. The year's winners are displayed every year at STC's annual conference. I have been to three annual conferences and helped judge the international entries for two other years. In each encounter with the entries I learned something and felt inspired.

This year the annual conference is in Seattle, but you don't have to fly to Seattle to see samples of the best of the best. The 2004 winners in the technical art and technical publications categories are coming to a chapter near you as a traveling exhibit.

Among the entries that will be on display will be the Best of Show winners in the two categories. In the art category is a whimsical calendar featuring faces assembled from laboratory materials. In the publications category is a lavishly illustrated book describing the nine forest regions of Canada. There will be something to impress the left brain and right brain in all of us.

In addition to the winning entries on display, we will look at criteria for "excellence" in communications, tips on creating a winning entry, and candidate qualifications for you to be a judge.

An Observation...

If you have never attended an STC conference or a professional seminar dealing with your field of communication, you are missing out on a very eye-opening experience. Nothing gives the old creative juices a kick like the opportunity to see how someone else handles a publication similar to the ones you develop. Sometimes, just looking at other ideas can be the start of a new thought.

Likewise, serving as an STC competition judge is also a unique experience. Not only do you gain a new perspective on how other professionals meet the challenges of their individual fields. You also gain a unique look at the inside world of STC competitions.

So, if your schedule permits, why not call in an early reservation and join us on March 2, for a look at "The Best of the Best" from the STC's 2004 International Competition.

Editor

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WEBSITE: www.stc-sjvc.org

President's Column

What do I do? I solve marketing and communication problems in health insurance at Mennonite Mutual Aid. This way of thinking about my role – as a communication problem solver rather than a writer – was given to me by our vice president of marketing, Barth Hague.

Years ago, when Barth managed the Communication Department, he told us over and over again, "You are not just writers and designers. You are communication problem-solvers."

I've always appreciated this philosophy because:

- It liberates me from being an order-taker when someone makes a specific request for a brochure, for example; and
- It involves me in an examination of the thought process of how the need for a brochure was identified. It allows me to ask questions like "what is your objective?" and "how will you measure the success of this brochure?"

Sometimes, I am needed to just be a writer, but these occasions happen less and less often. And, usually, my own state of mind – whether I'm aspiring to solve problems or just wanting to be told what to do – enters in.

What's your preference in your job?

Kirsten Klassen

STC Mission Statement

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

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Editor's Corner

Once again I find myself sitting up late tapping away on the ole' keyboard. (Somehow I think I should have studied harder at the piano.) Not that I mind. I really prefer the quiet to ponder the day's events. It gives me a chance to settle my mind and put everything in perspective. If I don't fall asleep that is.

For nearly a year now, I have been looking high and low for a job. If you haven't been browsing the want ads or the job boards, you may want to take a look some just to stay up with things.

There seems to be a transition going on in the workplace concerning the definition of a technical writer. I have received ads in response to my agents that seemingly have nothing at all to do with what I thought a technical writer was.

On the other hand, I have seen postings for the "technical writer Plus." Plus what you ask? Oh, how about graphics illustrator, AutoCAD specialist, business analyst, etc. Those are fairly common, but I have seen a few real beauts' too.

So what is going on?

Given what we have seen in recent issues of the *Intercom* and the *Technical Journal*, there does seem to be a shift going on. It seems that manufacturing and design firms are not the only ones sending work offshore. In some areas technical writing jobs are also heading east, way east.

I have to admit, the logic defies me (other than the greed...OOPs! I mean PROFIT aspect.) If you have ever written in a multi-language environment, I think you would understand.

If your manuals are being produced in five or more languages (actually, anything over one) a whole new set of rules are applied to the writing task. Suddenly, words you have used all your life are no longer usable. Because if you do use them, you may offend or confuse the nationals who speak one of those languages. (Don't get me wrong. I accept this and it makes good business sense if you want to sell in those countries.)

So, companies send documentation projects to third world countries where English is not the native language. Then they tell these people to write manuals for an English speaking audience. I have always heard that English is about the worst language to learn if it is not your native tongue. I bet these writers LOVE their jobs!

So what do they produce, I wonder. I have heard the final product is not that great. I have not seen one yet, so I can't say. But I am reminded of an experience I had in the 80's.

A company I worked for was producing laptops computers overseas. The company sent the engineering specs and designs to the partner company in Taiwan where the computer was manufactured. Part of the deal was the partner company would produce a draft manual that our writers would clean up.

One day we were reading through one of these manuals and came to the section on cleaning the display. The instructions, as they were translated from the Chinese original, told the user to spit on the LCD.

This caused quite a row in the department. Half of us wanted to leave the instruction as translated to see if anyone noticed. The other half, naturally, wanted to do things the "right" way. (The "rights" eventually won.)

Now I have to allow that things have improved somewhat over the years. (At least I haven't seen any instructions to spit on an LCD recently.) But this points up part of the problem.

People who are native to third world countries cannot possibly be familiar with all the idioms, syntax, grammar and usage variations and rules that occur in the English language. Any more than I would know their language. So how good is the manual?

Sadly, they are apparently good enough. You don't hear about consumers complaining to the company very often, do you? And we certainly seem to buy products over and over from the same manufacturers.

So, it appears the American consumer has accepted a "dumbed down" version of "this is

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March Meeting Details

Date: Wednesday, March 2, 2005.

Time: 6:00, exhibit browsing; 6:30, dinner and informal presentation. (Note: Indiana and Michigan will still be on the same time.)

Reservations: Contact Mark Stucky at 574-862-7659 or e-mail mstucky@utilimaster.com. Reservations will be accepted until Feb. 28.

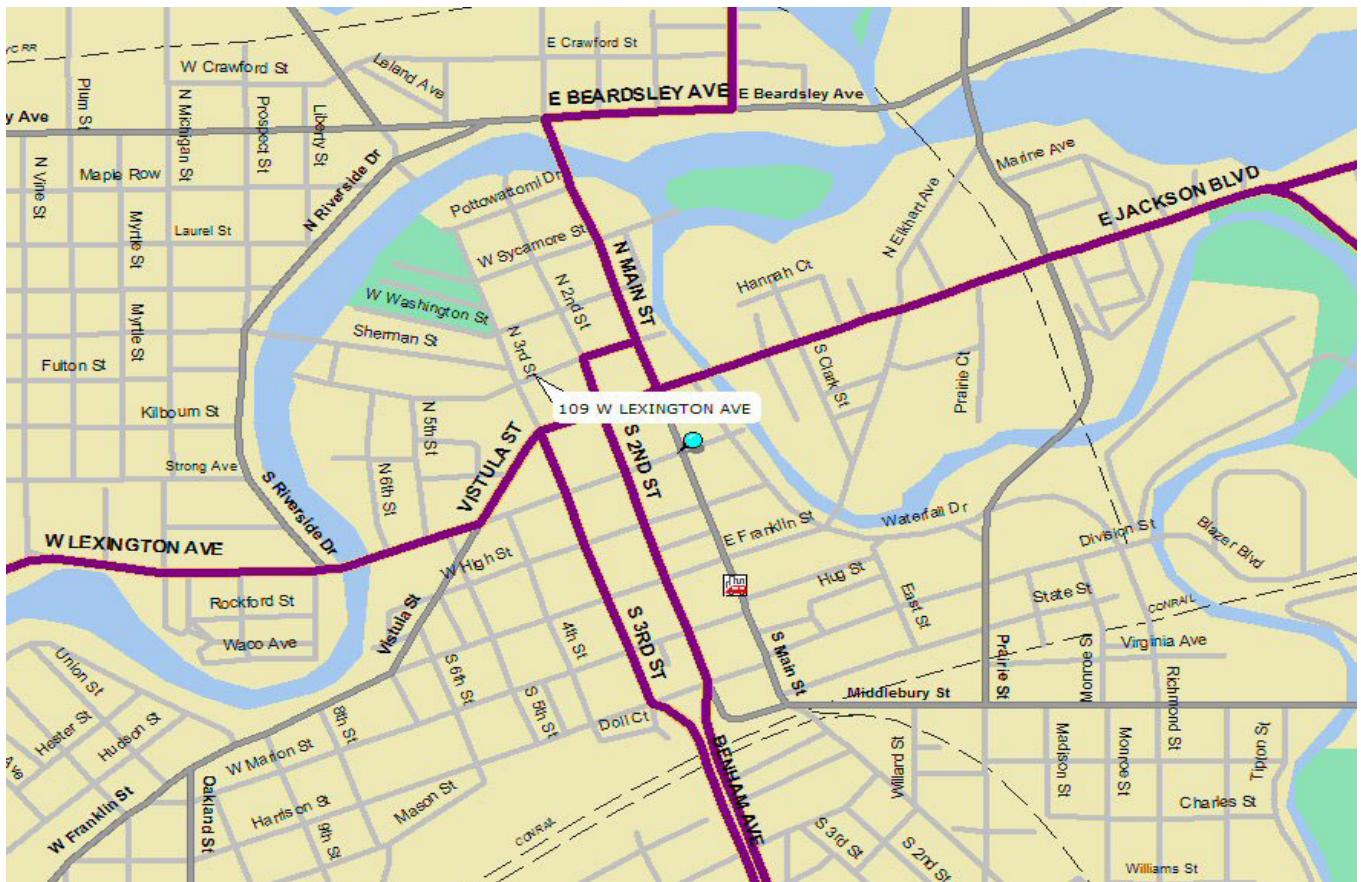
Location: Exchange Bakery, 109 W. Lexington, Elkhart, IN 46516 (574-293-5175). The unique Exchange Bakery has excellent food at reasonable prices. Normally open for breakfast and lunch (and catering), they will be open that evening exclusively for us. We will also be just a block from downtown Elkhart's scenic RiverWalk, which is well worth a stroll.

Cost: \$10 for the meal. This meal and price includes their popular spinach chicken lasagna and a green salad, as well as choices of drinks (nonalcoholic) and tempting deserts.

Directions: (About 10 minutes from Elkhart Exit 92 on the 80/90 Toll Road. Refer to the map below or the link on the chapter website

www.stc-sjvc.org/meetings.htm.)

1. From the 80/90 Toll Road, take Exit 92, Elkhart.
2. After paying the toll, get into left lane and turn left at the light onto Indiana 19 South (going across the bridge). Drive south about 2-1/2 miles. (Indiana State Road 19 South becomes Cassopolis Street.)
3. The four lanes eventually narrow into two, but continue driving straight until you run into the river. Actually, to avoid submerging your car, turn right, just before the river at the T intersection.
4. Drive west a few blocks (on E. Beardsley Ave.) and turn left onto the bridge (Main Street).
5. Drive six blocks to Lexington and turn right.
6. The Exchange Bakery is on the south side of the street. (When you leave or try to park, note that Second Street is a one-way street going north, and Third Street is a one-way street going south.)



MEET A MEMBER

Name: Kirsten Klassen

Member since: 1989

Member status: Senior

Why technical writing?: In 1986, I was finishing up a pile of advanced courses in English literature and trying to decide whether I was fated to join the world of academia and commit myself to what-seemed-an-infinite number of years in higher education. Then I saw it: on the bulletin board at University of Manitoba, an advertisement for a master's degree in business and technical writing at Iowa State University. Sending in that little postcard set the course of my life. I knew I couldn't go without a scholarship of some sort, and ISU came through with a teaching assistantship. I was thrilled, but even then, I had no idea how perfect my interests and skills would match with this career until I began taking courses, teaching freshmen composition, and working on my master's thesis (which is on pictographic communication).

The education, then the career: The two years at Iowa State taught me a lot – about editing, graphic design, teaching technical writing, communication principles, and more. In 1988, I was hired at Mennonite Mutual Aid as a technical writer. One of my first assignments was to revise the manual on health insurance. I also edited the newsletter for our sales representatives, worked on all forms and applications, and taught business communication to in-house staff. My job began as a writer, then grew into more editing of other people's writing. As I gained product knowledge, I was asked to serve on teams that were creating products or striving to gain efficiencies. By now, I've managed projects as well. I've been fortunate that my role continues to grow and expand. My current title is marketing and communication manager for health.

Editor continued from page 3

as good as it gets." (I TOLD them buying those "Dummies" books would be a problem. - I don't own one and do not plan to.) We seem to be happy with the idea that there is nothing we can do to fix it anyhow (kind of like the elections.) If that is true, do we even need technical writers anymore? (Believe me, if the bean counters haven't thought of that one yet, it's only a matter of time.) So, do we need technical writers?

In my mind the answer is yes. The real question is what can be done to preserve our livelihood?

The STC some time ago formed a committee to study the future of the STC. One of the things they seem to have forgotten is the past. If we want to be appreciated for the skills and value we can bring to a product, someone must make the case to the business leaders who use those skills and benefit from

all that value.

It seems to me that the STC national organization is the logical and practical venue to pursue this effort. The STC provides companies with a means of posting their job requirements. Why not also present those same companies (and any others) with detailed studies and reports that define how a technical writer can be a benefit for the company?

Of course, this does mean we would need to get involved. Writing to our regional sponsors and leaders at the national level to let them know what we think or want them to do. Considering how things seem to be going, I think it couldn't hurt to try. Who knows, we could get the STC onto a whole new purpose and direction.

Then again, that might be a little work and my schedule is pretty full...

Anyone know where I can sign up for a Chinese language course?

Content Management Strategies Conference

*Annapolis, MD
April 11-13, 2005*

Join Dr. JoAnn T. Hackos and the people who define the world of single sourcing in Annapolis, Maryland April 11-13, for this stimulating gathering of industry experts and leading practitioners.

Are you moving your information to the web? Reusing content among multiple print and online deliverables? Sharing content among departments such as training, marketing, editorial, and technical information development? Are you restricting some content for internal use only or directing it to specific targeted user communities? Are you faced with a challenging, multi-faceted user environment but tied down with only document blobs at your disposal?

Join those in the forefront of component information management at the 7th Annual Content Management Strategies conference. Learn to create modular, topic-based content, ready for assembly into compound documents, and conditionalized for targeted delivery. Take content embedded in those massive tomes and move critical components to the precise points where they are needed—in print or on the web.

CM Strategies 2005 brings you three essential tracks. Focus on management and planning or technical design and implementation, and learn how to implement the DITA standard from the experts. At CM Strategies, you'll find a returning community of information developers and publishers who value building core content as much as its presentation and delivery.

For more information on this conference and workshops, visit the conference website at <http://www.cm-strategies.com/>

2004 - 2005 Meeting Schedule (Updated)

April 14, 2005

Topic: "So You Want to be Independent—a look at the pros and cons of the independent tech writer"

When: Thursday, April 14, 2005.

Where: TBD.

May, 2005

Topic: "Photo Critique 2"

When: May, 2005.

Where: TBD.