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NEWSLETTER

**Inside**



# Alan Lightman's "The Physicist as Novelist"

By Ronald J. Nelson

Michael Brady, in his recent column "IMRAD Buried" (March/April 2003 *Newsletter*), calls attention to the differences between the activities of students of the sciences and students of the humanities, as they are spoken of in Scott Montgomery's *The Chicago Guide to Communicating Science*. In the process of preparing my last column (on Stephen Hawking, in the same issue), I chanced to read an essay in the book that Hawking coedited with Kip Thorne, Igor Novikov, Timothy Ferris, and Alan Lightman: *The Future of Spacetime*. The essay that I found particularly engaging was Lightman's "The Physicist as Novelist" (pp. 171-190)—the subject of which constitutes, I believe, a useful follow-up to Brady's distinction between two polar types of students. Professional communicators can benefit from perusing Lightman's essay, as well as his many other publications.

His books include *Problem Book in Relativity and Gravitation* (with W. H. Press, R. H. Price, and S. A. Teukolsky, 1975), *Radiative Processes in Astrophysics* (with G. B. Rybicki, 1979), *Time Travel and Papa Joe's Pipe: Essays on the Human Side of Science* (1984), *A Modern-Day Yankee in a Connecticut Court, and Other Essays on Science* (1986), *Origins: The Lives and Worlds of Modern Cosmologists* (with Roberta Brawer, 1990), *Ancient Light: Our Changing View of the Universe* (1991), *Great Ideas in Physics* (1992), *Time for the Stars: Astronomy in the 1990s* (1992), *Einstein's Dreams* (1993), *Good Benito* (1995), *Dance for Two: Selected Essays* (1996), *The Diagnosis* (2000), and *The Best American Essays* (edited, with Robert Atwan, 2000).

For my purpose here, I restrict my comments to Lightman's style as it manifests itself in "The Physicist as Novelist," occasionally pointing out atypical techniques. The interested reader might explore his other works, which are equally mind-expanding.

Lightman's introductory paragraphs employ a stylistic device that humanizes subject matter: anecdotes relating to his days as a graduate student of Kip Thorne. Lightman saw a stack of reprints of one of Thorne's essays that had won an award for popular science writing and found that discovery interesting. Here was a prestigious scientist (who, despite the fact that he was in regular contact with famous scientists, instructed his students to call him "Kip") spending time writing for the public. And, when Lightman and a fellow graduate student got back the draft of their first scientific paper, it was "drowning in red ink." Thorne had also attached a note: "How your papers are accepted, and the impact they have, will depend heavily on how they are written." Professional communicators would do well to heed Thorne's advice.

In his second paragraph Lightman provides further background on how he came to make the transition between physicist and novelist. From his childhood on, he had

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PCS Newsletter

## From the Editor

May/June 2003

Rudy Joenk

**This Issue**

Thanks to Kirk St.Amant, who taught technical communication in Ukraine during the summer of 2001 (*Newsletter*, November/December 2001), two new authors with European backgrounds, Marina Karapetyan and Thei Zervaki, offer reminders about culture and writing for successful international communication, and Professor Grammar reminds us about jargon.

**AdCom**

The administrative committee is meeting 17-18 May (about the time you receive this *Newsletter*) in Dallas, Texas, prior to the STC conference. The final meeting, including the annual election, will be 19-20 September in Lake Buena Vista, Florida, prior to IPCC 2003. PCS members are welcome at AdCom meetings.

**Potpourri**

Apropos Net Notes in this issue ("Do You Blog"), marketing companies are wooing bloggers to include links on their sites to various products. This is not a case of marketers posing as ordinary bloggers, so a debate is on about the ethics of masking marketing in supposedly independent blogs. *New York Times*, 27 March 2003.

As a way to help himself learn English, India-born Anu Garg began to distribute a word a day via e-mail, including definition, pronunciation, and roots. Some of the words are fairly common; some are quite obscure. He now has nearly 600 000 subscribers: *http://wordsmith.org/awad*.

World Wide Words (*http://www.worldwidewords.org*) is a weekly e-mail newsletter about international English edited by Michael Quinion who not only elucidates topical words, weird words, and phrases but also answers questions and provides amusing examples of communication as the following three items demonstrate.

"It was one of the dullest speeches I ever heard. The Agee woman told us for three quarters of an hour how she came to write her beastly book, when a simple apology was all that was required." P. G. Wodehouse in *The Girl in Blue*, 1960, via World Wide Words, 22 March 2003.

"If a member does not follow this code by engaging in gross misconduct, membership in ACM may be terminated." *Communications of the ACM*, February 2003, reported by John O'Flaherty in the Internet newsgroup *alt.usage.English*, via World Wide Words, 15 February 2003.

"People think that I can teach them style. What stuff it all is! Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style." Matthew Arnold, 1898, via World Wide Words, 16 November 2002.

**Unimaginative place names:**
*Fairview*—there are 141 U.S. municipalities with this name in 43 states;
*Jackson Township*—there are 47 with this name in Indiana alone;
*Mill Creek*—there are 1365 of these.
**Imaginative place names:**
Tyewhoppety, Oklahoma;
Tizzle Flats, Virginia;
Utsaladdy, Washington.
By Frank R. Abate in *Verbatim* magazine, reprinted in *Verbatim* (book edited by Erin McKean, 2001).

**Pleonasties** (a pleonasty is a response to a pleonasm):
*Deflected away*—Where else can it be deflected?
*End result*—How final can you get?

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PCS Newsletter

President's Column

Volume 47 • Number 3

Elizabeth Weise Moeller

# Moving Forward

After almost eight months of discussing changing the name of the society, we're moving forward. As you all know from the letter you received, the AdCom voted not to continue name change discussions. The reasons were varied, but fewer than half of the AdCom members felt that PCS should change its name at this time. That does not mean we wasted this time. Out of these discussions came a new mission statement and a better refinement of our goals as a society.

**Society Goals**

In the last issue of the *Newsletter* I included our new mission statement. In this issue I share my vision for how those goals will be met. This is by no means a comprehensive list (I only have 1000 or so words to work with). However, there are projects I would like to see up and running within the next eight to 12 months, some sooner if possible.

The mission statement says:

*To foster a community dedicated to understanding and promoting effective communication in engineering, scientific, and other technical environments.*

*To this end, the IEEE Professional Communication Society endeavors to:*

- *Advance technical and scientific communication as an essential element of engineering;*
- *Help engineers, scientists, and other technically oriented professionals to communicate better in the workplace—both in speaking and in writing, both verbally and nonverbally;*
- *Promote and disseminate best practices and research results on the development, maintenance, delivery, and management of technical content; and*
- *Promote and facilitate leading-edge education and training of engineers, scientists, and other technically oriented professionals in communication theory and practice.*

PCS exists to help technical professionals with their communication skills.

***Foster a Community***

The PCS Web site is the first place to start while fostering a community. One of my major goals for our May AdCom meeting is to reorganize the site content and develop a community where members can share information in a password-protected environment. We are planning on adding tools, such as a resource section that members can use as a one-stop location for communication resources for both technical and communication professionals. The primary goal of this work, however, is to add another benefit for members. Only members of PCS will have access to the "meat" of the information. Our Web site receives almost 15 000 requests for pages per month from over 6000 distinct hosts. Over 500 people per month access the *Newsletter* online. The Web site is almost three years old; it's time for an upgrade and reorganization to better serve our current situation and future goals.

***Advance technical and scientific communication*** *as an essential element of engineering*

To advance technical and scientific communication we need to first make sure engineers know we are here and have the resources to assist with their day-to-day communication tasks. Our first step will be more publicity within the IEEE. We are working from the society end, but you can help, too. Talk to your section leaders. Find out if they would be interested in having a PCS speaker at a meeting. We have a list of available speakers who can put together presentations tailored to your section's needs.

***Help engineers, scientists, and other technically oriented professionals to communicate better in the workplace*** *—both in speaking and in writing, both verbally and nonverbally*

The vision for the new resources section of the Web site is a one-stop shop of links to useful information for professionals who need to communicate. In addition, the new community aspect of the Web site will enable you to discuss your issues with others who have encountered similar situations and challenges. This *Newsletter* also provides a number of columns that people save and refer to on a regular basis.

***Promote and disseminate best practices and research results*** *on the development, maintenance, delivery, and management of technical content*

There are a number of avenues for this information already. The *IEEE Transactions on Professional Commu-*

*nication* is an archival-quality, peer-reviewed journal. The articles showcase research in the field to help you understand usability, readability, and the latest technical communication techniques. Much of this information is then distilled and reproduced in the *Newsletter* from the perspective of the practitioner. In development is an electronic newsletter to bring some of this information to you faster. It will be an opt-in e-mail list. Watch the Web site for more information.

***Promote and facilitate leading-edge education and training*** *of engineers, scientists, and other technically oriented professionals in communication theory and practice*

Having graduated from two universities known for their engineering, I know a lot of engineers. One of the most interesting communication stories I have heard was from a friend who was a support specialist for a well-known computer company. He would solve problems in his specific area and then write up his solution for his superiors. He did not realize that those were being archived for others in the company until he received a call from a colleague who basically said that he understood my friend had solved the problem, but he had no idea how my friend did it based on the way the report was written. My friend told me it was at that point that he understood the need for good communication skills.

This is why PCS exists: to help technical professionals with their communication skills, whether spoken or written. In development are pilot Web-based education programs. PCS just signed an agreement with RGI Learning (*http://www.rgilearning.com*) to provide a discount to PCS and IEEE members on the purchase of RGI online courses. Visit the PCS Web site (*http://www.ieeepcs.org*) for complete details. Finally, we have a list of available trainers who can customize an instructor-led course for groups and organizations.

Word of mouth is the best way to let people know about PCS and the services we provide—and are about to provide. Share your *Newsletter*, pass the conference announcement around the office, inquire about the educational opportunities, or volunteer. These are all ways you can help PCS continue to grow and prosper.

## FLY-SPECK, *n.*

The prototype of punctuation. It is observed by Garvinus that the systems of punctuation in use by the various literary nations depended originally upon the social habits and general diet of the flies infesting the several countries. These creatures, which have always been distinguished for a neighborly and companionable familiarity with authors, liberally or niggardly embellish the manuscripts in process of growth under the pen, according to their bodily habit, bringing out the sense of the work by a species of interpretation superior to, and independent of, the writer's powers. The "old masters" of literature—that is to say, the early writers whose work is so esteemed by later scribes and critics in the same language—never punctuated at all, but worked right along free-handed, without that abruption of the thought which comes from the use of points. (We observe the same thing in children today, whose usage in this particular is a striking and beautiful instance of the law that the infancy of individuals reproduces the methods and stages of development characterizing the infancy of races.) In the work of these primitive scribes all the punctuation is found, by the modern investigator with his optical instruments and chemical tests, to have been inserted by the writers' ingenious and serviceable collaborator, the common housefly—*Musca maledicta.*

— Ambrose Bierce in
*The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911.

## Alan Lightman

*(continued from page 1)*


Ronald J. Nelson

"double passions in the sciences and in the arts." Several years after receiving his Ph.D. degree in theoretical physics, he "came out of the closet with [his] literary interests and began writing popular essays on science." He experimented with the essay form, "stretching its limits" into something that could be called "fables—half fact, half fiction, still dealing with science but in an oblique way. Science as metaphor. Science as a way to view the world" (note the deliberate fragments). He "left solid ground altogether and drifted into full-blown fiction" about 10 years ago.

This two-paragraph introduction leads masterfully into a discussion of the key similarities and differences between scientists and humanists as Lightman sees them. His primary technique is comparison-contrast, perhaps the most useful tool for enabling a person (professional communicators included) to discover common as well as distinguishing points between objects or concepts. It is, I believe, the basis of how people (readers included) learn. For example, a woman sees a man. Then she sees a second man. She consciously or semiconsciously realizes that the second man is taller, shorter, or the same height as the first man. And so with other traits. In other words, the two men are the same, only different. That is the principle of the multiple. [For a thorough and graphic discussion of the concept of the multiple, see chapter 6 (Multiples in Space and Time) of Edward R. Tufte's *Visual Explanations*, 1997.]

Thereby, Lightman engages the reader's mind in learning about the physicist and the novelist. He first gets at the notion of community. Whereas "an active scientist stays in close touch with dozens of other scientists," "writers work in isolation." Then he elaborates on the latter, employing the stylistically elegant technique of relating words (underlined) that solidify coherence and give the reader a memorable visual image: "A novelist lives in the desert. He has evidence of the existence of other novelists mainly through the occasional footprints he stumbles upon, in the form of books and reviews. He reads other writers' books with admiration and jealousy, then goes back to his one-man tent. That's the community of writers."

> Scientific texts ideally would be so concise and clear and exact that they would need to be read only once.

Lightman refers to a second distinction as the "naming of things": "Roughly speaking, the scientist tries to name things and the artist tries to avoid naming things. There are many facets to this distinction." When scientists name a thing (like an electron), they attempt to enclose it in a box, identifying its various properties precisely. The novelist, though, deals with imponderables like love and fear that defy restriction (there are so many kinds of love, an expansive concept). Stylistically, Lightman distinguishes concepts and illustrates their similarities and differences in an extended way.

Moreover, scientific texts ideally would be "so concise and clear and exact" (note the polysyndeton) that they would need to be read only once, whereas an ideal literary text would have to be read many times because of the changes in "the complexities and ambiguities of human behavior." Professional communicators write documents that incorporate both these aspects: exactitude and flexibility.

In addition, scientific writing involves a more or less structured approach with a reasoned argument; fiction writing involves ideas, but "you want to state your idea baldly but to let it seep in slowly and gradually, around the edges, so that your reader must sweep through the terrain over and over again searching for meaning, haunted." As Lightman says, "The difference between these two kinds of writing can be stated in terms of the body. In expository writing, you want to get to your reader's brain. In creative writing, you want to bypass the brain and go for the stomach or heart" (note the point-of-view shift).

Scientists attempt to frame problems in terms of questions and answers: "…much of the game of science is

to pose a problem with enough precision and clarity to guarantee a solution. The world is then built, piece by piece, from these solvable problems." But artists know that, for their activities, "definite answers don't exist. Ideas in a novel or painting are complicated with the intrinsic ambiguity of human nature. Indeed, the exquisite contradictions and uncertainties of the human heart make life interesting." Thus, "for many artists, the question is much more important than the answer."

There is a difference in mind-set as well. As a scientist Lightman pursued solutions with a confidence that he would succeed; as a novelist he feels that he is not in control, that characters can surprise him as he works out various tensions. For him, characters are created as a result of the tension between certainty and uncertainty. And ideas in fiction—unlike in science—must be introduced subtly: "It is better that a novelist's intellectual intentions not barge through the front entrance, but slip quietly through a back door." Professional communicators can learn from the previous sentence that eloquence can emerge by using synonyms and antonyms effectively.

Lightman spends time discussing commonalities, too. Creative imagination and inventiveness belong to both scientists and novelists. And both must pursue the truth: "…novelists must conform to a certain body of recognized truth about human nature, just as physicists must adhere to truth about nonhuman nature." Lightman illustrates these points by grounding them in Einstein's "free invention" of the mind as it relates to the special theory of relativity and in James Joyce's magnificent story "The Dead" (from *Dubliners*). After providing some plot summary of the Joyce story, he offers several possible endings and shows how the ending Joyce chose rings true to human nature. Professional communicators, of course, also must take care that what they write rings true.

> How your papers are accepted, and the impact they have, will depend heavily on how they are written.

Physicists and novelists share the creative moment that sometimes happens after long involvement with a task. Both get so deeply immersed in what they are doing that they sometimes lose themselves: "What a strange and beautiful paradox of creativity, that we dive deep into ourselves to create something, drawing on what is most private and personal, and completely lose ourselves in the process. When I am writing, I forget where I am and who I am. I become a pure spirit; I melt into all the other spirits who have ever created. These moments, I think, are the closest a human being can come to immortality." Lightman shows how scientists and novelists share these rare, special moments when they have richly rewarding creative moments, characterized by an absolute sense of certainty regarding the rightness of those moments. Such involvement is a compulsion that is both blessing and burden: "A blessing because the creative life is filled with beauty and not given to everyone, a burden because the call is unrelenting and can drown out the rest of life."

Lightman concludes the essay with another anecdote about Kip Thorne (a solid stylistic technique). Thorne had invited his graduate students to his mountain cabin. While they busied themselves with various tasks, he was sitting off by himself next to a rock, "scribbling quotations, oblivious to the world, happy, doing what he loved more than anything, doing what he must do, blessed and burdened at the same time." If we are fortunate as scientists and humanists, perhaps we too will find such rewarding involvement in the task at hand.

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"About which there is nothing to say, we must remain silent."
— *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

# Creating and Managing Interactivity I: Setting or Revising the Agenda

By Jason Palmeri and Paul Tuten

Newcomers to making persuasive appeals often think the task is unidirectional. "*I have to sell* them this car," he said. "*I've got to convince* my boss to let us undertake this new project," she remarked. Yet a simple fact is often overlooked in planning elaborate pitches: Individuals make buying decisions for *their* reasons, not yours. Effective presenters know how to elicit those desires and use them to offer win-win solutions.

To persuade customers, both internal and external, technical presenters must move beyond conveying information to developing a partnership. In building a relationship, the speaker must make the audience feel that his or her organization can meet their requirements, both in the short term *and* the long term. To this end, presentations should be interactive events in which the audience talks as much as the presenter.

While interactivity is essential, it is also challenging. To start, the presenter must create an environment in which interactivity flourishes and then manage the interactivity to ensure that it serves his or her persuasive purpose. In this column we focus on strategically engaging the audience in setting the agenda. In subsequent columns we will address specific interactive techniques for using technology or visuals, keeping the conversation flowing, and managing difficult or hostile audience members.

Audiences can be fickle. Even with extensive audience analysis and preplanning (an essential preparatory step), it is impossible to know for sure what an audience wants from a presentation on any given day. Thus, at the start of your presentation (or multi-speaker briefing), you should distribute an agenda summarizing the topics you plan to cover. Then you should ask the audience—especially the primary decision maker—if this agenda meets his or her requirements. Key questions include:

- Are there any topics you would like added?
- What topics would you like to discuss in detail?
- What topics would you prefer to discuss in broad terms?
- What major challenges is your organization facing and how do you see us helping you meet those challenges?

Ensure that you give a presentation specifically targeted to the audience.

By having a conversation about the agenda at the start of the talk, you can ensure that you will give a presentation specifically targeted to the audience. Furthermore, that conversation establishes an environment of interactivity, making it clear that you intend to allow the audience to direct the ongoing dialog.

Although you should let the audience have a great deal of influence in deciding the agenda, you should not lose sight of your persuasive purpose. If your primary goal is to convince the audience to purchase or use a particular technological product or service, you should not empower them to take this technology off the agenda entirely. Rather, you should adapt the presentation to address the audience's other interests but still give a broad overview of the technology you are trying to sell. When you give the broad overview you should focus particularly on how this technology could meet the audience's organizational goals. In this way you still leave open the possibility that the audience will be so intrigued by your broad overview that they will then ask for a more detailed discussion.

Of course, in letting the audience set the agenda, the presenter takes a definite risk. The audience may request information that he or she is unable to provide. To address this issue we suggest a team approach in which the speakers collaborate with a master of ceremonies. In addition to introducing the speakers and leading the discussion of agenda setting, the master of ceremonies (MC) is in charge of adapting the agenda to the audience's requirements. Once the presentations are in progress, the MC can leave the room and locate a resource person within his or her organization who can address any of the audience's unexpected concerns. Once the

resource person has been located, the MC can either gather the needed information and report it or ask the resource person to speak to the audience directly (face-to-face or via audio-video conferencing). To be effective in this role the MC should:

- Have enough leverage within the organization to require relatively high-level experts to respond quickly to his or her requests for information or impromptu speaking
- Be able to span organizational boundaries, demonstrating knowledge of key players in various areas of the business
- Anticipate the potential resource people who may be needed for a presentation and alert them to attend or to be on call
- Ensure that audio-video conferencing equipment is available

While an MC can help greatly in adapting an agenda to an audience's requirements, this role is not absolutely necessary. In a solo presentation the speaker can play the MC role as well. When presented with questions he or she cannot answer, the speaker should note them in detail. Then, as soon as possible after the presentation, the speaker should gain answers to the questions and follow up with the audience. In this way the speaker clearly establishes a reputation as a person who responds promptly to customer needs.

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## From the Editor

*(continued from page 2)*

*Foot pedal*—Is that like a hand handle?
By Harold J. Ellner in *Verbatim* magazine, reprinted in *Verbatim* (book edited by Erin McKean, 2001).

### Information for Authors

One thousand words makes a nice page-and-a-half article, though longer and shorter articles may be appropriate. Proposals for periodic columns are also welcome. Write about what you know, things that you're familiar with. If you live outside North America, consider writing about technical communication in your country. You needn't be a PCS member to contribute.

If you use a wp program, **keep your formatting simple;** multiple fonts and sizes, customized paragraphing and line spacing, personalized styles, etc. have to be filtered out before being recoded in *Newsletter* style. Headers, footers, and tables lead the casualty list. **Embed only enough specialized formatting and highlighting (boldface, italics, bullets) to show me your preferences.**

If you borrow text—more than a fair-use sentence or two—from previously published material, you are responsible for obtaining written permission for its use. Ditto for graphics. Always give credit to the author or artist.

The *Newsletter* issues on our Web site (*http://www.ieeepcs.org/newsletter.html*) can be used as examples. Issues are posted about one month after distribution of the print version and now have active e-mail, Web, and table-of-contents links.

I prefer to receive articles by e-mail; most WordPerfect, Word (except XP), RTF (rich text format), and ASCII files are acceptable. My addresses are in the boilerplate at the bottom of page 2 along with our copyright notice.

### Deadlines

The 15th day of each odd-number month is the deadline for publication in the succeeding odd-number month. For example, the deadline is 15 July for the September/October issue, 15 September for the November/December issue, etc. You won't be far off (and never late) if you observe the Ides of July, September, November, and so on.

PCS Newsletter

Volume 47 • Number 3

## Good Intent, Poor Outcome

Jean-luc Doumont

# Audi LZS 936 Has Lights On

Asked recently to give a talk on the effective use of electronic mail at a nearby research center in microelectronics, I was not sure whether to accept. Their researchers were struggling with overflowing in-boxes and I had much empathy for this problem. Yet I had no secret to share, no magic to sell: The advice I had to offer boiled down to common sense, discipline, and reciprocation. Still, even if they knew what to do, they were clearly not all doing it, so a bit of pep talk would not hurt. Here, then, are the guidelines I offered them and propose to you. They may look like they are about going easy on your colleagues' in-boxes, not your own, but we are all someone else's colleague, so if we all want to receive less e-mail, we might try sending less e-mail to start with.

For most of us a sizeable share of e-mail overabundance is unsolicited commercial e-mail (junk e-mail). Such messages are unpleasant but not so hard to recognize and remove, either by hand or with automated filters. Still, filters are not perfect, so you may want to inspect filtered messages before they are deleted to recover possible false positives. To prevent junk e-mail, avoid making your e-mail address available too easily, as on a static Web site, where it can be collected automatically. (To fool robots, consider spelling it out, as in "jl dot doumont at ieee dot org.")

Often, however, most of the unwanted messages do not come from outside, but from within the organization.

The undiscerning, if well meant, use of a company-wide distribution list remains the main generator of messages perceived as unnecessary. Almost every day at many companies I know, someone notices a car with the lights still on in the parking lot and sends a company-wide e-mail about it ("Audi LZS 936 has lights on"). With a thousand employees in the company, such a message has an efficiency of 0.1 percent; it is indeed useless to 99.9 percent of its recipients. A more effective approach is to contact the receptionist, who can look up the license plate in the company database, then contact the right employee about it. A similar example of "good intent, poor outcome" is this employee's sending a Merry Christmas e-mail to all his colleagues—imagine all thousand of them doing so on the same day.

> To receive less e-mail, try sending less e-mail to start with.

Distribution lists need not be as large as a thousand people to be abused. Perhaps the misuse I most often witness in my own in-box is an inappropriate "reply to all." For example, when someone asks a group of people to send her their availability so she can schedule a meeting, there is no need to reply to all. Only one person needs the information at this time and she will let the others know later when the meeting is scheduled.

Besides, as a result of a reply to all, many recipients unnecessarily end up on the *Copy to* list on a just-in-case basis. Overly prudent junior employees thus tend to copy their boss on every single message, hence needlessly cluttering his or her in-box.

To reduce unnecessary e-mail, be highly selective of your recipients. Address your messages only to those who must take action, such as make a decision or answer a question. Copy your messages to those who must be kept informed, but need not act. Those recipients often need to be informed of the outcome of a discussion only, not of the ongoing details of it, so do not copy them too soon. Sometimes they deserve a separate message summarizing the discussion (if useful) and stating its outcome.

To reduce unnecessary e-mail further, select the content carefully, too: Prefer one thoughtful message to several quick-and-dirty back-and-forth ones. You may encourage your colleagues to do the same by replying with a delay (half a day, perhaps?) to their messages. By refraining from replying instantly, you make the exchange look less like an oral conversation and more like written mail, so they are more likely to write thoughtfully.

Besides cutting what is unnecessary, we might want to add what is useful. Among the messages I never mind receiving are those that reassure me about what recipients do with what I have sent—a mere acknowledgment ("Got it; thank you") or an idea of what I can expect and when ("I'll ask Gini and let you know by Monday").

*Dr. Jean-luc Doumont teaches and provides advice on professional speaking, writing, and graphing. For over 15 years, he has helped audiences of all ages, backgrounds, and nationalities structure their thoughts and construct their communication (http://www.JLConsulting.be).*

PCS Newsletter

Tools of the Trade

May/June 2003

Peter Reimold and Cheryl Reimold

# Tips for Making Writing Easier

**Part 2: Narrow Your Questions, Shape Your Answers**

In the last column we proposed a quick and easy way to approach a short piece of writing ("The Five-Minute Miracle," January/February 2003 *Newsletter*). Briefly, you set up a conversation with your reader in which you begin with your main message and then answer your reader's probable questions about that message. Your main message will require only the opening sentence or paragraph (from one to three sentences in all). The bulk of your writing will consist of your answers to the questions you think your readers would have. Now we must see how to make those answers easy to write and useful to read.

Build your e-mail or report out of solid answers to questions.

**Narrow Your Reader's Questions**

The first step to easy answers is finding the right questions. The right questions are the ones that tell the readers what they most want and need to know. It is worth spending some time considering what questions are most important, so as not to waste more time answering others that lead you away from the main reasons for your report. For example, suppose you are writing a progress report with the following main message:

*Although phase one of the project was completed two months behind schedule, we now have the data needed to begin phase two.*

What do you think your reader's first question would be? The question that immediately pops to mind might be, "Why were you so late finishing phase one?"

That could be a large and difficult question to answer. It could lead you into a litany of explanations, accusations, justifications, apologies, and excuses for the delay that quickly fills up a full page. Is it really the most valuable question? After all, neither you nor your reader will benefit from an annotated list of all the obstacles that came between you and the completion of phase one. If you start with that, you will irritate the reader with all your self-justifying details while giving your report a negative cast by drawing attention to all the things that went wrong before.

Instead of going with the first question that occurs to you, stop to ask yourself what your reader most wants to know. In this case it might be, "When do you expect to complete the project (or, at least, phase two)?" Answering that question first will tell the reader what he or she wants to know right up front. It will give your report a positive, forward-looking approach. Finally, it will leave room for you to explain the reasons for the phase one delay further on, in one or two sentences. Once you have shown that you are on a planned, positive course, the reader will be more accepting of the previous problems that now appear as history.

**Structure Your Answers**

The best structure for answering your reader's probable questions is this:

*Key Point + Backup*

It gives the reader the answer immediately and then makes that answer credible by bolstering it with an example, an illustration, or an explanation.

This approach does not come naturally. Our tendency seems to be the reverse: Build up evidence and then present the conclusion. Although this progression makes sense in science and logic, it doesn't work well for business writing. Why not? Well, think of your own expectations as a reader: Do you want to know the answer to your question at the beginning or the end of the section?

To write effectively in business, we must remember to tell the reader the answer first and then explain the reasoning behind it.

In the example, you would begin your answer with a clear statement of when and how you hope to complete the project or its second phase. One or at most two sentences should suffice. Then you would follow with your reasons for this assertion.

Yes, in one sense this method is harder, because it forces you to make clear, committed statements. That's what you look for in the writing you receive, isn't it?

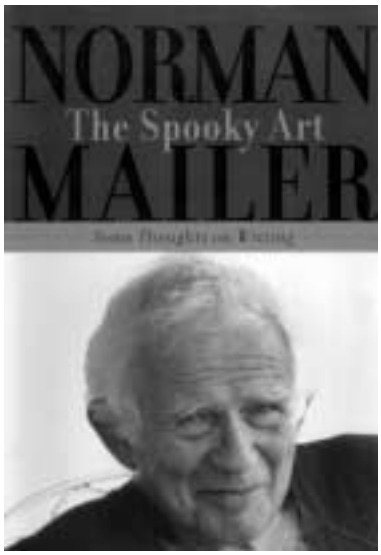
Try it, and, as always, please let us know how it works for you: *perccom @aol.com*.

*(continued on page 14)*

# Spooky Art

By Michael Brady

*If I had to give young writers advice, I'd say don't listen to writers talking about writing.* American playwright Lillian Hellman's caveat is concise and arguably correct most of the time. But there are exceptions, and we of PCS hope that this *Newsletter* is one. And now there's a blockbuster exception: Norman Mailer's *The Spooky Art*,* published this past January 31 on his 80th birthday.




It stands on a stack of some 30 bold works that started with *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), regarded as one of the finest American novels to come out of World War II. But *The Spooky Art* is not fiction. As its subtitle, *Some Thoughts on Writing*, implies, it's the writer talking about his craft in a compilation of "literary gleanings, fulminations, *pensées*, gripes, insights, regrets and affirmations, a few excuses, several insults, and a number of essays," some previously published as long as 50 years ago and some new for this book, all woven together into a unified whole from which any writer, of fiction or nonfiction, can benefit.

The book is divided into two almost equal parts. Part I is about writing; it provides the professional wallop most relevant to our craft. Part II is about genre and colleagues, the juicy bits on the practice of a novelist. Alone, Part I recommends *The Spooky Art* as an in-depth handbook of the workings of the writing mind. In it are enough one-liners to paper the wall above your desk: "I learned to write by writing." "The popularity of bad writing is analogous to the enjoyment of fast food." "It's as hard to learn to write as play the piano." "Style is character." "A writer, like a skier, must have confidence in technique." "In a large part, writing may be an instinctive process." The title of the book comes on page 70, just before the halfway mark in Part I: "Writing is spooky. There is no routine of an office to keep you going, only the blank page each morning…." Advice abounds, from when to rewrite to when to use the first versus the third person (like the difference between major and minor keys in music).

The literary and cultural establishments classify Mailer as controversial, and much that has been written about him tends to be critical; the entry on him in the current edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* focuses on failings. But as a writer speaking to other writers, in *The Spooky Art* he comes across as forthright but generous. Credit is given where credit is due. One of the greatest first sentences is that of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; one of the greatest last sentences is that of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. In Part II, the short chapter on *Huckleberry Finn—Alive at 100* convincingly argues that it is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, American novels ever.

And throughout there are hints of engineering savvy: a sentence that cannot be shortened has tensile strength, an obsession is like a magnetic field. Indeed, Mailer is of our ilk: His degree from Harvard in 1943 is in aeronautical engineering. All the more reason to read *The Spooky Art* now and return to it in the years to come.

* Norman Mailer, *The Spooky Art, Some Thoughts on Writing*, New York, Random House, 2003, 330 pages, hardcover, 0-394-53648-7, USD 24.95.

## Mystery Photo

The IEEE History Center maintains a photographic archive of more than 3300 images. From time to time images are donated without any identification. The Center now has a Web page that features a mystery photograph challenge each month: *http://www.ieee.org/organizations/history_center/mystery_photo.html*.

Wanted are details such as type of equipment, approximate dates, manufacturer, how or where used, and anything else of historical interest. E-mail your input to *history@ieee.org*, or you can fill out an online form.

# Writing in English for Global Audiences

By Thei Zervaki

When you write in English for international audiences, you need to develop an audience profile for yourself. In particular, you have to show consistency and clarity in your style and expression, and you have to be sensitive to the expectations of other cultures. These efforts make your documents easier to understand and easier to translate and will therefore decrease the cost of localizing a project.

Some recommendations for writing effectively in English for global audiences are:

### *1. Use plain English and be clear in your writing style*

To achieve this, writers should:

- Use short and complete sentences in correct English
- Use positive terms (*do*'s rather than *don't*s)
- Use relative pronouns
- Use simple punctuation
- Use advanced terminology sparingly
- Define abbreviations and acronyms

English allows writers to omit relative pronouns in some cases such as, "The book [that] you showed me is very interesting." Because the relative pronoun *that* is not strictly necessary, some organizational writing divisions routinely omit it in the interest of being concise. Many other languages, however, do not allow the same kind of omission, and the lack of the pronoun *that* can cause problems for translators.

Acronyms and abbreviations are heavily used in certain industries and sectors, such as telecommunications. As a general writing principle, however, you should always completely write out the meaning of an abbreviation or an acronym when you first use it and include the abbreviation or acronym in parentheses directly after it. For example, "They must open up, document, and actively support their application programming interfaces (APIs) to allow third-party suppliers to plug into the core content management system (CMS)."

### *2. Be culturally neutral*

To achieve this, writers should:

- Avoid analogies, metaphors, and similes
- Avoid idioms, neologisms, and slang
- Avoid humor
- Use globally accepted icons and symbols

Humor doesn't travel well.

Slang consists of vocabulary that is casual or playful. It is part of one's culture and often originates in television, movies, and political events, yet it should be avoided as much as possible when writing for translation. Not only does slang almost certainly cause translation problems, but it also can cause your writing to quickly become obsolete.

Just as with slang, the life of a humorous concept or expression can be very short. Much humor is extremely topical and, one year later, that same topic may no longer seem so funny. Using humor in formal writing is also dangerous because even people who share the same language fail to find the same things funny, and sometimes find them offensive. Humor doesn't travel well.

### *3. Use the Plain English Network as a writing guide*

The Plain English Network (*http://www.plainlanguage.gov*) is a U.S.-government-wide group of volunteers working to improve communication between the federal government and the public. Their Web site contains many resources to help writers achieve the goal of clear communication, and their three main principles are:

- Be reader-oriented
- Use natural expressions
- Make your document visually appealing

By following the three numbered steps in this article, writers can create more effective English-language documents for global audiences.

*Thei Zervaki is a professional translator and linguist based in London. She is author of Globalize, Localize, Translate: Tips and Resources for Success. Her organization, The Globalization Factory (http://www.globalizationfactory.com), offers linguistic consulting and strategy, cost analysis and outsourcing for translation and localization, and e-courses. She holds a B.A. degree from the Aristotelian University of Thessalonika, Greece, and master's degrees from the Free University of Brussels and Mons University, Belgium; tzervaki@hotmail.com.*

# EngiComm Special Interest Group

By Julia M. Williams

What makes engineering communication unique? For those of us who teach technical communication only to engineering students, this question can be answered in two ways. First, engineering students are majoring in engineering, not technical communication. Consequently their focus is usually on the bottom line, and their question in class might be, "How will this assignment help me in my job as an engineer?" Second, the engineering student population is diverse and global, like the profession of engineering itself. As a result, teachers of engineering communication must confront ESL (English as a second language) issues in their classrooms. For these and other reasons engineering communication faculty have a new resource for information and support: the EngiComm Special Interest Group (SIG).

EngiComm comprises technical communication faculty at a variety of institutions who teach engineering students as their primary responsibility. The members of EngiComm share resources, professional opportunities, and ideas to further the work of engineering communication. We meet annually and keep in touch through the year via the EngiComm listserv.

EngiComm was organized in 1999 by engineering communication faculty, and the first meeting of the group was held at the College Composition and Communication Conference (CCCC) in Chicago, Illinois. There participants met other faculty engaged in teaching communication to engineering students at a variety of institutions: Cornell University, Iowa State University, University of Missouri at Rolla, Northwestern University, to name only a few. Despite the differences in location and institutional profile, participants at EngiComm recognized that they shared important concerns. Since 1999 EngiComm has met each year at CCCC, and each year the number of participants has grown. A list of participants from the 2002 and 2003 meetings and their institutional affiliations is available at: *http://www.rose-hulman.edu/~williams/engicom/*.

An engineering communication resource for faculty information and support

This year at EngiComm attendees explored several issues of concern to faculty in the field of engineering communication. The format of the meeting was small-group discussion in four topic threads:

- *ESL* issues in the teaching of engineering communication
- Establishing *collaborations* between engineering communication faculty and engineering faculty or industry
- Successful *assignments* for the engineering communication or engineering classroom
- Current *research* projects in engineering communication

Each thread was moderated by one of the organizers of this year's EngiComm SIG. Participants in the *assignments* thread shared successful assignments developed on their campuses. They also planned to link successful assignments to the EngiComm Web site (*http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~engicomm/*) so that good ideas could be shared among institutions. Participants in the *collaborations* thread discussed on-going collaborations between academia and industry in such fields as civil engineering, the pharmaceutical industry, and aerospace engineering. The moderators took notes for all topic threads that will be shared through the EngiComm e-mail listserve in the months ahead.

The CCCC attracts many technical communication faculty each year and thus provides a good place for EngiComm members to connect. Beginning in 2002 EngiComm has also been scheduled for the International Professional Communication Conferences, a place where many engineering communication faculty and practitioners meet. This year EngiComm will host a meeting in Orlando at IPCC 2003, and the hope is that faculty who do not customarily attend CCCC will have a chance to get to know their colleagues in the field of engineering communication.

Currently an increasing number of engineering programs require com-

munication courses for their majors. In addition, the field of engineering communication presents faculty with unique concerns and issues. For these reasons EngiComm provides a place for both experienced and novice teachers of engineering communication to meet and share the best ideas for the classroom. We hope to see you in Orlando for EngiComm 2003 at IPCC!

*The author is associate professor of English and coordinator of technical communication at Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Terre Haute, Indiana. In 1996 she developed the campus-wide engineering communication program, which currently assists all engineering students to develop their communication skills in a variety of technical and nontechnical courses. Her articles on writing assessment, electronic portfolios, and ABET have appeared in the Technical Communication Quarterly, Technical Communication, and the International Journal of Engineering Education; julia williams@ieee.org.*

"Bad writers are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin and Greek words are grander than Saxon ones.…The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness."

*— George Orwell*

## None

By Michael Quinion

It's uncertain who started the notion that *none* requires a singular verb, but it's pervasive, in both the U.S. and Britain, and seems to have been drummed into the heads of generations of schoolchildren. However, all the usage guides—and the usage notes in every dictionary that I can find—are unanimous in saying that it's wrong.

The argument stems from a misunderstanding of where the word comes from. People assume that *none* is a condensed form of *no one* or *not one*. As both always take a singular verb, the argument goes, so must *none*. However, the amateur etymologizers have got it slightly but seriously wrong. Our modern form *none* comes from the Old English *nan*. Though this is indeed a contraction of *ne an* (no one), it was inflected in Old English and had different forms in singular and plural, showing that it was commonly used both ways; King Alfred used it in the plural as far back as the year 888.

The big *Oxford English Dictionary* has a whole section on the plural form of *none*, pointing out that it is frequently used to mean "no persons" (with writers preferring "no one" when they mean the singular) and that historical records show that its use in the plural is actually more common than in the singular. There are examples cited in the entry from many of the best English writers (and there's also an instance in the Authorized King James Version of the Bible: "None of these things move me," from Acts, chapter 20, verse 24). On modern usage, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* says, "It appears that writers generally make it singular or plural according to whatever their idea is when they write."

Such writers, myself included, follow the sense: We use the plural or singular form according to whether it's one or many things that we're writing about. This grammatical construction, which is based on sense rather than form, has the grand name of notional agreement or notional concord and is very common (so common that we often don't notice we're doing it).

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## Tools of the Trade

*(continued from page 10)*

*Cheryl and Peter Reimold have been teaching communication skills to engineers, scientists, and business people for 20 years. Their firm, PERC Communications (+1 914 725 1024, perccom@aol.com), offers businesses consulting and writing services, as well as customized in-house courses on writing, presentation skills, and on-the-job communication skills. Visit their Web site at http://www.allaboutcommunication.com.*

# International Business Communication Basics

By Marina Karapetyan

The business world tends to operate internationally these days. This trend expands cross-border interactions and raises the issue of understanding differently encoded cultural messages. A lack of cultural awareness often impedes the negotiating process because words and actions can be easily misinterpreted in terms of specific cultural expectations.

Both sides usually bear responsibility for a failure.

To interact successfully with coworkers and clients from other cultures, it is necessary to consider a series of factors: In business we don't deal only with individuals, we also encounter cultural differences on the national, organizational, functional, and team levels. Business is run differently in various cultural contexts. One must respect others' cultural values, be open to accepting the differences, and be willing to work for better mutual understanding. Both sides usually bear responsibility for a failure.

I believe most international business problems occur because of indirect or implicit communication. That is, people of some cultures who don't commonly express themselves verbally often depend on nonverbal cues instead; however, nonverbal signs vary from culture to culture. Further, ambiguity also can appear in spoken messages because people of various experiences and cultures have different perceptions of reality. Eventually, though, the conflict has to be resolved through exchanging verbal information.

Culture is generally viewed on a much broader basis than communication only. It's a complex of values, beliefs, priorities, attitudes, and expectations specific to a certain group of people. How representatives of various cultures behave in similar situations, what stimulates their actions and affects their decision-making processes, how they settle conflicts, how they achieve their goals, and other characteristics can have a crucial role in conducting international business.

Here are some recommendations for negotiating with people from other cultures:

1. Gain insight by investigating the target cultural background before a meeting, negotiation, or collaboration takes place
2. Consider who your negotiating partners are, what they want, and why they want it
3. Conduct a dialogue to fill information gaps and share cultural information (including beliefs and feelings)
4. Never interpret cultural cues in isolation or apart from the context in which they occur
5. Use your own sources to analyze situations where misunderstandings occur

Further reading: Richard R. Mead, *Cross-Cultural Management Communication*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1990; Joerg Schmitz, *Cultural Orientations Guide, 3rd ed., The Roadmap to Building Cultural Competence*, New Jersey, Princeton Training Press, 2003.

*The author's major field is applied linguistics and she has taught business English at Yerevan State University in the Republic of Armenia since 1993. She is currently attending the University of Colorado at Boulder as a visiting scholar and a fellow of the Junior Faculty Development Program (sponsored by the American Councils for International Education) and is also an administrative assistant at the Spring International Language Institute at CU Denver; marina_karapetyan@yahoo.com.*

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If you need further proof that the human race is doomed through stupidity, here are some label instructions on consumer goods:

- On most brands of Christmas lights:
  "For indoor or outdoor use only."
- On a child's superman costume:
  "Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly."
- On Sainsbury's peanuts:
  "Warning: Contains nuts."

# Do You Blog?

By Elizabeth Weise Moeller

*The dream behind the Web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information.*[1]

Unfortunately, sharing that information on the Web was not very easy—until recently. During the Web's infancy, people needed to know HTML to be able to publish a Web page. Eventually, programs such as Macromedia Dreamweaver and Microsoft FrontPage were developed to provide a visual interface to Web site development. Then developers started creating content-management tools so that people did not need to know HTML or purchase Dreamweaver to update a Web site.

In August 1999 Pyra Labs released Blogger (*http://www.blogger.com*, recently acquired by Google). This was the start of *blogs* (short for Web log), which Dave Winer defines as Personal Web Publishing Communities.[2] Blogs contain the personal views of their authors, displayed on the Web, and are communities. Blogs rarely stand alone. They are all interconnected somehow, often linking to each other, and cover just about any topic you can think of in a diary format. Some blogs are informative in nature, some are personal (reading like a diary), some are just random thoughts throughout the day. Most blogs also provide a comment feature that allows visitors to publicly comment on individual postings.

> Blogs are a great way to share information and receive immediate feedback.

Blogging software is inexpensive (often free) and designed to make it easy for just about anyone to use.[3] Because of this, the increase in the number of visitors to two of the largest blogging Web sites quadrupled between July 2002 and January 2003.[4]

I was discussing the concept of blogs with a non-techie friend over dinner one night recently. Her immediate reaction was, "Why?" It was a good question that got me thinking about why people would want to blog and why people would read blogs. It really depends on what people want to say and what others want to read.

Blogs are started for various reasons, but they all have one thing in common: Their authors feel that they have something important to say to someone. Sometimes it's as simple as a parent's sharing information and photos of the day with grandparents across the country. Other times it's deep commentary about the state of the world or some specific issue. Still other times, authors provide a venue to share technical expertise.

Most blogs are personal. Some of the more popular blogging personalities include Wil Wheaton (*http://www.wilwheaton.net*), formerly of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fame; Doc Searls (*http://doc.weblog.com*); and Dave Winer (*http://www.scripting.net*). Their blogs contain news of interest to the blogging community as well as their take on current events and political issues. Conversely, some authors are very humorous. Dave Barry, a U.S.-based humor columnist, uses his blogs (*http://davebarry.blogspot.com*) to share unique news stories from around the world.

Many blogs are technical in nature. Do you want to read the latest information surrounding Wi-Fi and the IEEE 802.11 standards? Visit the blog at *http://80211b.weblogger.com/*. Its primary purpose is to keep people up to date on the world of wireless standards. How about satellite radio? SatRadio (*http://satradio.weblogger.com/*) is your source for information and links. Dan Lewis's SportsBlog (*http://www.dlewis.net/index.php3*) appears to be the place to go for sports conversation and commentary. Can't decide where to start? The Weblog Review (*http://www.weblogreview.com*) covers blogs in a variety of more popular categories (e.g., movies, entertainment, computer,

1 Berners-Lee, Tim (1998). *A Short History of the Web. http://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/ShortHistory.html.*

2 Winer, Dave (2001). *What are Web Logs? http://newhome.weblogs.com/personalWebPublishingCommunities.*

3 Blogging software is available from Pyra Labs (*http://www.blogger.com*) and Moveable Type (*http://www.moveabletype.org*).

4 Liedtke, Michael (2003). "Blogging boom could be big business," *The Saratogian*, 14 March 2003, p. B-1.

humor). Only a small percentage of blogs are listed there, however.

The corporate world is starting to discover their usefulness. Some company intranets include blogs that developers can use to share documents, their commentary, points of view, and other information regarding products they are developing. These are informal discussions; the benefit is their asynchronous nature. As a developer comes across a link or piece of information she or he wants to share, it is posted to the blog. Others can read and comment on it in a public forum. Unlike e-mail discourse, the full discussion is located in one place and there is no need to sort through your in-box or sent mail to find a relevant message. In addition, there is no need to call a meeting to discuss an issue. By the time people meet in person, they have all the information they need to make informed decisions.

The potential exists, however, for a much more global use of blogs. As I write this, the war in Iraq has just begun. This is a war, more than any other war, that most people will watch live on television or through the Internet. Whether this is a good development is another issue. CNN journalist Kevin Sites (*http://www.kevinsites.net*) has created a blog of photos and commentary as he covers the war on the ground in Iraq. The disclaimer clearly states the blog is not funded or endorsed by CNN. It is his personal journal of experiences in Iraq.

I started reading individual blogs, many of which were reporting what had been heard through traditional news media and then offering commentary. It was interesting to read the opinions of a cross-section of the world. It was also very easy to lose track of time while reading and following links from one place to another.

Many blogs are technical in nature.

But, as I was getting caught up in following one link after another, reading reports that may or may not be accurate, I was reminded of part of Vannevar Bush's article[5] from 1945. He was discussing a way to use computers to share information and he said:

*Mendel's concept of the laws of genetics was lost to the world for a generation because his publication did not reach the few who were capable of grasping and extending it; and this sort of catastrophe is undoubtedly being repeated all about us, as truly significant attainments become lost in the mass of the inconsequential.*

With the number of blogs growing at a rapid pace, there is risk of losing the great in the midst of mediocrity. On the other hand, we are already experiencing with the Web (so many sites out there!) that it's hard to keep up with the good mixed in with the mediocre and downright ugly.

Back to my friend. Why would someone read or follow a blog? Because it's there. Because you can really get caught up in what someone is saying. Because it can be a place to gain valuable information. Why would someone create a blog? For the same reasons. In addition, blogs are a great way to share information and receive immediate feedback. The biggest reason right now, though, is that blogging software makes it *very* easy and inexpensive to create your own information space on the Web. With blogs, everyone can have a voice and share information they feel a need to share—just as Tim Berners-Lee said.

*Elizabeth Weise Moeller is president of PCS. She owns Interactive Media Consulting, LLC (+1 518 587 5107, beth@imediaconsult.com), a World Wide Web and Internet training firm in Saratoga Springs, New York, which provides Web site design and Internet training for businesses in the northeast.*

5 Bush, Vannevar (1945). "As We May Think," *Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 176, no. 1, pp. 101-108.

So…You Think You Know Everything?

There are more chickens than people in the world.

The average person's left hand does 56 percent of the typing.



# Keep Jargon in Its Place

Jargon is the technical terminology or characteristic idioms of a special activity or group. In technical information avoid using jargon unless you are writing about the activity or subject to which it applies. Jargon and other forms of figurative language cause many problems for translation tools, human translators, and users who use English editions of information even though English is not their primary language.

For example, the following instances of sports-related jargon are often used in everyday contexts without problems, but these phrases and others like them can cause major clarity problems in technical information:

| Idiom | Sports origin | Meaning |
|---|---|---|
| Bat a thousand | Baseball | Achieve a perfect record |
| End run | Football | Evasive action |
| Full-court press | Basketball | All-out effort to exert pressure |
| Hail Mary | Football | Last-minute, desperate effort |
| Hit the bull's eye | Archery | Be absolutely right |
| Hit the ground running | Parachuting (?) | Start doing productive work immediately |
| Home run | Baseball | Highly successful action |
| Jump the gun | Track, swimming, horse racing | Start too soon |
| Know the ropes | Sailing | Be informed about details of a task |
| Par for the course | Golf | Average or normal amount |
| Saved by the bell | Boxing | Rescued at the last moment |
| Slam dunk | Basketball | Forceful, dramatic move |

Although the Professor is not a sports fan, her teenage nephew has explained where some of these frequently used expressions of sports jargon originate.

 *Professor Grammar is an advisor to the IBM Santa Teresa Laboratory Editing Council. Each month she sends a lesson to the technical writers at the Laboratory. Many of the Professor's lessons are based on tenets described in the Prentice-Hall book Developing Quality Technical Information: A Handbook for Writers and Editors, recently authored by the Council.*

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If this copy of the *Newsletter* you're reading isn't yours, consider joining the Professional Communication Society as either a member of the IEEE and PCS or an affiliate of PCS. Visit our Web page (*http://www.ieeepcs.org/membership.htm*) for information; applications are online. On the other hand, if this copy is yours, please lend it to a friend.

# Workshops for IPCC 2003


Preparations for IPCC 2003 in Orlando are coming along well. About 85 proposals for papers have been received, with a good range of perspectives on the conference theme.

We are delighted to announce an additional guest speaker for the conference, Carol Barnum, who will give a luncheon presentation on Monday, 22 September. Dr. Barnum is a professor of technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia. The title of her latest book, *Usability Testing and Research*, corresponds precisely to the topic of her presentation. We are also making arrangements for a luncheon speaker on 23 September. These will give us an exciting array of interests and talents to learn from during the conference.

Seven workshops will be offered, with topics, presenters, dates, and times as follows. Register for the workshops as soon as possible at the Web site, *http://www.ieeepcs.org/conference/*.

**The Tina-Xena Transformation: Achieving Professional Empowerment By Shaping Knowledge and Adding Business Value to Your Organization (Sunday afternoon, 21 September)**

*Dan Voss and W. C. Wiese, communications managers at Lockheed Martin Missiles and Fire Control, Orlando, with combined 56 years of experience in aerospace technical communication.*

Provides ways to overcome the doormat syndrome for technical and professional communicators, alluding to Tina the technical communicator from the *Dilbert* comic strip and Xena the warrior-princess. Helps empower technical communicators to take a more assertive professional position with clients and customers by leveraging advanced communication technology and the capability to create multi-pronged solutions.

**Usability Principles for Technical Communicators (Sunday afternoon, 21 September)**

*Karla Kitalong is assistant professor at the University of Central Florida, specializing in usability testing and visual communication, and is director of the usability laboratory.*

Highlights the growing usability role of technical communicators in a variety of work contexts. Presents issues, methods, and resources and provides experience in two methods: heuristic inspection and think-aloud protocols.

**Can Everyone "See" Your Web Site? (Monday morning, 22 September)**

*Beth Weise Moeller is owner of Interactive Media Consulting, LLC, with over 10 years' experience creating usable and accessible computer-user interfaces stemming from her research on the design of hypermedia interfaces for optimum user performance.*

Provides guidelines, identifies tools, and demonstrates techniques for making your site accessible to 100 percent of your target audience. Accessibility is crucial for anyone working with government Web sites as well as for many other Web site managers.

**Content Management (Monday morning, 22 September)**

*Ann Rockley is president of The Rockley Group, a consultancy developing enterprise content management and unified content strategies, a frequent contributor to trade and industry publications, and author of Managing Enterprise Content: A Unified Content Strategy.*

Provides principles and guidelines for making the right decisions about content management by determining needs, understanding the content life cycle, selecting the right tools, and managing change.

**Changing the Way We Do Business: Adopting, Defining, and Implementing a New Software Development Life Cycle (Tuesday morning, 23 September)**

*Lisa S. Joiner and Robin L. Zancara are senior technical communicators with IT Services/Customer Relationship Management at Catalina Marketing, St. Petersburg, Florida.*

Describes problems in an IT department in developing software and in documenting and training to it. Tried an in-house training model but settled instead on Microsoft Solutions Framework process model. Provides guidelines and suggestions for adopting a process model in other industrial situations.

**Card-Sorts and Other Idea-Sorting Usability Methods: How to Do Them, How to Analyze the Data, and What They Can Contribute to Your Early Design Process (Wednesday morning, 24 September)**

*Judy Ramey is chair of the technical communication department at the University of Washington and director of the laboratory for usability testing and evaluation.*

Explains how and why to use card-sorting or other idea-sorting exercises in the document design process. Involves audience analysis, selecting from several approaches to designing and conducting sorting exercises, and the analysis of resulting data.

**Making the Most of Your Presentation (Wednesday morning, 24 September)**

*Jean-luc Doumont has taught and advised for over 15 years on professional writing, speaking, and graphing for various audiences, cultures, and languages, combining a strong engineering background and acclaimed communication expertise.*

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# Call for AdCom Nominations

By George Hayhoe

The Professional Communication Society is managed by an administrative committee (AdCom) comprising 18 volunteers who work to assure that our society serves its members, the IEEE, and the field of technical and professional communication. If you are interested in a higher level of involvement in PCS and IEEE, I urge you to consider being a candidate for the AdCom. Elections are held each year to fill six at-large positions with three-year terms. AdCom members-at-large must be both PCS and IEEE members (i.e., a higher level of membership than affiliate). Each year three members-at-large are selected by vote of the members of PCS and three by vote of the current AdCom.

Typically, AdCom members attend three business meetings each year. For the past two years, however, one of those meetings has been held via conference call. AdCom members also engage in e-mail discussions between meetings. Each member-at-large has an opportunity to provide leadership in the society by, for example, chairing a standing or ad hoc committee, serving as a society officer, or playing a lead role in an upcoming International Professional Communication Conference (IPCC).

Although AdCom members are volunteers and are expected to seek travel support from their employers, PCS currently provides up to USD 1200 yearly for attending the three meetings; the subsidy is USD 2000 for members living outside North America.

You need not be a member of the AdCom, however, to play a role in these and other PCS activities. There's plenty of rewarding work for anyone who wants to volunteer by contacting coordinator Bernadette Longo at *blongo@ieee.org*. Nevertheless, for those of you with a special desire and exciting ideas, working with the AdCom can be both significant and rewarding.

If you're interested, or know someone who might be, please contact George Hayhoe, chair of the nominating committee, at *g.hayhoe@ieee.org* by 15 June. You can learn more about our society by visiting *http://www.ieeepcs.org/*.

*George Hayhoe is a member of the AdCom and program chair for IPCC 2004.*