

SuperScript



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



What a Web We Weave

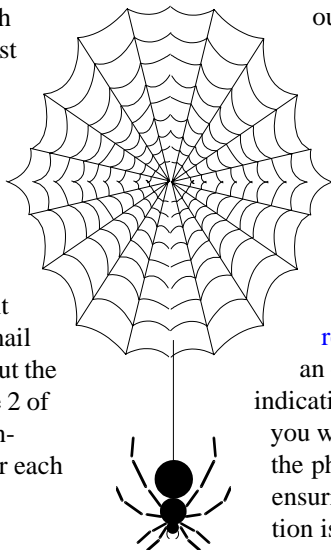
- Mai-Ann Sprung, Webmaster

If you've been visiting the STC Alberta Web site over the last few months, you've probably noticed a few changes and additions. So, just to be sure that everyone is aware of the improvements we've been making, I thought I'd drop a line....

One of the major benefits of moving to our own domain and Web site is that we were able to set up e-mail accounts for each of the Executive Council positions. Although most volunteers over the last few years have had their own e-mail addresses, using a static address (e.g., webmaster@stc-alberta.org) means that the changeover of Council members from year to year (or mid-year) does not result in missed or misdirected e-mail from our members. Check out the new Council listing on Page 2 of *SuperScript* for the position-specific e-mail addresses for each of our Council members.

One of the first major changes we made to the Web site was to move the Annual Salary Survey from a "print and mail" format to an electronic form ac-

cessed through our Web site. This change meant that submissions were easier to make (no filling out paper forms and mailing them back), and the resulting data entry was greatly reduced (a plus for Brian O'Malley, our dedicated Survey Coordinator). A second survey was also launched via our Web site when we asked for our members' input on a potential workshop led by Joanne Hackos.



The second significant change to our Web site affected our entire Program and Workshop registration process. Now, instead of calling the STC Alberta phone line and leaving a message to register in a program, you can just visit our Web site (<http://www.stc-alberta.org/registration.php>) and fill out an online registration form indicating the Program or Workshop you want to attend. By eliminating the phone line registration, and ensuring that all required information is included in the registration form, we have streamlined and drastically improved the process of signing our members up for events.

Since September, there have been several other changes as well, some visible and some not. If you visit our site, you'll probably notice that the pages now have ".php" extensions instead of the usual ".html" extensions. Thanks to the Web, scripting, and UNIX experience of our President, Ian Hawkins, we have made this change to reduce the amount of maintenance required for all of the navigation links. This change also

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



A Word from Our President

- Ian Hawkins

From all indications, the technical communication profession and most of the industries we support are faced with slower growth in the immediate future. Just in the last couple of months we have seen the local job market tighten considerably. Many companies have laid off some of their workers, while others are postponing hiring decisions until they have a clearer idea of which way the economy is going.

In financially difficult times, membership in organizations like the STC can be harder to justify. The good news is that any downturn in the economy will inevitably be followed by an upswing. The impossible part is predicting exactly when the upswing will occur. But even if we don't know when things will improve, there are steps we should be taking now so we are ready when the time comes.

Professional development is an essential part of this preparation. This can involve upgrading current skills, reviving old ones, or learning new ones. Getting maximum value from scarce professional development dollars can be quite a challenge. I think that the STC and the Alberta Chapter are both important parts of the solution to this challenge.

It does make it more imperative that we in the local Chapter focus on providing value to our members. Our formal professional development opportunities, the Thursday night programs and the Saturday workshops, are key pieces. However, in order to create the maximum benefit from these programs, we need help from our members in two important areas. First of all,

But even if we don't know when things will improve, there are steps we should be taking now so we are ready when the time comes.

attend and participate in the programs. Equally important, though, you must let us know what sorts of professional development you need. Fill in the feedback forms that we offer at every event, e-mail members of the Executive Council, or even send us a telegram or handwritten note if that's your preference.

The informal events, like the monthly coffee nights, are good opportunities to talk to others in the technical writing community, do some networking, and share tips, job leads, and peer support. Don't

forget that the coffee is free, and the charm of our inimitable moderator, Darren Tenor, is yet another bonus.

I'd like to close by thanking some of the volunteers who have made significant contributions to the Chapter so far this year. If I inadvertently leave anybody out, please let me know. I don't mind making mistakes, but I don't like to make them at the expense of others. These people, and the rest of the Executive Council, are the ones responsible for making our Chapter so successful.

Lois Hamilton did a superb job organizing the Wine and Cheese in September. She was helped by a good crowd of volunteers the night of the event. Thanks to Kathy Gerritsen, Debbie Barry, Mai-Ann Sprung, Brian O'Malley, Anton Molik, Jean Bauer, and Andrea Hogg for helping out.

Mai-Ann Sprung has also done some significant work on the Web site, with some good suggestions from Ken Schatzke.

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How Polite Are Your Documents?

- Kim McKenzie, STC Senior Member

You probably greeted your co-worker with a friendly smile this morning without even thinking about it, but when was the last time you consciously decided how polite you would be in one of your technical documents? That's probably just something you've never considered; but Bill Bunn, a local technical writer and long-time instructor in the Technical Writing department of Mount Royal College, suggested that politeness can improve our documentation. Bill spoke October 18th on Politeness Theory and its implications for technical writing.


In everyday social interactions we employ politeness strategies for a specific goal—to ensure our desire to be liked. In the same way, proposed Bill, technical writers can use politeness strategies for the purpose of creating more effective documentation.

A polite and, hence, effective document has the right “social” distance between itself and its audience—social distance being controlled by document form and content (for example, using the

personal pronoun “I” decreases social distance). In most cases, documents aim to decrease social distance; however, legal documents, explained Bill, often increase social distance.

Social distance, though, is only one part of a larger formula that Bill presented as a tool that technical communicators can use to achieve document effectiveness. The formula he showed us was: Social Distance (1-10) + Document Power (1-10) + Task Difficulty: Reading (1-5); Action (1-5) = Document Effectiveness.

Once you assign a value to each measurement in the formula, you add them together to arrive at a value for Document Effectiveness. The lower the total, the more effective your document.

You may want to try Bill's formula next time you write a technical document. It's certainly a new way to look at creating usable and effective technical documentation. 

November Saturday Workshops

In Calgary

HTML Basics

by Murray Nicholson

Saturday November 10, 2001

9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Mount Royal College, Room E141

STC Members: \$50.00

STC Student Members: \$25.00

Non-members: \$110.00

This workshop will introduce you to HTML, the lingua franca of the World Wide Web, and teaches you how to develop basic Web pages and other HTML-based documents.

In Edmonton

Introduction to Visual Basic

by Kevin Slywka

Saturday November 24, 2001

9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Ottewell Junior High School

STC Members: \$15.00

STC Student Members: \$10.00

Non-members: \$35.00

This workshop will introduce you to VBA syntax and apply lessons to real-world problems such as auto-updating tables of contents (TOC) and page numbering independent of Microsoft Word's built-in functions.

Seating for both workshops is allotted on a first come, first serve basis. Register through the chapter's online registration form (<http://www.stc-alberta.org/registration.php>)

Learning HTML

- Robin Etherington, STC Senior Member

Sams Teach Yourself HTML in 10 Minutes

By Tim Evans.

Indianapolis: Macmillan Computer Publishing, 1998


I know that all of you know HTML, from familiarity with its basic aspects and acknowledgement of its critical role in Web design, to being an expert who dreams HTML code.

Regardless of what level of expertise you currently are at, *Sams Teach Yourself HTML 4 in 10 Minutes* is a great read and serves as a quick reference for all of us. Also, it accomplishes its intent, which is to provide us with concise and precise ten-minute long lessons on various aspects of HTML 4. You can do one lesson at a time or do all of them as one long lesson plan. Each lesson builds on the ones you completed. By the middle of the book you have a good basic understanding of HTML and its strengths and applications. By the end of the book you can use HTML 4 in more complicated Web-works, such as “frames” and “style sheets.” You can envision how to apply HTML to your current work as well as future projects.

For those of you who know HTML, this may still be a good read. It provides a refresher course and you can focus on those features and code that you want to exercise and master.



I picked up this book when I wanted to start an HTML project and needed a reminder of specific code and a pointer about new features. I worked through the ten-minute long lessons which not only refreshed my memory but also gave me practical tips and new perspective on using HTML 4.

The layout is practical and readable. The sequence of lessons may seem slightly unorthodox, but I began to appreciate the method in the madness midway through the book. 

Editor's Note: Robin's review is of the first edition of this book. This title's third edition has just been released.


Sams Teach Yourself HTML and XHTML in 10 minutes, 3rd. Ed.
Author: Deidre Hayes
ISBN: 0672322544
Published September 12, 2001
Pages: 256

What a Web We Weave

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facilitates having several individuals updating different portions of the Web site (Jobline, Programs, Workshops, and Edmonton).

The more visible additions to the site include the new Edmonton page, maintained by Peter Adamski in Edmonton, which will promote any events in the Edmonton area. The Chapter Resources page is another addition, including important chapter governance materials like the Chapter Operations Manual, Bylaws, a sample Code of Conduct, Annual Reports, and any other information that our members might need.

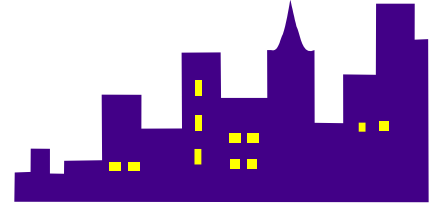
As always, we continue to seek ways of improving our site, both in the current content and structure, and in additions that can be made. Please don't hesitate to contact us (webmaster@stc-alberta.org) with any comments, corrections, suggestions, or submissions you'd like to make. 

EDITORS' ASSOCIATION OF CANADA ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES	EIGHT STEP EDITING
RÉVISEURS	WITH JIM TAYLOR
PRESENTS	
Jim is back with his nationally recognized course! Whether you're an editor or a writer, a novice or a pro, this course will help you to use words to achieve the effect you want. Outlining a step-by-step process, the course identifies the most common factors in writing that become obstacles for readers. You'll learn to recognize these problems—and find out how to fix them simply and quickly.	
<i>Jim Taylor has taught Eight Step Editing since 1985. He has nearly 40 years of experience in writing and editing.</i>	
Space is limited. Please visit the EAC Web site at www.editors.ca/prairie/prairie.htm to register. For more information, please call 780-455-3047 or e-mail Karys@telusplanet.net .	
Calgary Friday November 23 9 am-4 pm	Edmonton Monday November 26 9 am -4 pm
\$96.30 EAC members	
\$144.45 non-members	
Fee includes GST and lunch	

EDMONTON

V

- Lorraine Gorman, Edmonton Correspondent



E

Last Meeting (October 18)

N

John Fleming

At Second Cup, we gathered to discuss “Tense Present”, David Foster Wallace’s review of “A Dictionary of Modern American Usage” that appeared in the April edition of Harper’s magazine. This focused our discussion on prescriptive grammar vs. descriptive grammar, and helped us arrive at a consensus on grammar and usage from a utility point of view.

T

Peter Adamski, who picked the topic, led off with an overview on prescriptive grammar vs. descriptive grammar.

S

At one end of the scale is the tyranny of prescriptive grammar. The hard rules of grammar—thou shalt and shalt not—can become a law unto themselves. In the extreme, following the rules can become more important than communicating the message.

At the other end of the scale, descriptive grammar takes its cues from what is in use somewhere, with the possible flaw that anything goes. When anything goes, the message can become muddled. The rules of grammar help us understand the message the author is trying to communicate, and when anything goes, there are no rules.

In time, we reached a consensus that there is a utilitarian purpose for grammar—it helps us communicate. By understanding and using the rules of grammar, we become better communicators. At the same time, we know there are times where bending and breaking the rules is acceptable, perhaps even appropriate, to our purpose.

Finally, we broadened our discussion, gaining insights into the need to understand how our audience uses language. This covered everything from spelling to how people use different dialects of English. How people use the language affects how we communicate our own message.

Thus we deepened our understanding of the role of grammar and usage in communication. A very productive evening indeed, filled with ideas and insights into the communication process.

To get the full effect of the article, read it as it was published in the April edition of Harper’s. If that’s not possible, try this link: http://www.findarticles.com/cf_0/m1111/1811_302/72732951/p1/article.jhtml.

Next Meeting (November)

Our November meeting is replaced by Kevin Slywka’s Visual Basic workshop on November 24th, 2001. Kevin is Senior Tech Writer at ACI Worldwide/MessagingDirect. Since there is a maximum of 10 attendees, he strongly recommends that you register early at <http://www.stc-alberta.org/registration.php>. For more details see <http://www.stc-alberta.org/calendar.php#edmontonwshop>.

Stay tuned to this spot for more exciting events

We’ve got a Christmas party in December. January is still open and available. February, the month of love, will be highlighted by Hugh Read’s much-loved grammar gremlins. The ides of March will bring an Indexing workshop.

Tech Writing Horror Stories

- Anonymous STC Member

On the Letters page of the July/August issue of *Intercom*, a member wrote to complain about the magazine's apparent lowering of its target audience. The member strongly believed that an article about the most rudimentary usage of DTP tools was far below the core competence level of STC members. In the writer's region, a tech writer who didn't "know how to use styles in Word or tags in FrameMaker would not be employable."

Our story teller nearly snorted her breakfast cereal out her nose reading the letter. Earlier this year she had experienced two "tech writer horror stories" from the tech pubs department there: one involving templates, one involving a style guide, and both involving FrameMaker tags, variables, master and reference pages, and cross-reference formats—in short, every aspect of tool usage and document infrastructure.

Template horror story...

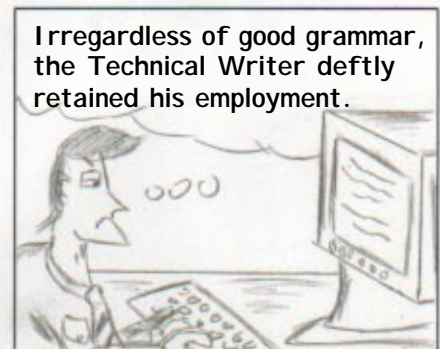
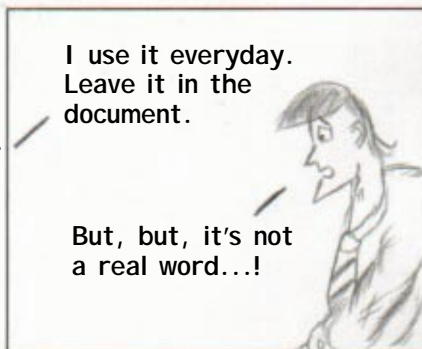
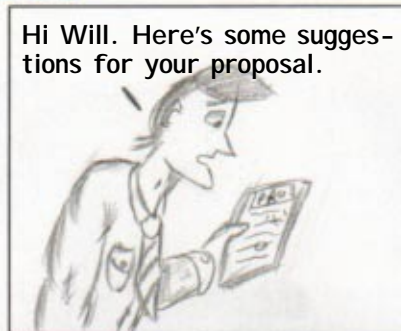
In an attempt to impose a valuable uniformity on product documentation coming out of many development centres, her head office issued FrameMaker documents designated as templates. Now, the knowledgeable FrameMaker user revels in the simplicity with which this EPS encourages robust large-document design, structure and infrastructure, and recoils in horror at any kind of format override. Frame Technology had this licked long before SGML and HTML.

Our story teller needed these templates to guide the formatting and internal architecture of her current documentation, which would be released in both hardcopy and electronic media. She should simply be able to import the infrastructure from the template, which would automatically change things such as page and paragraph formats appropriately, so she could get on with touch-ups. To her consternation, she found different paragraph tags, master pages, and everything else. Arbitrary and inconsistent variables and cross-ref formats showed a lack of unifying concept. Paratags were often used (or even created) arbitrarily, including similar names differing only in case; e.g., Numbered, Numbered1, NumberedCont, NumberedText, Numberedtext, Numlist, Numlistt, Numlist1. One template preferred to call its headings by names such as Head1, Head2, Head3... and the other used Heading1, Heading2, Heading3... Autonumber series were out of control too, and sometimes not even assigned.

The templates were infested with format overrides, both in body page layout paragraph tags. Cover pages were the scariest, using format overrides for size and position of the text and imported graphics. Within one of these "templates," nearly EVERY instance of the "Note" tag overrode the catalogued format. On the master pages, header and footer frames contained embedded frames and ignored the intuitive usage of

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Bitter Ink.



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Learn the History of Technical Books

- Grant Sorensen, Programs Coordinator

The November 15th program will be presented by Dr. Diana Patterson, an instructor in Mount Royal College's Technical Writing department. Dr. Patterson promotes technical writing as an important form of reading material for the masses. As part of this promotion, she will be contributing a chapter on the history of Canadian technical books to the three-volume *History of the Book in Canada* to be published in 2004 by University of Toronto Press.

While preparing her materials for this chapter, she recently gave an overview of the history of technical books at a seminar on the History of the Book on the Prairies. On November 15th, Dr. Patterson will be presenting this information along with new material. Included will be slides and samples of such early technical writing materials as catalogues, pattern books, sewing machine instructions, settlement advertisements, and illustrations. The presentation will be at 7:00 in the Media Room at McDougall Centre. See "Mark Your Calendars" for the address and registration information.



Horror Story


Continued from Page 6

existing paratags "header left", "header right", "footer left", and "footer right".

Finally she realized, to her horror: they were using FrameMaker like a mere word processor. She wasn't supposed to scratch the surface, she was just supposed to use the templates to create a similar external appearance. You've heard of using an elephant gun to shoot a mosquito? Well, this was at the opposite end of the spectrum: the quarry was worthy of an elephant gun, but she was being asked to swing the gun like a club.

Style guide horror story...

While trying to make sense of the templates, she asked for a style guide. What she received was an unfinished masterpiece, which is probably the fate of most well-intentioned style guide initiatives in our lean-and-mean industrial world. It claimed to be intended for the online docs, but it was frequently muddled, wandered without warning into treatments of hardcopy styles, and covered less than half of what she would demand of a style guide if she ruled the world. (To be fair, though, it did answer a few of her questions.)


The document was itself a FrameMaker file, so she hoped its infrastructure would give her some shining examples. No luck there. After an experiment in importing formats from the templates and the style guide into one of her documents, she ended up with over 120 different paragraph tags. The character tag list was bloated, too, though of course not so greatly. Approximately 90% of all tags were not even mentioned in the style guide. 

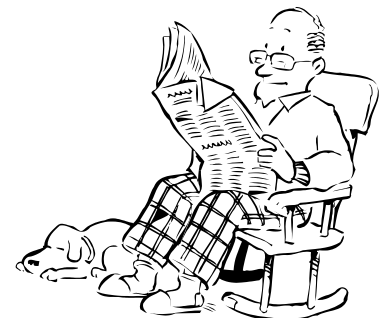
President's Message

Continued from Page 2

There are more pages to explore, including the new online registration page. Take a look and let us know what you think.

The newsletter editors, Jessie Channey, Helen Schleedoorn, Rosemary Reed, Jean Bauer, and Lorraine Gorman, deserve congratulations for publishing an excellent newsletter, every single month. Please support them by submitting articles. Your contributions can help make the newsletter more valuable to the rest of the members. They can also provide good material for your portfolio.

Lastly, a couple of new volunteer opportunities have opened up. We are looking for a Programs Coordinator and an Archivist. The Programs Coordinator is responsible for arranging the Thursday night programs, and the Archivist stores and organizes Chapter documents. Refer to the Chapter Operations Manual on the new Chapter Resources page of the Web site if you are interested in more details. 





Mark Your Calendars!

Programs

Attend programs to discover the ideas and technologies that affect today's technical communicators.

Location: MacDougall Centre
455-6 Street SW, Calgary

Time: Third Thursday of the month, 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.
Please arrive by 6:30 pm for registration.

Registration: **Recommended.** Register by the Monday prior to the program.

Fee:	Registered	Drop-in
Members	\$5.00	\$10.00
Student Members	Free	8.00
Non-members	10.00	13.00

Workshops

Attend workshops to gain in-depth knowledge and skill through instruction and hands-on activities.

Location: Mount Royal College (Room E141)
4825 Richard Road SW, Calgary
\$8.00 parking passes can be purchased from the parking office located by the West Gate.

Time: Scheduled Saturdays, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Registration: **Required.** Register at least 10 days prior to the workshop.
Registration must be cancelled one week in advance of the workshop or the registrant will be billed for workshop fees.

Fee:	Members	\$50.00
	Student Members	25.00
	Non-members	110.00

Coffee Nights

Attend coffee nights to meet with your fellow technical communicators and discuss a monthly topic in a casual setting.

Location: Annie's Books (Literary Salon)
912-16 Avenue NW, Calgary
Parking is available behind Tim Hortons.

Time: Second Tuesday of the month, 7:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Registration: Not required.

Fee: Free for both members and non-members.

Executive Meetings

Location: Merak Building
600, 322-11 Avenue SW, Calgary

Time: Third Monday of the month, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
Building doors are locked after 5:30 p.m.

November 2001

Saturday, 10	HTML Basics by Murray Nicholson Calgary Workshop
Thursday, 15	History of Technical Publications on the Prairies Diana Patterson
Monday, 19	Executive Meeting
Saturday, 24	Introduction to Visual Basic by Kevin Slywka Edmonton Workshop
Tuesday, 27	Java Night Coffee Night* <i>New night this month!</i>

December 2001

Monday, 10	Executive Meeting
Tuesday, 11	Technical Writing Books and Resources Coffee Night*

To register...

To register for programs and workshops, use our online registration form at <http://www.stc-alberta.org/registration.php>.

Coffee Nights

Come join us for stimulating discussion.

The coffee is on us!*



*STC will pay for your refreshments at Coffee Nights held in September to December.

SuperScript

Editors:

Helen Schleedoorn	Jessie Channey
Rosemary Reed	Lorraine Gorman
Jean Bauer	

newsletter@stc-alberta.org

SuperScript is the official newsletter of the Society for Technical Communication Alberta Chapter and is published 10 times annually, including double issues in July-August, and December-January.

Submissions: The Editors invite readers to submit articles, news, reviews, and other items of interest. Articles may be edited for size. Note: By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to *SuperScript* to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editors know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.

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Advertising: *SuperScript* accepts advertising of interest to our readership, and which furthers professional development. We reserve the right to limit or refuse advertising.

Rates:

Full page	\$160.00	Quarter page	\$50.00
Half page	\$100.00	Business card	\$20.00

To place an advertisement: send your cheque, payable in advance, to Society for Technical Communication, Alberta Chapter, Attn: Treasurer, at:

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