



Mentoring - Make a difference!

by *Ralph F. Rumpf, Watermark Editor*

I'm what you might call an old school technical writer. Like many of my peers, I sort of fell into the work as I transitioned from one position to another, found I liked it and stayed. I never had the opportunity to finish a degree program in Technical Writing (or anything like it) because there were none.

Today, the vast majority (if not all) technical writers entering the work force have completed an approved college-level curriculum designed to give them all the tools they need to perform as a technical writer. Unfortunately, like most college programs, what they largely lack is practical experience. Oh, I applaud the institutions that implement intern programs so a student can get some kind of field experience before graduating. But somehow, it just doesn't set in as reality.

The other thing I am not certain most schools convey well is the volatility of the field. As I look over job postings for "Technical Writer" I see job descriptions and qualifications that seem to be way beyond the qualifications I had when I started. ("Yes, I know what a computer is and I can find words in the dictionary." Actually, some of us were still using pencils.)

As we all know, a Technical Writer is a sort of chameleon. Today you compose text, tomorrow you edit someone else's work, in the morning you manage a project, in the afternoon you create illustrations. You are expected to stay current with the tools that apply to the work you do as well as antici-

pate tomorrow's needs and be ready with new skills. We used to call it "wearing many different hats," but it has never been more true than it is today.

A technical writer may have a degree, but it certainly doesn't mean he or she is finished learning. If there ever was a perpetual student, it's the technical writer!

But this creates a bit of a problem for a new technical writer entering the work force. While he or she has some experience with the tools of the trade and perhaps some work experience, there are far more tools than any college has time to teach in a normal four or five year degree program. And knowing the tools is only a small part of most jobs these days. A new writer needs some idea of how project management operates and how that applies to their particular work situation.

Then there are the people skills. Every technical writer spends a good part of the day interfacing with SMEs (Subject Matter Experts) - the people who KNOW the product or process you need to document. But an engineer under a deadline may not have the same priorities as a technical writer; getting his or

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WEBSITE: www.stc-sjvc.org

President's Column

At our officers' meeting this summer, we discussed our growing concern of whether we can continue to keep our local chapter going. Over the last number of years, the officers have floated between the same core of members, attendance at meetings has declined and we've tried a number of topics and experiments to see if we can remain relevant to you, the member.

Yes, we have had some successes. We were thrilled that over 30 people came to our half-day event with Jan White. And, we had fairly good attendance at the meeting last year where we brought in the winners of the STC international competition.

We are willing – and our chapter can afford – to bring in more paid speakers. Anyone you want to hear? Or we could have lunch meetings in key areas. Or we could show up on your doorstep and ask for a tour of your workplace (just kidding).

We've got our regional sponsor, Bob Dianetti, coming in for our first meeting in October. We hope you can make it. It's the first visit from a sponsor we've had in probably close to 10 years! (Yeah, I can remember that long ago.) Bob's going to talk about plotting your career, in a fun, interactive way, and if you think that's not related to STC, read about Mark Stucky's career in the member introduction column. (I introduced Mark to Ben Dorsey at an STC meeting, and Ben later hired him, first at Crown and now at KMC. Another member, Ann Linley, could also tell you about having met her boss through STC.)

And, that brings me to the end of my column, and my two-year term. I'm slipping back into the "past president" role for the next two years. Please join me in welcoming Mark Stucky as your new president, and consider whether you're interested in the president-elect position. We'll teach you the ropes, and not leave you high and dry.

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

As another program year for our STC Chapter winds down, I would like to take a few minutes to reflect back on the past year.

I must concur with Kirsten's comments (see President's Column) concerning our continuing viability as a chapter. For all the years I have been a member of this chapter, there seems to have been one primary focus - to provide an added benefit to you, the members. This was done using a wide variety of approaches and, as Kirsten points out, we continue to try to reach out to you.

I believe the vitality of any organization is a direct reflection on the activity level of the members. Admittedly, our core membership attendance levels, at least as a percentage of the total membership, are higher than many other chapters, even those several times our size. But that still leaves a lot of people out of the loop.

The STC as a whole is struggling right now as it tries, on the national level, to get a grip on current issues and concerns of members. Part of that process has resulted in something of an identity crises. Perhaps the key to understanding the problem lies at the chapter level.

I can understand the financial issues of dues, especially for those between jobs or going through a rough period. But the STC has made several changes in the dues structure to help accommodate those with differing membership needs. So once we are employed, we can connect at a dues level we can afford.

But how do you get members to attend meetings?

How do you provide programs that are of interest and useful to the membership?

These and other questions persist.

Annual Officer's Meeting Notes

So, once again, the officer's meeting has generated some changes in direction.

First and foremost, we would like to focus on our membership. If we can increase it, the

more the better. But in lieu of that, we would like to reach out to other organizations that might benefit from our meetings.

To that end, I have agreed to add interested parties to the chapter mailing list so they can receive copies of the newsletter. So if you are aware of a business or professional organization, or individuals who might benefit from our meetings, please pass on the name and address to me by snail or e-mail. I will extend an invitation to the organization or individual to receive a copy of the newsletter. Perhaps we will see some new faces from time to time.

Over the last few years we have attempted to select meeting locations that were convenient to the larger body of our members. We have decided to select two or three locations and use those exclusively. Probably we will alternate between them, but it should be an easier affair to know where you are going for any particular meeting. (Naturally, I will continue to post locations in the newsletter with the meeting announcement - we may know where to go, but visitors might appreciate a little guidance.)

Finally, as you may have noticed, Mark Stucky has stepped up to the position of Chapter President (see Mark's Meet a Member post on page 5) and Kirsten has retired to the ranks of Past President. (Two years goes by pretty quickly, eh?)

We now find ourself in the position of needing a President Elect. So, if any of you find yourselves with a little spare time on your hands (you won't need much) and a desire to step into the limelight for a little while, contact Mark. If we need too, we can have a runoff vote, I guess, but Mark will have to make the call on that one.

As another meeting enhancement, we will try to set each meeting date to the same day of the week and the same week of the month.

These changes will take a little time and adjustment but by this time next year things should be running fairly smoothly, so bear with us. As always, if you have any suggestions or ideas you would like to contribute, contact one of the chapter officers.

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October Meeting Brief

Topic: Strategic Career Planning for Technical Communicators

Presenter: Bob Dianetti, STC Region 4 Director-Sponsor

Time: 6:00 PM (Indiana Time)

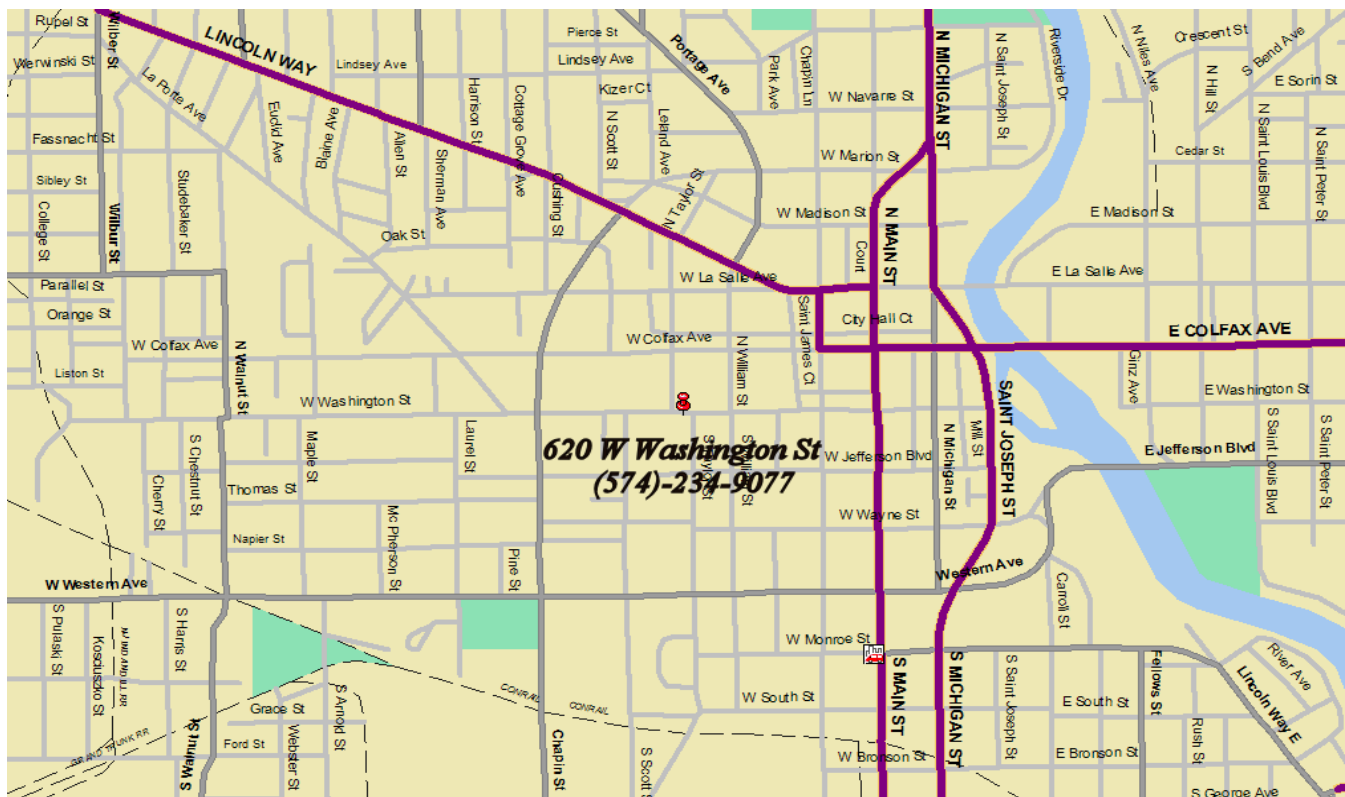
Location: Tippecanoe Place, South Bend (Website: <http://www.tippe.com/> Maps at <http://www.tippe.com/directions.html>)

RSVP: By Monday, October 10 to Mark Stucky (mstucky@kmccontrols.com), or Kirsten Klassen (Kirsten.Klassen@mma-online.org)

Bob will discuss several areas of growth for technical communicators over the next several years based on observed trends in both the domestic and global economy. There are many areas where we can thrive that may not be obvious to those already in the industry. In many cases, retraining is not what is required to succeed. What is required to succeed is a new attitude about what we do, the value we provide, and where we fit into the global business arena.

The talk will be highly interactive, with a real-world case study or two discussed during the session. Information for the case study will be provided by one or two willing volunteers chosen from the group who would like to share their career information and see it mapped out to a possible future career path.

Bob Dianetti, a Senior Member of STC, is currently Director-Sponsor for STC Region 4. He is former President of the Northeast Ohio STC Chapter and earned the Distinguished Chapter Service Award in 2002. He earned his bachelor's degree in technical writing from Capital University and has continued his studies towards an MBA at Kent State University. Bob is founder and part owner of RADCom, a successful training and documentation consulting company in Northeast Ohio. RADCom, founded in 1996, was recently recognized as one of the 100 fastest-growing companies in Northeast Ohio by Case-Western Reserve University. He lives in Stow, Ohio with his wife (also a senior STC member) and 4 children. He enjoys sailing, piano, and amateur radio.



Please visit <http://www.tippe.com/directions.html> for detailed directions.

MEET A MEMBER

Name: Mark Stucky

Member since: 1992

Member status: Senior

I had a circuitous career path into technical communication. At 18, I left the farm to enroll in electrical engineering at the University of Kansas. During my second semester, however, I experienced a combination of disillusionment with that career path and had a spiritual awakening. I felt that God was calling me into ministry, and I eventually ended up with a B.A. in Religious Studies. I went on to work with student ministry and to three years of seminary at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart (which is how I ended up as a Hoosier of all things).

A funny thing happened in the last semester before my M.Div., however. I took a little one-credit class in religious journalism, and the writing bug bit me hard. I went on to become a pastor, but I became increasingly interested in communications and less interested in traditional pastoral ministry.

After doing freelance writing and having more career mishaps and adventures, I got an M.A. in Communication Arts at Notre Dame. I joined STC, and one day was offered a job at Crown International by Ben Dorsey, who

knew me through the chapter meetings. (Come to chapter meetings, and you, too, might have a better job someday.)

At Crown, I worked for two years in the Techron division, documenting power amplifiers. (The aborted engineering background paid off after all.) Then I worked another two years in the Satellite division, doing a host of projects for satellite communications equipment. I loved Crown, but all good things come to an end it seems. When my division was in the process of being sold, I started taking a look at what other opportunities existed.

Utilimaster Corporation finally gave me an offer I couldn't refuse, and I wore many hats there for nearly seven years as manager of the new technical publications department. This summer, however, an unexpected turn of events led me to KMC Controls in New Paris (www.kmcccontrols.com). There I am working as a technical writer, once again, with Ben Dorsey.

And speaking of history repeating itself, in our STC chapter, I've previously been jobs coordinator, president, and (still) webmaster. Now I'm president again, and we are looking for new blood among the officers. If you have a desire to become involved in the future of technical communication, let us know.

Tentative Meeting Schedule Announced

The annual Officer's Meeting is also our meeting planning session where we get the wheels rolling on the program schedule for the upcoming meeting year.

October 11, 2005

Bob Dianetti
Strategic Career Planning for Technical Communicators
Tippecanoe Place, South Bend

February 7, 2005

Ann Linley
Persona Creation and Audience Analysis
Honkers, Mishawaka

May 9, 2006

TBA
Interviewing
Honkers, Mishawaka

August 8, 2006

Mark Stucky
Photoshop Power Pointers for Photo Perfecton
Honkers, Mishawaka

Editor (continued from page 3)

Back Again...

Now, it's my turn. What would I like? Well, every editor has a sometimes elusive dream of what the perfect book, article, newsletter, etc. would look like. I too have a small list of things I would like to see in a "perfect" issue of *Watermark*.

Here is my short list:

I would like to see a Meet a Member piece from all our members. I'm not asking for your bank account numbers or your Social Security number (seems those are being distributed fairly readily these days.) I would just like a small introductory piece: how long you've been a member of the STC, why you joined, what you are doing and where you would like to be someday. We have several examples you can look at in back issues. (There's one in this issue too!)

I would like to see an occasional technical article covering some new developments in a particular area of technical writing. No, I'm not looking for a thesis (although that would take care of content issues for a couple of years). I would just like an overview of what's new. What things used to be the norm, what new developments are taking over, and where things may go in the future. Call me old fashioned but I can't believe I am the only person who has faced changes in the workplace.

When was the last time you came across a really good book related to your field of work? Why was it good? What made it stand out, who would find the book most useful, how do I get a copy? Information is a very valuable commodity in this technical age we live in and the more resources we are aware of, the better we are at doing our jobs.

Ever have a situation come up that caused you to pop a stitch laughing? Well, now they tell us that laughter is actually good for our health. Why not share the story and let us share the laughter? Maybe you have a comedian lurking around under that tech writer exterior you wear every day. Maybe you can

prevent a couple serious diseases or a heart attack among the members. Hey! You never know!

Lastly, I think a Help column would be a great addition! We all have those situations where we encounter a peculiarity in the way a software application works. (We expect the function to do one thing, but the designers decided it should do something else.) You need to find a work around to solve the problem so you can meet your schedule. Imagine how much time you could save a fellow tech writer (who you know is going to run into the same problem, eventually anyhow) if you shared your knowledge? I know I would appreciate the information and I'd even be willing to do one myself should the occasion arise. Just describe the problem and the way you solved it. Don't forget, this newsletter has a home on the Internet. So you may be reaching out to a lot more writers than you realize.

Other than those few items, I am open to suggestions. If you have something that you think would be of benefit to the membership at large, drop me a line with your proposal. I can accommodate short pieces or articles that span a few issues.

Am I hoping for the impossible? Perhaps. But think of the potential.

I've been in this field for over 18 years, and I think I have some appreciation for the hassles we all face nearly every day. I also have an appreciation for the amount of information we can accumulate over the course of a career. If you think back over all those times you were in a tight spot with a deadline looming over you, what would you have given for that all important key to make all the pieces fall into place?

Well, I would be willing to bet that each of us holds at least one key in his or her pocket. How much good can it do tucked away in a pocket? Think about sharing that tidbit with other writers. You might be surprised at how it comes back to you.

Mentoring (continued from page 1)

her attention may be difficult. Likewise, it is sometimes difficult to communicate with a company executive who does not fully understand the function of the Documentation Department within the company infrastructure. How do you go about interviewing these people; what questions do you ask? And if the tools the writer is required to use on the job are not the same tools he/she trained with at school, the learning curve can be steep. Put these and a dozen other variables together, and a new writer can be facing a very difficult, perplexing, and frustrating adjustment period.

In some cases, it is too much. The writer feels overwhelmed, closed in with no where to turn, and with no place to go to get the answers. You want everyone to think you have it all together when you know beyond a doubt you don't have a clue. Panic sets in and the writer quits in frustration.

Enter the Mentor

Not exactly a Guardian Angel, but as far as a new writer is concerned, a mentor could be a close second. Just knowing you can go somewhere or to someone for insights and answers can relieve a great deal of stress.

Mentoring, at least from my viewpoint, isn't about trying to create younger copies of myself; I've already raised my kids. But mentoring is a lot like parenting, without the discipline.

As a mentor, it is important to answer questions and offer alternatives in an open and supportive manner. If I already have the answer to a question, then it is easy. If I am asked about an application I am not familiar with, then the reply becomes one of how to find the answer. Knowing how to get to an answer is every bit as important as actually having one.

Of course, this must be accomplished within the constraints of the work environment. We may not always agree with company policies, but as employees, we are obligated to respect and obey them. So the answers a mentor formulates must take that into consideration. I would consider it highly unprofessional to counsel a new writer in the methods of get-

ting around a policy or another individual rather than working within the system to solve the problem. After all, in today's workplace it is very unlikely that a new hire out of school will not be with the company in another five years. But the skills he or she learns in how to thrive within a company environment are easily transferred to the next position. Also, the quicker that individual learns how to perform their job, the sooner they can start making a real contribution.

Becoming a Mentor

I admit, like being a parent, it takes a certain mind-set to be a mentor. You have to get past the idea that you are training your replacement and remember that you are actually helping another person.

As an older writer, I recognize that the time I have left in this field is growing short. I also know that as a Senior Writer within a company, many eyes would be upon my position as a possible career progression. While I can't ignore the sense of being pushed aside, mentoring allows me to leave a sort of legacy behind, regardless.

It takes very little effort to become a mentor, you merely have to make yourself available. But you must be willing to maintain a level of commitment. You need to be available to make time to answer questions, demonstrate procedures, and perhaps seek some answers yourself. It is also helpful if you have a lifetime learner attitude. This field changes too often for us to remain stagnant with a limited set of skills, you need to keep up to date. Obviously, you cannot mentor an entire department, that is just too much for any one person to take on.

Typically, a mentor chooses a person to mentor. I personally have a problem with the underlying feeling of favoritism that might generate within a department that is highly competitive. But a mentor normally works with one person at a time. Keeping up with your own responsibilities and doing a good job of being a mentor is difficult with more than one person. The whole idea is to help someone else, not to hinder two people.

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Mentoring (continued from page 7)

However, it would be possible to create a mentoring program within a large department where new writers are paired with more senior writers to help them learn the ropes. The results? I would wager that there would be an improvement in overall department interaction and a real improvement in productivity.

But don't take my word for it. There are numerous studies and publications dealing with the idea of mentoring. I have compiled a brief list for you to use below.

Peer Resources

www.mentors.ca/

Peer Resources Document Archives

www.peer.ca/docs.html

Peer Resources - Additional Links

<http://www.mentors.ca/mentorlinks.html>

Advance Mentoring

www.advancementoring.com/resources/mags/

Mentoring

<http://www.managementhelp.org/guiding/mentrng/mentrng.htm>

The Growth Connection

<http://www.growconnect.com.au/bookshop/ment-res.html>

Unfortunately, most of these sites are commercial (no, I'm not getting a kickback), but they will give you an idea of the types of information that is out there. I'm sure you can locate information that is more pertinent to your needs.

Final Thoughts

So, are you up to it? Mentoring doesn't cost much, takes a little bit of time and pays back far more than you put into it.

Think back to your first day on the job as a brand spanking new, still wet behind the ears, technical writer. How much of an impact would it have made to have someone come up to you and say, "Hi. Welcome aboard. I'm here to help you get settled in and answer your questions. What would you like to know?"

Words We Use

by Ralph F. Rumpf

I heard something the other day that got me to thinking - something I rarely do.

I heard someone use the expression: "the cards I was dealt." It's an expression I have heard for most of my adult life but never really paid much attention to, until now. This time, for some reason, I pondered the phrase a bit longer.

Used in the context of a card game, "the cards we are dealt" are largely out of our control. The dealer selects and distributes cards in a more or less random manner. Even if we draw cards, we usually cannot tell what the face value is until we see the card. (I am not an expert in card games so please pardon my generalities.)

Used in terms of life, as was the case here, "the cards we are dealt" would seem to imply a life situation that is out of our control, like birth or our gender or skin color. But once we reach adulthood, and are essentially on our own in this world, is that phrase really applicable?

I believe all our lives, once we reach adulthood, are comprised of choices. They may not be good choices or they may be made for the wrong reasons, or a lack of information, but we still make them. I admit there are circumstances that can lead us to conclude that a situation is out of our control, but that is often a protective mechanism. If we look at the hard truth, we often have to admit we made a choice.

If that is so, why do we persist in using a phrase that only confuses the facts and leads us to false conclusions?

Just wondering...

If you have a "pet" phrase that gets under your skin or an expression that drives you to distraction and you would like to take a whack or two at it, why not drop me a line and I can include it in a future newsletter?

Your comments and thoughts are also appreciated but let's keep the discussions on the favorable side of "politically correct."

West Michigan Shores



Call for Entries

2005-2006 STC International Competition Entry

Have you or your company produced technical communication products that you think are worthy of awards? Would you like your work to be recognized by your peers? This call for entries is your invitation to participate in the following Society for Technical Communication (STC) competitions:

- Online Communication Competition
- Technical Art Competition
- Technical Publications Competition

Deadline for submissions: Friday, October 14, 2005

Who is eligible?

Anyone is eligible to submit entries. You do not have to be a member of STC. You may enter work as an individual or on behalf of a colleague or subordinate.

What can you enter?

Entries in all categories must contain sufficient technical, scientific, medical, or similar content to qualify as technical communication. Entries must have been produced or substantially revised within 24 months preceding September 1 of the current year. Entries must have been originally prepared for and accepted for publication by a client, employer, or publisher. Entries are subject to all restrictions listed in the section of this document titled "Entry Rules."

How are the competitions structured?

STC's competitions recognize and encourage excellence in online communication, technical art, and technical publications. STC offers two levels of competition:

- Local and regional competitions
- The international competitions

Local and regional competitions are the first level of competition. Local competitions are held by single chapters; regional competitions by two or more chapters, usually in the same STC region.

The international competitions—the international online communication competition (IOCC), the international technical art competition (ITAC), and the international technical publications competition (ITPC)—are the second and final level of competition. Winners of the Distinguished Technical Communication award in each category of each local and regional competition are automatically submitted to the appropriate international competition. After you enter the local competition, no further action is required.

What awards could I receive?

The chapter presents 3 levels of awards in each competition category. These awards, in descending order, are

- Distinguished Technical Communication (DTC)
- Excellence
- Merit

The judges also select one entry in each category as the Best of Show. The WMS-STC Chapter sponsors the winners of the DTC and Best of Show award in each category in STC's international competitions.

Deadlines, Fees, and Where to Submit

The deadline for the West Michigan Shores chapter competitions is **Friday, October 14, 2005**.

Fees are **\$75. per entry (\$85. per entry** if none of the submitters are STC members). If ANY of the submitters are STC members, you may pay the member fee. If you submit multiple products, each additional item is \$50. (\$65. for non-members).

If your product reflects work in more than one area, such as technical art and technical publications, you are encouraged to enter it into both competitions for recognition. However, if you enter a product into more than one competition, you must pay the fee for each entry.

Submit your entries to

Sandy Balkema, competition committee chair
8550 9-Mile Road
Rockford, MI 49341
(email: drsandyb@sbcglobal.net or balkemas@ferris.edu)

Entries must be received by October 14th to be entered in the competition