

In this issue...

Writing With Style
Page 2

**Things Your HTML
Teacher Never Told
You**
Page 2

**Who's Who In
Technical
Communication**
Page 3

The Power of Word
Page 3

Meeting Schedule
Page 4

Webs of Interest
Page 4

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President's Notes: **Checking In Over Summer Break**

by Ryan Edwards Bertrand

Our spring picnic has ushered in another summer, and we hope you have a great break to enjoy the weather and summer activities! We will meet again for a chapter planning session at 6 pm on August 8 at Lucca Grill in Bloomington.

In the meantime, be sure to stay plugged in to the national STC calendar for events and telephone seminars. The national STC Web site (www.stc.org) has added some helpful links to information on technical writing careers and the value of Society membership. Check these out, and also have a look at the "About STC" page if you haven't seen it for a while. It includes a link to the Society's

"Strategic Plan" for the next few years.

Look for an email from us in August to remind you of our next Illinois Heartland chapter sessions. When we reconvene in September, we'll focus on "Tech Comm Tech"—the tools and techniques at the forefront of technical communication. Our November session will be a resume workshop, where we have a chance to bring resumes for review and share tips on skill development and job hunting.

So relax, enjoy summer, and join us again this fall to share in discussions and networking!

April Speaker Discusses Mind Project

Our April speaker was Professor David Anderson, who teaches in the Philosophy department at Illinois State University. Dr. Anderson is the director of the University's minor in Cognitive Sciences (www.mind.ilstu.edu/community/isu/cogsciminor.html). He also directs the Mind Project (www.mind.ilstu.edu).

Dr. Anderson explained that the Mind Project is "a student-faculty research and curriculum project in the cognitive and learning sciences." As the website explains, it is a collaboration between students, teachers, community members, and expert researchers interested in learning together about the mind and the brain. The project, which began in the mid-1990s, has been supported by a number of National Science Foundation grants and has involved faculty and students at Illinois State as well as other

universities and public schools. This group is conducting research on the nature of the mind (see for example virtual Cid, www.mind.ilstu.edu/research/virtual/cyd/) as well as developing curricular materials.

Of particular note is the cognitive science archive (www.mind.ilstu.edu/archives/), which the Mind Project is currently developing. The archive will contain all sorts of material about cognitive science, Artificial Intelligence, and the nature of the mind, including sample curricula, documents (e.g., reviews of science fiction novels), images, software, video, and audio.

Dr. Anderson is recruiting volunteers from the Bloomington-Normal community to help build this archive. If you are interested in participating, you can contact him at dlanders@ilstu.edu or (309) 438-7175.

News, Conferences, and Events

Remote Seminars

Complete seminar descriptions and registration information available at: <http://stc.webex.com>

Practical Strategies for Developing Online Courses

Presenter: Ann-Marie Grissino
August 4, 2004

Chapter 1: Writing Effective Introductions and Overviews

Presenter: Leah Guren
August 18, 2004

Cascading Style Sheets: Learning the Basics (Part I)

Presenter: Char James-Tanny
September 15, 2004

Cascading Style Sheets: Creating Layouts without Tables (Part II)

Presenter: Char James-Tanny
September 29, 2004

Writing With Style

Tips for Clear Technical Writing

by Ryan Edwards Bertrand

Here are a few familiar guidelines to keep in mind when producing technical documentation.

1. Write as you speak.

When deciding how to describe a difficult concept, imagine yourself speaking to someone directly. Consider the best opening and imagine their reaction as you complete each sentence. If they have questions you cannot address in your explanation, try to provide references that point the reader to answers.

2. Review each document as a whole.

Many technical writers reuse “modules” or sections of text that they compile into various documents. Writers sometimes copy sections from older documents or update old documents to create new ones. It is tempting to review and edit only the “changed sections” in such documents without reviewing the overall

document as a whole. Make sure, though, that the document still flows, that it contains everything it needs to, and that it does not assume the reader has knowledge which is no longer in the document.

3. Review each document in context.

A document often has a limited role in explaining part of a product or a process. Make sure that your document does not try to convey information that is more complete or current in another resource available to the user. While users should not have to reference several documents for a single task, they will be confused if they find the same topic described differently in multiple documents.

Note: For a discussion of grammar rules, see Branford R. Connatser's "Reconsidering Some Prescriptive Rules of Grammar and Composition" in the May 2004 issue of Technical Communication.

Things Your HTML Teacher Never Taught You (But Should Have)

Giving Your Web Pages Some Class

by Jim Kalmbach

A question I often hear is, *How do I make my links look different in different parts of my page?*

If you have a menu bar with a dark background color, you will want to use text links with light colors but these same link colors will not work in the body of the page against a white background. Before I learned how to use CSS, I would deal with this problem by using graphic text in the menu bar, but now that I have seen the light, I use CSS classes instead.

A CSS class is a custom style, but instead of applying this custom style to a span of text, you will apply it to a link tag.

Let's say that your normal link style is to

use red for unvisited links with no underline. The code that creates that link would be as follows:

```
a {
    color: #FF0000;
    text-decoration:
    none; }
```

In your menu bar, however, you would like the color of a regular link to be white because it will be viewed against a black background. The style code to create this custom link style is as follows:

```
a.menu {
    color: #FFFFFF;
    text-decoration:
    none; }
```

The name of this new link class “menu” is arbitrary. The name can be any string of text you like; only the period is required. To create a custom link style in Dreamweaver, use the “CSS Selector” option in the CSS palette and type the name of your new class, “a.menu”, in the text area.

Using your new custom link style is quite straightforward. Here is the code for adding a class to a link by hand.

```
<p><a href="#"
class="menu">Sample Link</a> </p>
```

To assign a specific link to your new class, add `class="menu"` after the href part of the link. To apply this custom style in Dreamweaver, right click on a link and choose “menu” from the “CSS Styles” menu item.

When you use CSS classes, life is good.

Who's Who in Technical Communication: Brian Goodin

by Cassie Hart

It's always fascinating to learn about the different jobs that fall under the umbrella of technical communication. Not everyone in our field is responsible for developing online help or mastering XML. Some technical communicators don't directly engage in overtly technical work, but they regularly interact with individuals who do. While technical recruiters don't necessarily need to know the ins and outs of document planning, it's essential that they possess many of the same skills as a practicing technical writer/documentation specialist: a solid awareness of today's ever-changing technology, job coaching know-how, and excellent communication skills.

Although he's only been with PDS Technology Group for a few months, technical recruiter Brian Goodin is no stranger to technical communication. Before moving to PDS he worked at STL Technologies, first as a technical communicator and then as a recruiter. He also has extensive proposal writing and editing experience. Being able to work in a few different areas of technical communication has helped Goodin understand just how diverse the

profession really is; he routinely uses this insight to execute his recruiting task efficiently and effectively.



Goodin relies on the Internet as a source for locating consultants for his clients. If a resume—often posted on database sites such as CareerBuilder.com, HotJobs.com, and Monster.com—boasts specific skills required by a client, Goodin will contact the resume poster for an interview. This interview is preliminary to the one the actual company conducts, and he serves as mediator between prospective employee and potential employer. Goodin explains the process:

“First, I assess their (the potential consultants’) skill level and determine if they will match the client’s required skills. I then assist in writing a presentable resume...once their resume is revised I submit it to our client through my manager. If the applicant is chosen for an interview, I will coach him on how to interview and present himself.”

The job of a recruiter offers a unique glimpse into the technical communication field. Acting as a liaison between employer and employee allows for an inside look at both sides of the workforce. So how does it look, this future of technical communication?

“I think too little emphasis is placed on technical communication,” Goodin says. “I say this because I have seen the bill rates for technical writer positions drop, which leads to lower salaries for our consultants. It seems that companies want technical writers who can step into an organization and gather requirements and create a document in a short amount of time. I believe that corporate expectations are too high to be met in such a short time frame.”

continued on page 4

The Power of Word Take Advantage of Styles

by Julie Tarr

Using styles in long documents with recurring elements, such as headings, can eliminate nightmarish formatting tasks. A style is a set of pre-determined formatting commands that can quickly be applied to the contents of your document. These formatting commands can range from font type, size, color, and style to indents, borders, shading, bullets, line spacing, character spacing, and everything in between. For example, you can create a first-level heading style in the following manner:

Heading 1 = Font: Arial, Font Size: 16, Font Style: Bold and Small Caps, Border: Line 2pt., Character Spacing: Expanded.

Result:

HEADING 1

Benefits of utilizing styles:

- Saves time by eliminating the repetitive application of multiple formats to document contents.
- Styles can be easily modified and applied to all contents assigned to that style.
- The use of styles can enable you to perform powerful automation/organizational tasks, such as creating a table of contents.

For instructions of how to create, modify, and apply styles to your Word documents, choose Microsoft Word Help under the Help menu, and search for *style*.

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For more information
about the
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Who's Who...continued from page 3

Technical communicators looking to change jobs or recent graduates seeking work in the field might take note of Goodin's tip to increase their chances of securing a position: diversify skills by learning about web design, programming, and/or training. Even Goodin, ever conscious of the expectations of technical communicators seeking work, plans to take his own advice. The principles of web design pique his interest, and he feels that the communicative and often persuasive effects that web-based

layout has on consumers is fascinating.

Does this mean Goodin is planning to make the jump from technical recruiter to web designer? Not necessarily, he says, but in the fast-paced world of technology it never hurts to have additional skills. Goodin knows this first-hand, which gives him an edge no matter where his career takes him next. In the meantime, he's happy to share his knowledge with technical communicators presently seeking work.

2004 Meeting Schedule

It's time once again to mark your calendars with upcoming meeting dates. Join us and enjoy these opportunities to meet others involved in technical communication!

August 4

Planning session at Lucca Grill (Bloomington)

September 1

Tech Comm Tech

November 3

Resume Workshop

All meetings (except August 8) are held at:
Normal Township Hall, 304 E. Mulberry Street
(across from Ace Hardware) from 6:00 - 7:00 pm.

Networking dinners will immediately follow the meetings.



Webs of Interest

Illinois Heartland STC Website

www.english.ilstu.edu/stc/

National STC Website

www.stc.org

Illinois Heartland Chapter Job Bank

<http://listserv.ilstu.edu/archives/twjjobs-1.html>

Write Thinking (newsletter for the practical technical writer)

www.writethinking.net