



society for technical communication



Interactive media a valuable communication tool if used properly

- by Perry Shulak, Edmonton member

In developing for interactive media for the use of training or any other media, it is essential to develop a solid plan to ensure proper execution. This begins with a script.

Scripts are defined by objectives, which are the key points that you intend to deliver to the prospective viewer. These points become the foundation or guideline that the script follows. As in any writing, structure plays a major role in ensuring success.

In scripting interactive media, the writer must keep in mind all elements that make up an interactive program. This usually includes photos, graphics, text, audio and video. All these elements must seamlessly come together to deliver the intended message.

Since this is very much a visual and auditory experience, it is crucial that these elements become part of the scripting process. Information should flow along quickly to ensure boredom doesn't take control, especially when developing for younger age groups. It is helpful to keep on-screen text to a minimum, relying more on audio and images to tell your story. Text is desirable for reinforcing key points users must remember.

As scripting proceeds, style and audience will further define the approach. The vari-

ables are as diverse as the audience, and defining the delivery style will ensure you are not speaking below or leaving behind your audience.

When exploring delivery keep an open mind, because a unique approach or personality will give your product far more mileage than traditional corporate lingo. In all cases, a casual speaking tone works best. Once a style is identified, the components can follow.

During the scripting phase, an image of the final result begins to evolve. A presentation style evolves out of the content, the audience, and the written style of the script. Once you have gone this far, how the components come together can enhance or destroy a good script. This includes video, photos, audio, and graphics.

With a sound navigation structure, these elements unfold to provide a vivid image of the condition with an intention to gain results from the user. This includes active participa-

tion with the content, and an emotional attachment to the message delivered. To ensure users remember the information, they have to own it, so by creating pathos, and having users participate through interactivity, there is far greater chance they will remember. If done successfully, the potential retention can be far greater than traditional methods of delivery.

In all the phases of development, it is important that quality is a priority. There is nothing like bad audio or poorly rendered graphics to turn off a user. If you want the user to take you seriously, you have to be serious about the standards you set for your delivery.

In the age of information, perhaps interactive media represents the pinnacle of delivery that communications has to offer, but in many cases it must be applicable to whatever you are attempting to convey. If done right, you have succeeded in enlightening a new generation of information consumers. If done wrong, well, at least you end up with a nice collection of drink coasters.

If you have any question on interactive media or this article, you can email me at pshulak@criticalfusion.com.

Editor's Note: This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the April issue of SuperScript. During the editing process, some text was omitted from the original article and formatting errors occurred. The editors would like to extend our sincere apologies to the article's author.

When the use of technologies is incorporated into training programs, the focus is on the trainer. From a roundtable discussion in March 2000, members of the STC Edmonton group indicated that trainers need training to incorporate technologies such as presentation software, audio or video conferencing, e-mail, on-line confer-

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Trainers training technologies

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encing, and the world wide web into their teaching/learning strategies.

Specific to using technologies, trainers need to allow time for advance project planning. The trainers need to learn about and consider their audience when preparing objectives. They also need to develop a project plan (training, scope, timelines, budget, logistics, tools, contingency, evaluation) because the use of technologies involves coordinating and collaborating with other specialists and departments.

When developing the course, trainers need to pay specific attention to information design elements such as the amount of information per screen, links to resources, and types of activities. Before and during the development, trainers need to become comfortable using the technologies, identify prerequisites, provide resources and contingency plans, and develop evaluation tools. Important components to delivery using technologies include the setup, contingency plans, adaptation, and mental preparation. Time, expertise, and support are necessary

in setting up the equipment and connections.

A contingency or backup plan is also necessary. Trainers need to be mentally prepared to use the technologies. When they meet the learners, they must establish ground rules, develop rapport, and strive for rhythm by incorporating or adapting icebreakers, energizers, and breaks.

In addition to evaluating the transfer of knowledge and evaluating if the students' needs and expectations are being met, trainers need to reflect on their own experiences so they can implement changes and set new goals.

Trainers need specific skills and abilities in order to work in a collaborative environment with specialists and departments; to incorporate technologies with the teaching/learning strategies; to become competent and confident using the technologies; and to listen, communicate, manage time, recognize differences, and build a learning community using technologies.

To use the technologies effectively and

confidently, trainers need to participate in professional development activities. Suggested strategies are face-to-face, apprenticeship or mentorship, informal assistance, and hands-on training on the technologies—all combined with the support of another person. Human feedback is deemed important to help trainers stay on track and avoid learning by doing it wrong hundreds of times, or to miss out important details. Self-learning and books are also deemed important tools for grasping the potential of the tool or objectives, to experiment with or to use as a resource.

From our STC roundtable discussion, we discovered that trainers seeking professional development so they can learn to incorporate technologies in the training program choose books as resources rather than on-line documentation, and human face-to-face training rather than virtual connections. Ironic, isn't it?

Special thanks to STC members John Fleming, Elaine Gottlieb, Hugh Read, Angela Wiens, Marcia Wright. 📧

Awards evening salutes winners of STC Alberta Help File Competition

Winners of the STC Alberta chapter's annual online documentation and technical publications competition received awards at a reception on Thursday, May 4 at the Bow Valley Club in downtown Calgary.

In all, 21 of 28 entries received awards – six awards of excellence and 15 awards of merit. In her speech to attendees, chapter president Leila Meyer said the large number of entries that received awards was indicative of the excellent quality of online and printed documentation being produced in Alberta.

A complete list of winners is included here. Due to space constraints, we were unable to include names of the award-winning entries.

Awards of excellence went to Cari Chernenich, Jennifer Feurer and Mary Jo Leslie; Mai-Ann Sprung and Dan Fichter; Don Harman and Alisen Mechele; Brian O'Malley; Shelley Tremblay, Marty Steadman and Sandra Busby; Susan Scott and Tom Lichak.

Awards of merit were presented to Ruth Maryniuk; Leslie Johnson, Carey Fougere

and Peter Straub; Glen Cools and Kari Strutt; the IT Education Group, PanCanadian Petroleum Ltd. (online and technical publications); Katherine Caleb; Angela Wiens and Donna Schultz; Rick Paisley, Tom Rathkamp and Suzanne Scott; Michelle Whitten; Philip Sharman; Keith Burgess, Peter Huizinga and Andre Yskes; C.F. Perkin; Leslie Johnson, Susan Gardner and Tim Tomanik; Fena Maucieri; and Brian O'Malley.

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Seminar explores the graphic art of technical communication

- by Gary Ten-Hove

Kenneth Dove projected a diagram on to the screen before the group of technical writers. "This is your brain: IBM," it said. "This is your brain on drugs:" followed by the Apple logo. "Any questions?"

Dove was telling the monthly STC seminar at the MacDougall Centre about technical illustration: what the realities of the specialty are, and how to work with illustrators. One myth he exploded was that all graphic artists use Macintoshes.

"Macs are non-standard," Dove said. "They're not compatible with my clients."

Dove runs CDA, formerly TechArt. He's been producing graphics using a wide range of applications for nine years. He's entirely self-taught—not all artists go to art school.

"This is one of the last fields where you don't require formal education," Dove said. "You just have to be able to do the job."

Artists need to work with people who will actually look at the hardware and software to be illustrated, he said. Often, the design is not

quite what's built. Then the artist needs enough time to do quality illustration work. When the artist says he needs two weeks, don't expect results tomorrow, no matter what the deadline is.

Graphic artists have their own technical vocabulary, words that people who work with artists must know to communicate with them. Dove went over some of the terms used by artists, explaining "isometric," "shaded plan," "3-d model," and the difference between .cdr, .wmf, .cgm, .emf and many other formats, their advantages and disadvantages.

Vector drawings are mathematically defined points and curves, he said. They're smaller than bitmaps and they're scalable.

Bitmaps are groups of pixels with colors assigned to them. They're usually used for photographs, web images, and buttons. Common formats are .tif, .gif, .bmp, and .jpg.

Each format has its advantages and disadvantages, Dove said, going into great detail.

All this illustration is for naught unless the

document was planned with illustrations in mind. In fact, illustrations are necessary to most documentation and becoming more necessary all the time, said one of Dove's collaborators.

"The information age is forcing today's population to absorb information at an ever-increasing volume and speed," said Catherine Saxby, who has often written oilfield equipment manuals Dove has illustrated. Visual displays are often the way to communicate this information.

Illustrations have long been a part of hardware documentation, but more software development teams are including graphic arts, she said.

The way to deal with the artists is to try to think like one, Saxby said. "Master at least one graphics software package," she said. Looking at examples of artwork in magazines and elsewhere helps train a non-artist to understand what works and what doesn't. 🖨️

He Said, She Said—April Coffee Night

- by Alan Yamada and Suzanne Scott

He Said...

E-mail is a fast, efficient written communication method that is easy to use and readily accessible. So one would think that technical communicators would love e-mail. There was, however, very little love for e-mail at the last STC Coffee Night.

Almost every attendee expressed frustration with e-mail in the workplace, and it is interesting that they were not the typical tool annoyances, the likes of which we repeatedly hear with regard to our favorite word processor.

E-mail complaints are about usage: it is *too* easy to use. It is just too easy to stab a quick note into the computer and send it off without proofreading. It is too easy to forward and reply to messages without reading the original or assessing the needs of the recipients. It is also too easy to send a message that does not make sense, or does not answer the initial question. The result is a whole bunch of poorly written and often needless e-mail that clogs our in-baskets.

I think the cause for this e-mail frustration is from the high expectations technical communicators have for written correspondence. The typical e-mail user does not spell check quick e-mail notes, and forwards everything that comes in because they don't take e-mail seriously. Technical writers, if I can make such generalizations, cringe at spelling mistakes, misplaced modifiers, and verbosity.

So the real problem with e-mail at work is the same one that plagues technical communicators on a regular basis: people don't know how to communicate. If e-mail users learned how to order their thoughts, determine who *really* needs a copy, and how to spell-check, there would be a whole lot less frustrating junk on our computers. 🖨️

She Said...

As participants of a working world where email is a very popular medium for communication, a few STC members took on the topic of "Is E-mail Helpful or Hazardous to Communication?" during the April Coffee Night. They said that they like using e-mail, and concluded that it is a helpful, rather than hazardous form of modern communication. E-mail is a helpful medium, most agreed, because almost everyone we know is accessible through at least one e-mail account. It is fast and easy to use, with a relatively low cost. Many of us rely on e-mail for various tasks at work, for communicating over long distances, and for sharing files.

It's easy to look past the drawbacks of this medium since most of us enjoy using e-mail and have come to rely on it so much. However, miscommunication also seems to be the one e-mail drawback that users have either experienced, or have heard horror stories about. Whether miscommunication is actually 'hazardous' to communication depends on how much common sense the e-mail author throws out the window before clicking the Send button. In those cases, user errors are made by authors who do not take the time to review the message for accuracy, content, and the potential for misrepresentation.

The group concluded that this type of user error often occurs because most people view e-mail as an informal medium. With this status, e-mail easily dodges the jurisdiction of the grammar and spelling police. While there is no law against sending an e-mail with grammatical errors or incorrect information, the attending technical writers agreed that it is not a good idea to do so because it promotes an unprofessional image. 🖨️

Mark Your Calendars!

Executive Meeting

Mon., May 15, 6 pm

#1400, 505 - 3 St SW

All members are welcome.

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Programs

MacDougall Centre

455 - 6 Street SW

Thursday, May 18, 7 pm

How Plain is Plain Language Really? The Role of Language In Organizations

Presented by Dr. B. Schneider of University of Calgary

Dr. Schneider offers another view of language as the medium through which organizational knowledge is produced and organizations themselves are maintained. This view of language leads to a very different understanding of concepts such as clarity, conciseness, and misunderstanding, and of the current move towards plain language.

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Coffee Nights

Annie's Books

912 - 16 Ave. NW. Free.

Tuesday, June 13th, 7 pm

"The Future of the STC Alberta Chapter."

No registration necessary.

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20/20 Conference & Annual General Meeting Saturday, June 24

Don't forget to register now to guarantee your place!

The Alberta Chapter of the STC invites all members to attend. Region 7 Director-Sponsor Ellen Fenwick will be on hand as a special guest.

STC Alberta's Year-At-A-Glance

(Dates and locations subject to change)

May 15	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
May 18	(Thurs)	Program (Plain Language) ***
June 13	(Tues)	Coffee night *
June 19	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
June 24	(Sat)	20/20 Conference and AGM

Locations and details

* 7 pm at Annie's Books, 912 - 16 Avenue NW in the literary salon. Parking behind Tim Horton's. No registration required.

** 6 pm at 1400, 505 - 3 Street SW. Parking available on the street and is free after 6 pm

*** 7 pm at MacDougall Center, 455 - 6 Street SW. Register in advance.

STC Alberta Help Competition

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Competition entries were judged by members of the STC West Coast Chapter. STC Alberta judges who reviewed entries from the West Coast chapter included Ken d'Albenas, Marie Frison-Klassen, Laurie Holtby, Laura Harvie, Fena Maucieri, Brian O'Malley, Philip Sharman, Kari Strutt, and Michelle Whitten.

Leila also expressed her appreciation to the members of the Competition Committee,

whose efforts helped make the competition a success. They included Laura Harvie (Competitions Chair), Ruth Maryniuk (Judges Chair), Sandra Busby (Entries Chair), Diane Laverty (Promotions Chair), Marty Steadman (Financial Chair) and Mai-Ann Sprung (Competitions Site Chair).

On behalf of the Committee, thanks to all who entered the competition. See you next year! 🎉

NOTICE: Program Fees

Advance Registration

\$5 students
\$7 members
\$10 non-members

Drop-In Fees

\$8 students
\$10 members
\$13 non-members

Advance Registration

How to RSVP to the STC message line

1. Read the newsletter.
2. Think to yourself "I'd like to know more about topic XYZ."
3. Check your calendar for conflicts.
4. Grab a coffee and think about how nice it'll be to get away from work and kids.
5. Mentally plan a solo vacation to Aruba.
6. After reality sets in, decide that an evening for yourself is in order.
7. Go to the phone. Dial **230-6072**.
8. After the recorded message, press **2**.
9. Leave a message for our congenial hospitality coordinator stating:
 - your name,
 - your phone number, and
 - the Program you'd like to attend.
10. Mark the day and time in your DayTimer.
11. Return to your coffee and dream about Aruba some more.

SuperScript

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

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Submissions: The Editors invite readers to submit articles, news, reviews, and other items of interest. Articles may be edited for size.

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Distribution: SuperScript is distributed to members in Alberta, and Northwest Territories, to all Canadian chapters of the STC, and to interested companies and individuals upon request. Circulation is 225.

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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 of Technical Communication, Alberta Chapter, Attn: Treasurer, at:

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