

Inside

From the Editor	2
President's Column	3
Flocci...pification	7
Information Diets	8
Good Intent, Poor Outcome	10
Net Notes	11
Book Reviewing	12
Tools of the Trade	14
Masters of Style	15
PCCS Seeks New Editor	17
Blah, Blah, Blog	18
Thinking Globally, Acting Locally	19
Professor Grammar	21
Call for AdCom Nominations	22
IPCC 2005 Call for Papers	23
IPCC 2004	24

A Different Kind of Radio Engineer

Q & A with Bill Hammack, creator of Engineering & Life

Interviewed by Jamie Hutchinson

Bill Hammack's Engineering & Life radio commentaries originate from public radio station WILL, AM 580, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where Hammack teaches chemical engineering. The two-and-a-half-minute commentaries, which introduce general audiences to little-known stories from the world of technology, are broadcast throughout Illinois and the surrounding area in addition to receiving national exposure on the Public Radio International program Marketplace. Fiercely dedicated to reaching out from the esoteric world of engineering, Hammack is at work on one book about a 1930s airship and another about the microwave oven, as well as a series of television documentaries. He also teaches a course, The Hidden World of Engineering, for non-engineering majors at Illinois. Visit his Web site at <http://www.engineerguy.com>.



Bill Hammack in the studio of public radio station WILL (AM 580) in Urbana, Illinois. Photo courtesy of Bill Weigand, UIUC News Bureau.

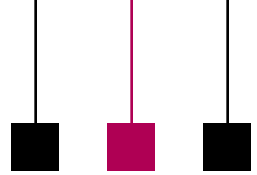
How did Engineering & Life get started?

In about 1995 or 1996, when I was teaching at Carnegie Mellon University [Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania], I decided I wanted to reach out to the public, and there were various reasons for that: interest, career, a whole mixture of things. I thought the job was untapped, and I thought universities should do it. So I did two things which failed. One, I worked with another person on developing a television show and actually got into the office of the executive director of NOVA and we tried to sell it to her. Two, I looked at reaching out to the legal community. I actually wrote a short book, a primer on statistics for lawyers. Neither effort gained much traction.

But from those I began to get some of the skill that I needed to reach out. I realized I was a regular public radio listener and that the short format was nice for developing writing skills; that's one of the reasons I wanted to be on deadline, and on deadline regularly. Radio, too, is a very intellectual medium compared to television. It may not be like a book, but you can't half-listen to news and information radio. It actually is a very good way to present the nuances of technical or social aspects of technology. I think it works better than television in some ways.

I had moved to Urbana in 1997 and in 1999 I approached the public radio station manager here, having done that other work and having taken some voice lessons in Pittsburgh for about two years to begin to sound conversational and communicate

(continued on page 4)



Rudy Joenk

This Issue

Items of note: The first call for papers for IPCC 2005 in Limerick, Ireland, is on p. 23 and a job description for the new position of electronic newsletter editor is on p. 17.

I'm still interested in receiving proposals for single articles or short-lived columns for the remaining issues of this *Newsletter*. See the information for authors farther along in this column.

Auld Lang Syne

As you now know, November/December will be the last print issue of this *Newsletter*. I'm seeking both ideas and input to make it a memorable swan song issue. Do you have any "ancient" photos of PCS people or activities? Untold stories of a forgotten or unnoticed event? Extra-fond recollections of a long-ago society article worth reprinting? There will be a deadline in late summer but I'd appreciate hearing from you any time.

AdCom

PCS is looking for a volunteer to fill the role of **Web master**, who will pri-

marily be responsible for updating the Web site as new content is supplied. However, some content development projects may be necessary. Knowledge of HTML is required. Access to Macromedia Dreamweaver MX and knowledge of PHP and MySQL are desirable.

Please send resume, URLs of sites you have worked on, and the names of three professional references to web@ieeepcs.org.

The AdCom will meet in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 21-22 May, and after IPCC 2004 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2-3 October. PCS members are always welcome at AdCom meetings.

Potpourri

"I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure that you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." Alan Greenspan, quoted in *The Wall Street Journal Sunday* via *The Denver Post*, 8 February 2004.

Plain English supporters voted "At the end of the day" as the most irritat-

ing phrase in the language. "At this moment in time" shared second place with "like," and "with all due respect" came in fourth. Started in 1979, the Plain English Campaign polled its 5000 members in 70 countries to determine those least favorites. <http://plainenglish.co.uk/>, 23 March 2004.

About a magazine photographer: "She spent several years in Paris shooting and raising her son before moving back to Los Angeles."

Urb magazine, February 2004, via *World Wide Words*, 27 March 2004.

"Police Commissioner Ray Kelly said cops have shot people with toy guns 14 times since 1998." *New York Post*, 17 March 2004, via *World Wide Words*, 27 March 2004.

Terms for writerly things: Almost-right word: *nearlynym*; merciless editor: *dreaditor*; tortured sentence: *schizophrasia*. More at <http://www.writermag.com>.

A federal judge in Philadelphia reduced a lawyer's request for fees because his filings were infested with

(continued on page 6)

IEEE Professional Communication Society

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- **Postmaster:** Send address changes to IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter, IEEE, 445 Hoes Lane, Piscataway, NJ 08855.
- **Editorial correspondence:** Rudy Joenk, 2227 Canyon Blvd. #462, Boulder, CO 80302-5680, +1 303 541 0060, rjjoenk@comcastdotnet. Articles, letters, reviews, and proposals for columns are welcome.



Eduardo H. Clark

Gone Online

There is a song by American country music artist Alan Jackson that was popular back in the nineties: *Gone Country*. It describes composers “schooled in voice and composition” and songs that “didn’t sound much different than Dylan,” Bob, that is. In the song, aspiring musicians who didn’t quite make it in the rock scene were “going country” as a last resource in their quest for fame and fortune.

Well, in a parallel reality, PCS missed the *Gone Online* fad back in the nineties, when the big players in technical documentation embraced single sourcing, which basically meant producing online documents from print-ready versions. To me, single sourcing means having a database of building blocks of reference, procedural, instructional, and even marketing information that can be easily updated and delivered in whatever format is required, but I digress. I don’t think that PCS missed fame, although we probably missed fortune in recent years (but that’s another story and I have already told it).

The *Newsletter* has been around since the beginning of PCS, almost half a century ago. In these times the constant and almost unpredictable change makes 50 years sound like an eternity—although human longevity has increased so that we can stay around longer to adapt to that constant change. For some of us members (yes, I am not just the president but also a long-time PCS member), the *Newsletter* has been not only our

connection to learn about news in our society and the players involved, but also a source of interesting articles about communication. For the last seven years Rudy Joenk has lent his brilliant talent to making the *Newsletter* a publication worth looking forward to receiving and reading

from cover to cover. Over the years I have enjoyed reading the Curmudgeon’s Corner; Professor Grammar; Good Intent, Poor Outcome; Tools of the Trade; Net Notes;

and other columns by respected colleagues of mine, some of whom I am privileged to know personally.

Well, the times are-a-changing and we are planning an electronic newsletter to replace the current printed version starting next year. Rudy Joenk has decided to step down as editor at the end of the current printed volume (48) and, on behalf of PCS and myself, I thank him for his commitment to excellence as editor for so many years. The AdCom is working to define the frequency, content, and electronic delivery method (e-mail or Web-based) for the electronic newsletter and we are open to your ideas. Beth Moeller, owner of a Web development business, is leading the effort as chair of the electronic information committee.

Using the electronic medium will help us reduce production and distribution costs. An electronic publication will not only be less costly to produce but also far cheaper to distribute to our increasing membership beyond North America.

The challenge of timely content

I am aware that some PCS members don’t have regular access to the Internet and e-mail, although an increasing majority does. Possibly some of our more senior members don’t even see the need to connect to the Internet. My father, an engineer who passed away last year, was a life member of the Society of Manufacturing Engineers and he never saw the need to connect to the Internet. However, my mother, who retired years ago from the Federal Attorney General’s Office in Mexico, recently signed up for Internet service in Mexico City, where she resides.

I don’t think that this going-online fad is going away and, although we might upset some members (and article contributors) with an e-mail or Web-based newsletter, I am sure that going online is the right thing to do. As professional communicators we must be leading the way in embracing new information technology, not just catching up to remain viable.

An Internet-distributed publication brings some clear benefits but also some difficult challenges. An obvious benefit, other than the cost savings, is more timely content (which is especially important with news). Other benefits are being able to use searching tools and having hyperlinks to references on our Web site and elsewhere. And saving trees is an important benefit for those of us with a social conscience. We might as well preserve the forests and, at the same time, keep paper out of the landfills.

The biggest challenge that I see, other than alienating members without computers and Internet access is,

(continued on page 5)

A Different Kind of Radio Engineer

(continued from page 1)

with people. I remember I decided I wasn't going to fail this time so I got a sales book and learned how to sell things correctly. I went into the station manager's office with my three or four pages of notes and he looked at me and said, "Yeah, I read your letter. Can you start on Tuesday?" I think it's been 225 Tuesdays now that I've shown up.

I'm impressed with how you prepared yourself with voice and sales training!

Carnegie Mellon University had a great theater school so I hired a voice teacher from there. And the kind of thing we worked on was, How does one sound conversational? I had an accent, too, that I lost. It was a slight Southern accent but not Southern enough to be interesting in the least. It was *odd*. It was a southern Indiana accent and so I would be talking about technical information and then say something like *southeren*, *northeren*, or *warsh*. And so I worked on that. The hardest thing I've ever done in my life, by the way. Very difficult work, very brutal!

But that wasn't all. I read books about media and I compulsively studied radio for a long time. I took out a stopwatch and measured how they did things, how to tell a story. This *American Life* is wonderful for that. I also studied how historians tell stories, a subject called historiography.

What is the correct way to tell a story? What things do we consider nonobjective or not the correct way? I wanted to moor my practice in proper storytelling, proper ways to explain what happened.

And I studied writing. I took apart chapters—word by word, sentence by sentence—by Francis Parkman, a great historian and a beautiful writer. And I actually outlined the chapters of a number of other historians who wrote well and would read them 20 to 30 times to begin to see how they were creating the effect, and what they were doing. And I read a lot of books on writing. But that's an interesting thing: The secret is to write, and then read books on writing, and read good writing, and then write again tomorrow. It's a very iterative process.

What did you learn from historiography about correct storytelling?

The big thing to avoid is called the Whig interpretation of history, or the Whig fallacy, where you look backwards from the present and everything appears as a step toward that final point. One of my favorite books is Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History*. So for example, if you are looking at an invention, you might consider every single aspect of the design and you think, "Everything else was wrong and we progressed only in this direction." But the story

is often murkier. You want to be in the time, looking at the choices they were making, and realize that the final product could have come out in a number of ways.

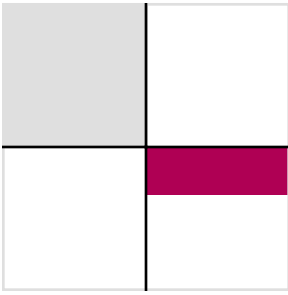
Give a specific example.

The microwave oven. There's no practical reason for the standard operating frequency. People were working with higher and lower frequencies. How did this come out at the time? The inventors intended it to be an oven to replace your oven, but it didn't—it became a reheater. We're tempted to tell the success story about how in 1945 Percy Spencer melted a candy bar in his pocket when he walked by a radar tube, and from there we develop completely the microwave oven. As it turned out, however, from '45 to '67 there was a lot of failure: designing it the wrong way, building it the wrong way, doing the wrong things.

You have written that "The values and world views, the intelligence and stupidity, the biases and vested interests of those who design a technology are embedded in the technology itself." Give an example.

Color film. The situation may change in the digital age, but color film does not reproduce completely the color spectrum. It's an approximation, or a simulation. To choose a color balance they took pictures of a white woman, looked at those pictures, and chose what they thought looked best. To this day it is difficult with standard film to photograph black people. In

Radio is a very good way to present the nuances of technical or social aspects of technology.



movies, to the best that I can understand, that takes special lighting and other things because the films were optimized for Caucasian skin. There's a cultural bias embedded in the technology. I think scientists and engineers might be more surprised than anybody else to learn of some of those embedded biases.

You also wrote that a pervasive belief in “technological determinism” engenders passivity among the public with regard to issues involving technology. But there are a great number of highly complex issues. Can we realistically expect the public to get involved in them?

I don't approach public outreach from what I call a knowledge or specific content base. I'm interested in giving people—and the radio talks are just a start at this—a thought process or a way to think about technology. When we look at what a citizen needs to be scientifically or technically literate, it is mostly the methods of science or how an engineer looks at something. I'll give you a prime example of that, and I'm stealing this from Herbert Simon, the Nobel economics laureate, who wrote a wonderful article on what the citizen needs to be scientifically or technologically literate. Simon holds up courts and legislatures as a model. Courts and legislatures use experts but they come up with the final opinion. It's a little controversial to say this because there are some highly publicized cases where they came up with some really dumb things, but I think if you look

at the majority of outcomes, reasonable decisions are being made.

So the kind of thing that I want somebody to understand—something that I emphasize, for example—is life cycle analysis. Look at a technology from cradle to grave—that of, say, hydrogen. Is hydrogen going to be the great thing that will solve our energy problems? Well, take a big step back. Where do we get hydrogen? We get it from methane, we get it from natural gas, we get it from fossil fuels (at least right now), and so we have to break those apart. All hydrogen does is transfer fossil fuel into another form. And if you take a step back, you can look at that.

Should more scientists and engineers follow your example and communicate directly with the public?

Yes. I have a seminar that I give to groups of engineers and at universities and I tell my colleagues, first, to back off from being an expert. If you come out and you want to announce the right answer to the question, you distance yourself from people. You instead want a role more like a tour

guide to this world people don't know so well. Second, I tell them to learn how to use mass media correctly. To give you an example that has nothing to do with science: Howard Dean now understands mass media better than he used to. What he did in that Iowa lecture hall when he screeched was *perfectly* appropriate in that lecture hall. Everybody who was there, every evidence I can get, says it was a compelling, interesting speech, and he was excited. He looked like a moron on television. The media are different.

Television, books, radio—these are not ways to export our classrooms. It's a different set of things that you're after, a different way to do it.

[In March this year IEEE-USA presented Dr. Hammack with its Award for Distinguished Literary Contributions Furthering Public Understanding of the Profession.]

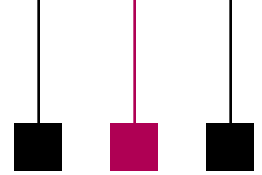
Jamie Hutchinson (jhutchin@uiuc.edu) manages the publications office in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

President's Column

(continued from page 3)

ironically, fresh content. Our readers are going to expect to see PCS news almost on a real-time basis, articles about current issues, and even errors fixed as they are discovered. This is going to require a fully engaged editor minding the new publication

probably as a full time job. I hope that the cost savings from not printing and mailing the current *Newsletter* will allow us to pay the salary of a dedicated editor, whom we still must find. *Are you interested? See the job description on p. 17.*



From the Editor

(continued from page 2)

typographical errors. “If these mistakes were purposeful,” the judge ruled, “they would be brilliant.” Never mind the typos, however, [the lawyer’s] prose was “vague, ambiguous, unintelligible, verbose, and repetitive.” *New York Times*, 4 March 2004.

Déjà vu: Do you remember Jean-luc Doumont’s article “No News Is News” in the January/February *Newsletter* about expectations and courtesy in communication? Writing about business courtesy in the Boulder, Colorado, *Daily Camera* on 1 March 2004, Ira Nottson said that “Forgetting the real priorities, not paying attention to the expectations of others, can be a big mistake.”

A recent challenge from Anu Garg (<http://wordsmith.org>) was to find a common pattern among the words *drabble*, *lability*, *orotund*, *pinnate*, and *trunnel*. The answer is that each yields another word when beheaded. *AWADmailissue* 114, 22 February 2004.

In December 2003 the International Telecommunications Union voted to add a new character to Morse code. It is a representation of the @ symbol (guess why) and is known as a “com-mat,” consisting of the signals for A and C with no space between: dot-dash-dash-dot-dash-dot. It is the first new sign in at least several decades. David Kohn in *The Baltimore Sun* via *The Denver Post*, 17 February 2004.

Computer Haiku

Serious error.
All shortcuts have disappeared.
Screen. Mind. Both are blank.

Stay the patient course.
Of little worth is your ire.
The network is down.

There’s more at <http://www.funny2.com/haiku.htm>; Sony has replaced some of the Microsoft error messages on its Vaio computers with Japanese haiku.

Confounding Compounding

The puzzler for the week of 8 March 2004 on National Public Radio’s Car Talk program was:

Q: Can you think of a situation where the components of a compound subject are connected by *and*, yet the form of the verb must be singular, not plural?

A: The verb must be singular when the two components of the compound subject refer to the same thing. For example, the verb takes the singular form when you say, “My closest friend and college roommate was the best man at my wedding.” Because it’s the same person, right?

Information for Authors

One thousand words makes a nice page-and-a-half article, though longer and shorter articles may be appropriate. Proposals for short-lived 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 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/activities_publications_newsletter.php) 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, RTF (rich text format), and ASCII files are acceptable. My addresses are in the boilerplate at the bottom of p. 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 and 15 September for the November/December issue. You won’t be far off (and never late) if you observe the Ides of July and September.

Punctuation Probed

By Michael Brady

A panda walks into a café. He orders and eats a sandwich, draws a gun, and fires. As he leaves, the waiter asks why. The panda shows him a badly punctuated wildlife manual, in which the waiter reads: “Panda, large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.”

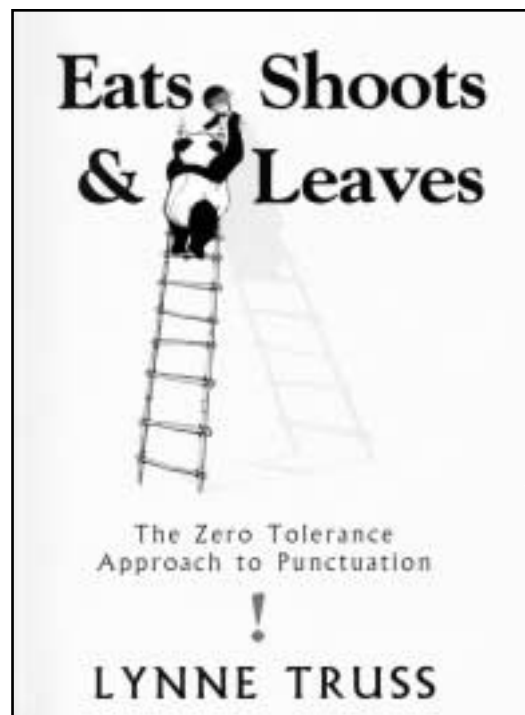
The punch line of that grammarians’ joke now has surfaced as the title of what may be the most readable book ever on punctuation, by British broadcaster, editor, novelist, and columnist Lynne Truss, published last November in England and last month in the U.S., with an introduction for North American readers.* Though her pen is light, the underlying theme is serious because, as author Truss admits, she is a stickler on punctuation.

She’s hardly alone, as innumerable texts and the pages of this *Newsletter* testify. Authors and publishers notoriously squabble over punctuation. James Thurber, who disliked commas, frequently quarreled with *New Yorker* editor Harold Ross, who favored them. Thurber usually lost. He once was asked why there was a comma in the sentence “After dinner, the men went into the living room.” His reply, author Truss muses, “was probably one of the loveliest things ever said about punctuation. ‘This particular comma,’ Thurber explained,

‘was Ross’s way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up.’”

Personal preference aside, punctuation—or lack of it—can change meaning: Without the comma, the message of “no dogs, please” shifts. Misuse of the other punctuation marks also invites misinterpretation. Author Truss steers clear of risqué jokes involving punctuation, most notably the venerable Australian version of the title, in which the creature is a wombat, the homonym *roots*, and the venue a bedroom. But as she cheerfully points out, punctuation error can give rise to moral miscalculation: Without the hyphen, “extra-marital sex” acquires a different meaning altogether.

She professes limited scientific savvy, remarking that “in 1995 I had a humorous weekly column in *The Times* called ‘Logged Off,’ tracing my novice efforts with the Internet. It was hell.” Nonetheless, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* reflects the thoroughness of the scientific method. There are more than 40 references, and the works of others are unfailingly credited. Objectivity prevails and personal preferences are flagged, not put forth as maxims. Moreover, the maxims that are the stuff of schoolbook grammars are dissected, particularly those held to constitute the differences between British and American usages. The inflexible British rule of



no comma before *and* in a collective sequence is shown to be as ridiculous as the inflexible American rule that the terminal punctuation of a sentence ending in a quote must be within the final quote mark. And throughout, there are hints at what may be the answers to the two basic questions of how did punctuation come about and what is its basic purpose?

The first question is the more easily answered: Our system of punctuation was produced in the age of printing, by printers. It exists as a set of printed conventions and consequently is endangered as the prominence of printing wanes. The second question can be answered, Lynne Truss contends, by regarding punctu-

(continued on page 9)

* *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss, London, Profile Books, November 2003, GBP 9.99, ISBN 1-86197-612-7; and New York, Gotham Books, April 2004, USD 17.50 and CDN 22.50, ISBN 1-592-40087-6.

Information Diets: Ridding Ourselves of Excess Information

By Tracey N. Wofford

Every day we find ourselves bombarded with information through television, radio, magazines, advertisements, billboards, posters, e-mail, conversations, lectures, and much, much more. Most of us ingest far too many useless facts and we store excess information rather than turn useful data into knowledge. Many of us could use an information diet.

Signs That an Information Diet Is Necessary

One of my coworkers suffers greatly from such an information burden. He reads three of the major newspapers, listens to National Public Radio, collects stacks of journals and magazines, and literally intends to learn all he can about all subjects that may affect his lifestyle. As a result he can't stay focused and he can't remember simple tasks. Not too surprisingly, he missed several weeks of work to get his life back in order and to purge his brain of useless information. Because of his example, I have made it a personal quest to go on an information diet.

How can you evaluate your information intake? Here is a list of signs that may help you decide if you need an information diet.

1. You don't understand the difference between useful and usable information.

Considering all information to be *useful* is a common mistake. Useful information provides you with information you *need*, whereas informa-

tion that is *usable* is nice to know but is not essential. To maintain an information diet, you should limit your intake of usable information.

2. You make a habit of reading everything that comes to you.

You may be afraid that you are going to miss an important piece of information. Scan through your material; don't waste your time or brain cells filtering that which doesn't explicitly state its usefulness. Oftentimes useful information manifests itself in several sources.

3. You consume information as a hobby.

If you like to read and retain inane bits of trivia as a leisure activity, help yourself. But if you are suffering from information overload, it may be time to postpone such activities.

4. You find yourself to be more and more forgetful.

The more useless facts you store in your brain, the less room there is for useful information, and the less likely you will be able to retain new information. Limit the amount of information you are required to remember. (That's why we have PDAs and date planners.)

How to Avoid Useless Information

Here are some other ways to avoid useless information that comes your way.

Set up filters

Thanks to modern technology, plenty of software programs can automatically sift through information for you, picking out only that which may pertain to your needs. E-mail filters search your inbox for key words (both pro and con) and file or remove the messages that contain those key words.

Process and retain only information that is pertinent to your needs.

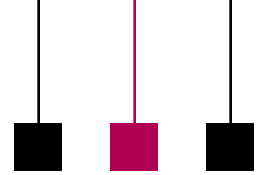
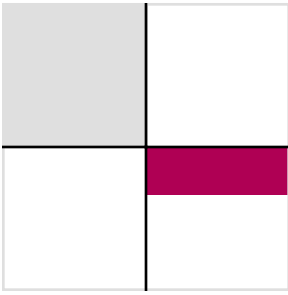
There are also many types of software that can filter—in or out—Web sites that contain certain content. Most of those filters, such as parental guides, are for preventing unwanted Web sites from appearing.

Seek out information

Rather than sift through all the information that comes to you, go out in search of appropriate information. That way, you are not tasked with internally processing everything that comes your way. Scan for useful ideas and conduct a search on your own. Seek only credible sources and those that display important information in obvious locations.

Reject sources that aren't useful

If you no longer find a source useful, throw it out. Cancel subscriptions to newsletters, magazines, journals, and so forth that rarely provide useful information. So how can you determine if a source has good information?



1. *Does the source have a named author?* Check the author’s credentials. Keep in mind that anonymous information isn’t trustworthy.
2. *Who funded the information?* Make sure that it wasn’t created just to add credibility to someone or something.
3. *When was the information published?* Look for copyright dates, updates, and references in the document.
4. *Is the source biased?* If you want all the facts, make sure your source isn’t swayed or doesn’t just state opinions.
5. *Where else has the information been published?* You should make sure the original source is reliable. Try to find additional sources that confirm the information.
6. *How in-depth is the information?* If the document seems to contain nothing more than introductory material and never fully explains itself, move on to another source. Look for material that provides real answers and doesn’t dance around its point.
7. *Does the source really provide information?* Watch out for sources that merely provide links or other resources. Those are the ones that have done little research and have little evidence to back up their information.
8. *How is the information presented?* Make sure the source is organized

well and is easy to read. There’s no need to stumble through a document that offers little navigation help.

How to Make Your Contributions Useful

As the author of any document, it is your responsibility to make your document as useful as possible for your target audience. If your company doesn’t have a document management system, take it upon yourself to establish one. In my office we have set up the following rules:

1. **Always provide a useful title.** Titles should indicate the main topic of the document. The same goes for the subject line in e-mail.
2. **Always include a byline.** The author should prominently display his or her name, job title, and appropriate contact information.
3. **Always include a date.** Mention whether the current document replaces previous information.
4. **Always include a version number.**

In addition to setting up a document management system, you should always help readers find information that is pertinent to them. Consider including some of the following:

- Abstracts
- Bookmarks in PDF documents and on Web sites
- Executive summaries
- Indexes
- Tables of contents

Help direct your readers to the information they need. Furthermore, keep your documents to the point. Cut out the roughage and provide only the nutrients for useful information.

The author is a technical editor for Mercer University and an editorial assistant for STC’s Technical Communication; e-mail: traceynw@bellsouth.net.

Floccinaucinihilipilification

(continued from page 7)

ation to be the track along which language runs. When it breaks down, meaning suffers.

And these days, meaning indeed suffers. Punctuation has all but sunk out of sight in the language of the street, if not the walls. Worse yet, in electronic e-mail and text messages, punctuation is nigh extinct; only its graphic marks remain as the elements of emoticons :-)

Sticklers unite! This is a book for people who care about what’s happening to punctuation. It’s also a humorous page-turner and a worthy reference that belongs on the shelf of any serious writer or editor.

“Most of the grounds of the world’s troubles are matters of grammar.”

—Montaigne



Jean-luc Doumont

Space: The Final Luxury

“What if space was the true luxury?” the French automobile manufacturer Renault used to ask in ads promoting its family van, Espace. The question takes on a particular meaning to me as I write these lines, for I am contemplating outside the window the desolate landscapes of the Cap de La Hague in Normandy during a short vacation away from the densely populated part of Europe where I normally live. And if land does not offer enough luxury to my reverie, the ocean beyond it certainly does. Do we not all value space?

Perhaps the question, then, is why do we not indulge in space when we can afford it—for example, in our page layouts? A little extra space can go a long way toward readability or accessibility, allowing readers to locate effortlessly the specific information they seek. True, paper is a precious resource. For documents printed in large runs, a small reduction in page count translates into a substantial saving; luxury has its price. Yet many professional documents are printed in few copies or, nowadays, viewed on screen.

Space in page layouts is of course a relative matter. Instead of adding more pages, we might decrease the amount of ink on each page. In an effort to be visually concise, we might remove decorative, non-informative ink. As George Bernard Shaw noted, “There is not in existence a page with a rule on it that cannot be instantly and obviously improved by taking the rule out.”

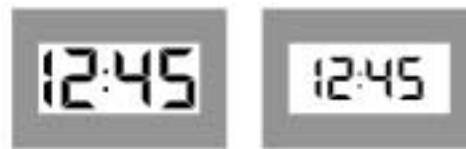
Perhaps unexpectedly, another way to improve legibility and aesthetics by adding space to the page is simply to reduce the font size within reason. Indeed, we recognize characters, syllables, and even full words by their silhouette: the more space around them (the less visual interference, that is), the more easily we perceive their shape. Reducing the font size slightly while keeping the line spacing constant is sure to improve legibility. Moreover, the space saved in number of lines can be reinvested where it is most needed: to separate clearly such entities as headings, sections, paragraphs, and figures.

Margins similarly play a key role in making textual silhouettes easy to recognize or in separating a block of text from surrounding elements, including those outside the screen or printed page. While most authors foresee sufficient margins for their document as a whole, few realize that equally large margins are needed for text within frames or sidebars: Text boxed in too closely does not invite reading and always looks cramped.

Insufficient line spacing, insufficient margins

Alas, insufficient margins are a widespread problem in documents designed for screen viewing, such as e-mail messages, presentation slides, and Web pages. As a way to organize the page, many Web designers divide it into rectangular zones with frames or background colors (one each for links, a banner, body text, ...), then dump verbal content into those zones with truly minimal margins. The resulting display can be suffocating.

Perhaps the most striking example I know of insufficient margins is that of large liquid-crystal displays, as used by wall clocks and thermometers. Probably in an attempt to make the digits legible from as far away as possible, all the displays I have seen make them almost as large as the available LCD area. Somewhat smaller digits would actually be much more recognizable from a distance, thanks to the space around them.



Those two problems—insufficient line spacing for a given font size and insufficient margins for a given text size—also show up in the default settings of Microsoft products such as Word and PowerPoint. To improve a generic Word document instantly and obviously, select the whole text, increase the line spacing somewhat (not quite by 50 percent as in a spacing of 1.5 lines, but perhaps by 20 percent) and increase the margins markedly. Go ahead and try it, if only as an experiment.

Add a little luxury to your documents: For the viewing comfort of your readers, invest in a little extra space.

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>).



Elizabeth Weise Moeller

The Es Are Everywhere

Last month I was asked by *The Business Review* in Albany, New York, to write an op-ed piece on the future of e-commerce. I am currently teaching a class on e-commerce at a local college and the combination of activities has provided some interesting insight into what people view as “e-commerce” and how it differs from “e-business.”

The words *e-commerce* and *e-business* can mean very different things, depending on your point of view. The high-tech-bubble burst, which sent technology stock prices to very low levels, bankrupted many companies, and cost investors millions of dollars (USD), is still fresh in the minds of many corporate executives and investors. Some who venture into e-commerce and e-business arenas are doing so slowly and carefully. On the other hand, there are a number of entrepreneurs who see e-commerce and e-business as limitless and are enthusiastic about the possibilities. Reality is somewhere in-between.

E-Commerce

E-commerce is simply the selling of goods and services online. While e-commerce is a great equalizer in terms of giving small and large businesses the same access to potential customers, the implementation of that e-commerce system relies primarily on the budget of the business. Off-the-shelf e-commerce solutions, which include a simple online store-

front and credit card processing mechanisms, can be implemented for an initial investment of approximately USD 1000. Moderate systems, customized for small businesses, can be implemented for an initial investment between USD 10 000 and USD 20 000. These systems include some custom features, credit card processing, and basic customer service functions.

On the high end, for larger corporate systems, expect to pay significantly more. In fact, the book we are using in my e-commerce class suggests that, after initial setup, businesses that gross “only” USD 52 million in sales will likely see a profit.

Those systems, however, blur the line between e-commerce and e-business. Such high-end systems include connections to suppliers for supply chain management: As inventory is depleted through sales, suppliers are automatically notified

to send more product. Those systems include customer service management features to help support staff understand the needs of individual customers. We also see content management as part of the high-end systems to help those who maintain the data keep track of everything. The systems are installed throughout an entire business, not just in customer service or sales. Purchasing, management, support, and production also have access to the system for the information they need. The integrated approach guarantees that everyone has access to the same data.

The common thread is automating all possible processes.

E-Business

E-business means taking a business process and moving it online. Like e-commerce, implementation depends on the budget and needs of the business. The goal, however, is slightly different. The obvious e-commerce goal is sales. E-business goals vary with the organization. The common thread, however, is automating all possible processes so that human intervention can be saved for more complicated tasks.

A very common, and inexpensive, e-business implementation is a membership application. Service or professional organizations often include membership applications on their Web site. The data can be returned to them via e-mail or in a format they can import to their database directly. Many larger businesses have moved processes like order tracking to their Web sites. Dell Computer (<http://www.dell.com>) has a place on their site to check the status of an order. That feature allows customers to check on their purchases without having to call a customer service representative, thus leaving the representative available to handle more complex questions.

The cost of an e-business application depends on the complexity and the level at which it is integrated into an existing business’s information technology infrastructure. Simple forms on a Web site that send data via e-mail are much less expensive to implement than a system that com-

(continued on page 13)

Book Reviews: An Educational Experience

By R. E. Floyd

Thousands of technical books are published each year, covering fields from electronics to botany, biology, zoology, ..., and the list goes on. Even in the field of communication probably hundreds of books are published, each an opportunity awaiting someone—an opportunity to write a book review for organizations such as the IEEE Professional Communication Society. Many societies and special interest groups within them have columns dedicated to book reviews for their members. It is a quick way for the members to evaluate whether they wish to purchase or read a new book without expending their money up front. Who provides these book reviews? Why not you?

Writing book reviews provides a number of benefits for the writer:

- Personal satisfaction
- Practice at a professional level
- Professional recognition
- An educational experience
- An opportunity to learn something new
- A free book (the usual stipend for writing a review)

Given such an impressive list of benefits, why doesn't everyone rush into becoming a book reviewer? I believe the major issue is that book reviewing takes considerable effort if done correctly, and most people are already loaded with business and personal commitments for their time. To understand the effort required, let us look at the steps taken to provide a book review.

To begin with, the reviewer needs to have an open mind. A book may cover information about which the reviewer is a subject matter expert or, conversely, is only somewhat aware. In any case, the purpose of the review is to help others understand the content and intent of the book, not to use the slash and burn tactics of a movie critic. The reviewer must assume different perspectives: that of the writer (what did he or she mean to convey?); the intended audience (as identified by the author, which may range from students to the world at large); and potential users. All three perspectives are crucial during the process of the review.

To start the process, read the back cover commentary and the front matter (preface, introduction, etc.) noting the intended audience, any background expectations, or other descriptions that could be used to set expectations within the reader. Highlight these as they are encountered, a reminder to yourself as you continue to read. The book will take on the appearance of a student text as the various points and sections are highlighted as reminders or passages of note.

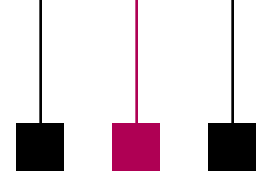
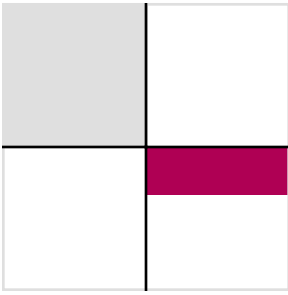
After the initial front-matter reading, review the aesthetics of the book. How is it laid out? Is there good balance between white space and the printed areas and illustrations? Is the print legible (in your opinion, of course)? Are there illustrations and,



if so, do they appear to be clear, easy to follow, and understandable? Are there highlighted (preferably bold) headers to help readers understand changing subject matter or as an aid in finding material more quickly? Note: None of this so far addresses the content of the book, simply your perspective of *how it looks and feels* (a very subjective view but one that may be important for others).

Next, take time to read the table of contents. Look at how the book is divided into parts, sections, and chapters. Does the division appear reasonable, with related topics joined in some semblance of order? Does one part follow the preceding one, or are they simply topical divisions? Are there chapters that appear out of place? For example, one part may be concerned with technical approaches to communication, whereas the next discusses specific types of reports, letters, etc. Included in a following section may be a chapter on the Web and the application of HTML. These

Does the book appear to be useful to the practitioner?



topics appear almost as an afterthought and, on reflection, you may find that they have been added at a very high level and contain little useful information.

Finally, it is time to read the text. The reviewer must remember the multiple perspectives to employ: the author, the audience, the user. Not only is the information presented important, but also *how* it is presented is important. Are the descriptions clear and easy to follow? Is the word selection appropriate to the intended audience and user? Are illustrations and call-outs in close proximity to each other, allowing a reader to read the text and look at the illustration at the same time? If shaded text is used, are the shading and print sufficiently distinct or is it a chore to read? Some may believe such observations to be aesthetic in

nature and not dealing with the content of the text, but the aesthetics can help or hinder the audience's ability to comprehend the subject matter.

The question arises, Do you have to read every word? Probably not. Having spent time on the structure, chapter introductions, and spot checks within each chapter (perhaps using the index for topical examinations), the reviewer can garner a reasonable evaluation of the text. Sometimes, however, reviewing is a word-by-word, time-consuming process to ensure a fair assessment of the text. Having done all that, you should be able to provide others a concise perspective of the text. Does the text serve the intended audience and users? Did the author meet the stated objectives? Were any expectations set that were not fulfilled? Was

the treatment of various topics complete and appropriate? Finally, from your perspective, does the book appear to be useful to the practitioner? All this in about 1000 words!

If book reviewing sounds interesting to you, visit http://ieeepcs.org/activities_publications_transactions_authors.php and see what opportunities await. Be adventurous, be daring, be a book reviewer—enjoy a new adventure!

The author is an IEEE Senior Member and a frequent contributor of book reviews to the IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication. After retiring from IBM he founded his own company specializing in systems integration of radio frequency identification technology; icubed@tritel.net.

Net Notes

(continued from page 11)

municates directly with a business's database.

Why Is This Important?

Why is it important to know the difference between e-commerce and e-business? Those terms are present in the day-to-day business lexicon. The problem is that they are often used interchangeably. While there is certainly overlap between e-commerce and an e-business application, they are not the same.

E-commerce is the process of selling goods and services online. There may be e-business components to an e-commerce application, such as order tracking or customer management, but e-commerce is devoted to selling. E-business, on the other hand, is moving a simple business process—one that often can be done without human intervention—to the Internet. In both cases, implementation *can* have a positive effect on a company's bottom line, but only if it is carefully

planned and implemented with little disruption to a company's day-to-day operation.

Elizabeth Weise Moeller was president of PCS 2002-2003. 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.



Peter Reimold and Cheryl Reimold

How to Give Technical Presentations to Non-Technical Audiences

Part 2: Pitfalls in Preparation

Last time we discussed ways to overcome stage fright. One cause of stage fright is *feeling disconnected* from the audience, which can easily happen when you realize you have no useful message for them. The cure for this, of course, is simple: *Always have a message about which both you and the audience care.*

Unfortunately, simple does not mean easy. We all have instincts that pull us toward self-centered or thing-oriented messages. So, before we discuss solid principles of preparation, let's clear away some obstacles by examining major pitfalls. As you read on, look back on your own presentations. Do you tend to stumble into these traps? How could you have done it better?

The Detail Trap

In talking to non-technical audiences, many presenters seem to have an irresistible urge to *educate*, down to a level of excruciating detail. Often, the "educational" approach springs from an urge to *impress*: "Look how complex this stuff is that I'm doing." Will it win you admiration? Try resentment instead—plus a warning from your boss to keep things simple next time!

Here is an example. Suppose you have been asked to present on the fancy new super FX microscope in your department. Immediately, the detail trap is waiting for you. It invites you to sit down and, without further ado, put together a murderous slide show: Slides 1-5: previous technology (pictures of equipment, tables of specs); slides 6-11: technical developments that made the new

technology possible; slides 12-20: key components of the super FX microscope; slides 21-40: table of technical specifications and *exactly* what they mean; slides 41-45: the incredibly fine skills needed to operate this equipment; slide 46: the training you and others received in how to operate this equipment and its associated software; slide 47: how you have been using this microscope and hope to use it in the future. *Done!*

However, does the audience care about any of that? To take the case of managers present, wouldn't they rather know what benefits the company has already reaped from this technology, what new business opportunities it may have opened up, and what savings it has generated (for instance, by avoiding expensive and slow outside laboratory analyses)?

The Logic Trap

Another fallacy is to assume that the internal logic of things must be honored and will fill the audience with satisfaction. For instance, presenting a process in complete time sequence, from origin to destination, seems almost inevitable to many presenters.

Suppose you are presenting on your investigation of a quality problem. The logic trap would lure you into a blow-by-blow description of what happened: (1) The mill had a customer complaint. (2) They sent us some samples. (3) The samples couldn't be analyzed with traditional methods. (4) We invented a new

method. (5) The method was good but the samples were insufficient and not quite from the right area of the product. (6) We requested new samples and analyzed those. (7) The results were very hard to interpret so we searched the literature and came up with some powerful statistical methods. (8) The mill used the results to adjust production but there were still some complaints. (9) We received new samples....

Again the question is, Does the audience care? Or are they more interested in a short description of the quality problem,

directly followed by your *ultimate* findings and how they helped solve the problem? Once you've given them that, they might be receptive to some *brief* explanations of the methods applied on this project, just enough to satisfy them that the solution is based on a sound analysis.

*Cheryl and Peter Reimold have been teaching communication skills to engineers, scientists, and business people for 20 years. Their latest book, **The Short Road to Great Presentations** (Wiley, 2003), is available from IEEE Press, Amazon.com, and all major bookstores. Their consulting 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>.*

Avoiding the detail trap and the logic trap will help you find a message the audience cares about.



Ronald J. Nelson

Telling Titles

Every document—report, article, book—should address the appropriate audience as well as inform that person or group of relevant content (ideally affecting, effecting action, or both, intermingled with informing). Only when the reader becomes immersed in such a document can she or he derive the satisfaction of experiencing the transformation of a text (a musical score, say) into a work (performance of that score). It comes alive. But unless the document has a telling title, the reader might never even know about it, let alone plunge into it.

Indeed, the first indication that a document may contain the rare combination of substance and vitality that readers value is its title. The lack of a worthy title may be a sign of a tell-tale deficiency in the document, for it suggests that the author is incapable of encapsulating in a phrase what is fundamental in his or her work or essay (*essayer* = to try). To be able to do so is testimony to the author's skill in abstracting the essence of content—a critical matter of judgment.

An effective title discloses the author's awareness and appreciation of the audience's need to know at the outset what, in essence, is contained within a document. (The writer who respects rather than wastes readers' time is likely to be an author worth reading.) The well-chosen title invites readers in, rousing them from lethargy by cutting through the amorphous fluff with which they are so often surrounded, as Bix Beiderbecke

did with his cornet in the midst of musical mush. (At times, Bix had to be elbowed for his solo, he having dozed off within the soporific strains of the soi-disant "King of Jazz," Paul Whiteman.) Some titles seem determined to induce sleep in all but the most attentive of readers.

For our purposes here, I comment on two kinds of titles: (1) those for technical reports and (2) those for various other documents. Readers can perhaps glean some perspectives to incorporate in the titles of future documents (and may even have rewarding reading in front of them).

For technical reports, Robert R. Rathbone's *Communicating Technical Information*, 2nd ed. (Addison-Wesley, 1985) is a valuable resource to consult, especially chapter 8, The Tenuous Title. Appropriately, this chapter gets at the flimsiness of many a title that must be meticulously reworked before it can immortalize its author by resting rock solid as at the head of a gravestone over a body of work.

Rathbone calls attention to several often overlooked points, including the fact that technical writing must have informative titles, which facilitate storing and retrieving information as well as help the reader decide the amount of attention to give to one document over another. His criteria (p. 67) are worth noting:

1. "Does the title accurately represent the subject? (*Is it correct?*)"

2. "Are the limits of coverage stated (or implied)? (*Is it complete?*)"
3. "Is the language of the title meaningful to the intended audience? (*Is it comprehensible?*)"
4. "Has the title been expressed as efficiently as possible? (*Is it concise?*)"

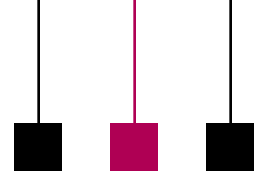
Among his suggestions for creating a useful title is eliminating general phrases that occupy a prominent position in the title but add nothing while stating the obvious: "A Report of..." and "An Analysis of..." Note the waste in this title, "A Report on the Use of Water as the Liquid Propellant in Project Transport," the first six words of which are useless in a literature search (p. 68).

As Rathbone states, "...vagueness obscures meaning" (p. 69). Titles like "A Method for Measuring Porosity Coefficients" can and should be

improved by specifying the method: "Measurement of Porosity Coefficients by the Shallow-Bore Method" (pp. 69-70). And one-word titles like "Lasers" are useful only for broad coverage of a topic.

Titles should reach the audience and invite them into the content.

Rathbone advocates two-part titles if the title is in danger of becoming too long. A title like "How Reaction Motors Work and Some Experiments with Them" can be improved by placing the key words first and the qualifying words after the colon: "Reaction Motors: How They Work



and Some Experiments with Them” (p. 71).

Titles for other documents (books, in this case) with different audiences and purposes in mind can profitably be examined in an attempt to ascertain the source of their potency. Each of the following titles, I believe, is effective because it reaches the audience, inviting the person into the content.

Some titles appeal because they **underplay** subject matter. For example, Garrison Keillor (of Prairie Home Companion fame) wrote *A Pretty Good Joke Book* (HighBridge, 2001), a book that does not raise expectations. Such a tendency is a refreshing counterpoint to the ubiquitous, rampant hype of the current age. We become jaded by the reverberating ring of “superstar” and other exaggerations when they fail to measure up to their promise. Understatement is perhaps the most powerful of language tools, at least in part because it cannot disappoint. Indeed, Keillor’s low-key humor uplifts. Similarly, Charles L. Woodard’s superb book, *As Far As I Can See: Contemporary Writing of the Middle Plains* (Windflower Press, 1989), admits its limitations while inviting the reader to stretch his or her intellectual and emotional horizons.

Other titles, like Donald Hall’s excellent *Writing Well* (Little, Brown, 1973) come **sensibly and straightforwardly to the point** of the book, as does John Kirkman’s *Good Style*

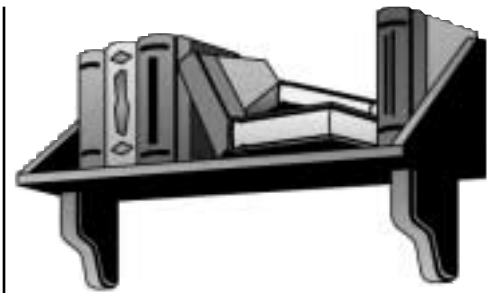
for Scientific and Engineering Writing (Pitman, 1980).

Still others seem particularly **timely**, like this wonderful collection of essays, stories, and poems in a litigious, impolite age: Karen Santorum, ed., *Everyday Graces: A Child’s Book of Good Manners* (ISI Books, 2003). Children and adults will benefit immeasurably from this civilizing (and beautifully designed) book. Getting along with people is clearly a matter of supreme importance to professional communicators. To review the fundamentals would do us all good.

Some titles impress by their **utterly serious wording**, for example, Laurence Gonzales’s *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why: True Stories of Miraculous Endurance and Sudden Death* (Norton, 2003). This title is somewhat unusual because of its two subtitles.

Providing a **slight surprise in the wording** can arrest a reader and make her or him pick up the book. Henry Petroski uses this ploy by evoking the NPR program All Things Considered in his *Small Things Considered: Where There Is No Perfect Design* (Knopf, 2003). Mark Obmascik’s new book on birding, *The Big Year: A Tale of Man, Nature, and Fowl Obsession* (Free Press, 2004), uses this technique as well.

Sometimes a title can **shock** the reader, disarming the person; for example, *Fart Proudly: Writings of*



Benjamin Franklin You Never Read in School, edited by Carl Japikse (Ariel Press, 1990; Frog Ltd., 2003); *Flushed with Pride: The Story of Thomas Crapper* by Wallace Reyburn (Trafalgar Square, 1998); and the distressing book, *A Stress Analysis of a Strapless Evening Gown and Other Essays for a Scientific Age* (Prentice Hall, 1987).

Some books **employ ambivalence**, suggesting the complexity of the subject matter: Scott Russell Sanders gets at his geographical location as well as his internal system of values in *Writing from the Center* (Indiana University Press, 1995), while Caitlin Shetterly’s collection, *Fault Lines: Stories of Divorce* (Berkley Books, 2001), suggests the potential devastation of a fracture in a geological rock formation as it simultaneously summons words of blame in a relationship.

Titles can also **stimulate curiosity**, perhaps people’s greatest asset. Consider the magnetic appeal of Michael J. Gelb’s *How To Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps To Genius Every Day* (Delacorte Press, 1998). (The first of the seven

steps, by the way, is Curiosa.) And Brendan Gill's *Late Bloomers: 75 Remarkable People Who Found Fame, Success & Joy in the Second Half of Their Lives* (subtitle on cover rather than title page; Artisan, 1996) sings of the delayed flourishings of Harry S. Truman, Ed Sullivan, Charles Darwin, Charles Ives, Ian Fleming, and Joseph Conrad, to name a few. Moreover, Henry Petroski's *Remaking the World: Adventures in Engineering* (Vintage Books, 1997) charms the reader with a selection of his columns from the journal *American Scientist*, including "On the Backs of Envelopes," "Good Drawings and Bad Dreams," "The Ferris Wheel," and "The Channel Tunnel."

The interested reader will, I suspect, find Andre Bernard's *Now All We Need Is a Title: Famous Book Titles and How They Got That Way* (Norton, 1996) fascinating reading for its background information and anecdotes.

Finally, I encourage the reader to use one or more of the above strategies, which may determine the fate of his or her document: Either it will have the vitality of a work (not merely a text) or it will gather dust.

Ron Nelson is a professor of English at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia 22807; +1 540 568 3755, fax +1 540 568 2983; nelsonrj@jmu.edu.

"If you don't say anything, you won't be called upon to repeat it."
—Calvin Coolidge

PCS SEEKING ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER EDITOR

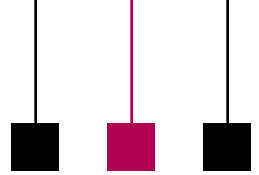
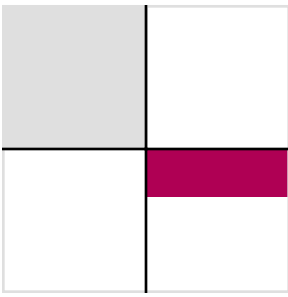
In January 2005 the IEEE Professional Communication Society (PCS) will migrate our printed *Newsletter* to an electronic newsletter. The goal of the new publication is to provide more timely information in combination with our Web site and virtual community.

The part-time job of the editor will include:

- Determine editorial direction, based on input from the Editorial Advisory Committee and, initially, the Newsletter Migration Committee
- Determine the frequency of publication and how best to integrate the electronic publication with information on the PCS Web site and in the virtual community
- Determine the optimal delivery mechanism for this electronic newsletter and the best combination of push and pull to encourage members to read the newsletter but not pester them
- Commission a professional design for the publication
- Recruit authors for one-time articles and regular columns
- Assemble a staff of volunteer reporters to cover areas of interest to PCS members
- Identify sources of additional material that could be subject to commentary or discussion within the PCS publication
- Oversee the final migration of the *Newsletter* from print to electronic distribution
- Conduct periodic surveys to determine whether the electronic newsletter meets the goals and expectations of PCS members
- Work with IEEE staff to facilitate electronic distribution

A stipend is available for this position and will be commensurate with experience.

Please e-mail a cover letter, a resume or curriculum vitae, and names of three professional references to newsletter@ieeepcs.org by 15 June 2004. Questions also may be sent to this e-mail address.



Blah, Blah, Blog

By Paul McFedries

It's the nature of Internet manias: They tend to leave almost as fast as they come, with only the rarest of rages sticking around for the long haul. Of the Internet "in things" that have remained "in," perhaps the most surprising is the humble Web log, or *blog*. This is a kind of digital diary, a Web page to which a writer posts chronological entries on a particular topic. The main difference between a blog and a regular Web site is that the blog's information is updated frequently, often several times a day or more.

No one knows how many blogs exist, but a search of the Whois database returns over 20 000 domain names that include the word *blog*. A recent survey by Perseus Development Corp. in Braintree, Massachusetts, estimated that there are over 4.1 million blogs just on blog-hosting sites such as LiveJournal and BlogCity. It's likely that there are at least as many standalone blogs. The Perseus survey also showed that about two-thirds of the blogs hadn't been updated in over two months, so the total number of active bloggers is probably somewhat less than three million.

That so few blogs remain active highlights an undeniable fact of blogging life: It's difficult and time-consuming to keep a blog fresh with constant new entries (called *blog blurbs*). Yet blogs of all stripes still spring up every day like so many mushrooms

after a spring rain. So most blogs may be transitory, but the collection of blogs—called variously *blogistan*, the *blogverse*, or, most often, the *blogosphere*—remains vibrant.

Bloggers tend to be passionate about their hobby, and the best among them—the so-called *blogerati* or *blognoscenti*—are genuine stars with dedicated followers. These include the likes of writer Doc Searles (<http://doc.weblogs.com>), the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Cory Doctorow (<http://boingboing.net>), journalist Andrew Sullivan (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com>), and technoguru Esther Dyson (<http://release4.blogspot.com>).

The vast majority of blogs are nothing more than ever-so-slightly glorified online diaries that record the daily trials and tribulations of the blogger. The worst of these journal blogs are dismissed as *kittyblogs* (since so many of them describe what their cat has done that day) or *bloggerel* (blog doggerel), and these bloggers are often accused of oversharing (providing too much detail about their personal lives) or being guilty of *blogorrhoea* (posting too much information in general).

The rest of the blogosphere consists mostly of blogs devoted to specific topics. For example, a *blawg* is related to legal matters or is written by a lawyer; a *bleg* is used to beg for help or money; an *advocacy blog*

supports a political cause; and a *news blog* or *pundit blog* examines mainstream news media and punditry (not to be confused with a blog that breaks its own news, or *blews*).

Covering language and linguistics is the job of a *linguablog*; a *tech blog* focuses on technology; an *edu-blog* discusses education issues; a *warblog* tackles war, particularly the war on terrorism; and a *photog* is a blog that posts pictures, particularly candid shots of people in public places.

In recent months we've seen the rise of the *moblog*, a blog maintained and updated using a mobile device such as a notebook, a palmtop computer, or a cell phone. (Photogs are often updated via the new camera phones that are the latest rage.) With its emphasis on mobility, the moblog has created an interesting new dynamic at conferences and business meetings, as bloggers post critiques of the current speaker and other attendees read those critiques and comment on them. This generates an entire back channel of communication that the speaker is likely to be unaware of.

Proof, perhaps, of blogging's having arrived is the increasing roster of professional journalists who maintain blogs. These include the aforementioned Sullivan; Dan Gillmor (<http://weblog.siliconvalley.com/column/dangillmor/>), the technology columnist of the *San Jose Mercury News*; and Daniel Weintraub, a columnist at the *Sacramento Bee*

(continued on page 21)

Playing With Prototypes

By Kirk St.Amant

Image design has become an important part of technical communication practices. For technical writing students, however, the shift from text-based to visual communication can be a daunting one. This transition is further complicated when instructors cover the topic of culture and image design. Yet students need to learn of such culture-related differences if they are to work successfully with localizers. Fortunately, prototype theory can serve as an effective foundation for examining culture and image design.

Prototypes: An Overview

According to prototype theory, humans use a visual representation, or *prototype*, to identify objects, and prototypes help individuals determine whether an item belongs to a particular category of objects. The process works as follows: Each prototype is composed of features, or *characteristics*, that are the traits an item should possess to be identified as a particular kind of object. When individuals encounter something new, they compare the characteristics of that item to those of the different prototypes in their memory. Objects that have enough characteristics in common with a particular prototype are identified as belonging to the category represented by that prototype. So, if *hammer* is my prototype for *tool*, then the more an object resembles a hammer, the more likely I am to classify it as a tool.

Teaching With Prototypes

Prototype theory helps students view images as composite vs. holistic representations, and instructors can use basic drawings to help students understand this characteristic-prototype relationship. For example, the instructor can begin by drawing a rectangle on the board and asking students, “What is this?” Most will respond, “A rectangle.” The instructor can then draw a circle in each bottom corner of the rectangle (in the places where the wheels on a car are located) and ask, “And what is this?” Many students will respond “a car” or “a bus.” At this point the instructor can explain how the addition of two simple characteristics changed the way students identified that image. Next the instructor can draw a series of small squares across the length of the rectangle (in locations where the windows on a bus are) and ask, “What is this?” Chances are that several students will identify the object as a bus. The instructor can then explain how the addition of new characteristics or features again affects the identification of the object.

From this point the instructor asks students to review a series of online images that depict one kind of object. When reviewing the first image, students make a checklist of the characteristics associated with the prototype for that particular item. They use

their checklists to review a second image and note characteristics that:

- Already appear on the checklist
- Do not appear on the checklist
- Appear on the checklist but not in the image being examined

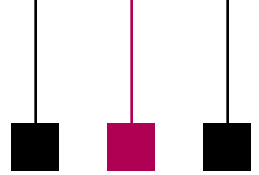
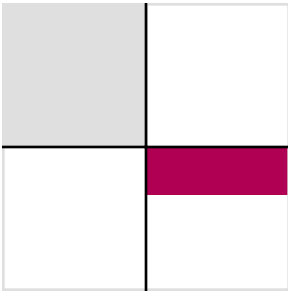
Students repeat this process with other images of the same object until a final checklist of common characteristics is created. They then use this checklist to create two images of the object they studied. The first image will be fairly realistic, the second will be an abstraction, and students test both images by asking peers to identify what each image represents. Through such testing students learn how characteristics help individuals identify different kinds of images.

Internationalizing Prototypes

To address culture and image design, students can use a similar prototype analysis process involving the creation of a design checklist. This time, however, students review images designed for audiences from another culture.

To begin this process students locate images designed for particular cultural audiences, and one key resource is international Web sites. Multiple examples of the same item need to be examined so students should first locate the international Web sites of

Designing images for different cultural audiences



companies that sell the same kind of products in different countries. Many of those sites contain links to the sites the company uses to sell its product in particular countries (e.g., Sony's <http://www.world.sony.com>).

Once at this site students select a culture to review and perform a prototype-characteristic analysis of a particular product or item. The objective is to develop a checklist for how to depict that item for a specific cultural audience. The process is repeated with product images found on three or four other business sites designed for the same cultural group. With each new site students modify their design checklist until they have developed a final list of most common characteristics.

Students use their findings to create strategies for how a particular item should be designed to meet the expectations of a particular cultural audience. They report their findings to the class and use images from international sites to explain how

the different characteristics they've identified come together to form the prototype for a particular object. Through this activity students:

- Learn that cultures can have different visual representations for an object
- Gain a familiarity with prototypes from other cultures
- Learn how to apply prototype theory to analyze international images
- Develop strategies for presenting visual information in a way that addresses cultural expectations

Although such exercises are only a beginning to understanding international image design, they provide a mechanism students can use to understand cultural expectations related to visual communication.

Images are a central part of effective technical communication and prototype theory can assist with the teaching of image design. Moreover, prototype concepts provide a mechanism for designing images for different

cultural audiences. By using prototype-based exercises, instructors can provide students with a simple but effective method for understanding a variety of visual displays.

The author is an assistant professor with the Institute of Technical and Scientific Communication at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. He has a background in anthropology, international government, and technical communication, and his research interests include intercultural communication, online communication, and international e-commerce. He can be reached at stamankr@jmu.edu.

The Word Spy by Paul McFedries

"This work has given me a bad case of 'author envy,' which is as demeaning as any other example of that emotion. Heavens, this man has done an appallingly large amount of research to create this book. In coining *author envy*, I join a long line of people who generate new words and phrases for the fun of it, words that for the past seven years have been Paul McFedries's special interest. This book presents many of the invented words that first appeared in his daily newsletter and which are archived on his Web site (<http://www.wordspy.com>)."
The Word Spy, New York: Broadway Books, 2004.

—*Michael Quinion in World Wide Words, 13 March 2004*

New Exhibit at IEEE Virtual Museum

The IEEE Virtual Museum (<http://ieee-virtual-museum.org/>) has a new exhibit titled "World War II: How War Impacted Technology; How Technology Impacted War." It contains information on:

- Causes of war
- Technologies that impacted battle and changed how war is fought
- Technologies that grew out of wartime urgency, such as radar, jet engines, nuclear weapons, and rockets
- Individuals who created and used wartime technology in innovative ways



I'm Just Not a Visual Person!

The Professor was recently meeting with a colleague who, when asked to evaluate and enhance the look and feel of some information, complained, "How can I do that? I'm just not a visual person!" While the Professor doesn't presume to be a graphic designer or an artist, she does believe that every writer has the skills and understanding to make information visually effective.

You can practice visual thinking without being a designer or illustrator. The secret is to develop a somewhat two-sided thought process. You must identify the bits of information that are most important for your user to find and understand, and then become your user to determine what would best help you find and process that information. The following questions might help you get started:

- What visual cues help you find information?
- Do you need to understand a concept before being able to do a task? Would a picture help get the concept across more quickly?
- Often, information is written for a mixed audience. If there is some information that you need more than other information, what can guide you to the pertinent information and help you avoid the unnecessary information?
- Are there document elements that, by their unique structure, help you find specific types of information more quickly, for example:

Boxes
Diagrams

Examples
Headings
Icons
Lists of varying types
Rules
Running heads and feet
Tables

- What might make the following visual cues more obvious and easier to use:
 - Critical information pop out?
 - Examples easier to find?
 - Graphics easier to read and understand?
 - Hints and tips easier to find without disrupting the primary text flow?
 - Lists easier to parse?
 - Tables easier to scan?
- What helps you find logical places to pause and later find where to resume?
- What helps guide you through the information in the most logical sequence?

Make
information
visually
effective.

- When does the number of visual cues become distracting rather than helpful?

The Professor would wager that you can already answer many of those questions. If there are some that you cannot answer, though, you are still well on your way to having more visually effective information. You can take the questions to your visual designers and put them to work finding and developing answers. Congratulations on a job well done!

*Copyright 2003 by IBM Corporation. Used with permission. 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**, authored by the Council.*

Blah, Blah, Blog

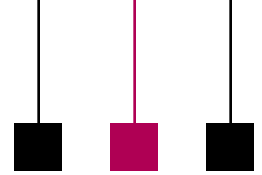
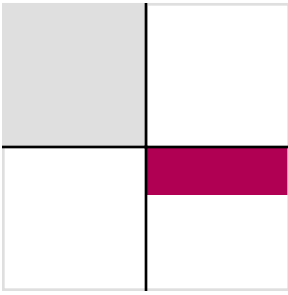
(continued from page 18)

(<http://www.sacbee.com/static/weblogs/insider/>).

But many blog enthusiasts scoff at these relics from the ancient media and extol the virtues of the bloggers who remain independent and free from corporate fetters. They claim these pure bloggers are the ones who

will let freedom ring in the 21st century and who will light the path to truth and justice. Some dismiss this as mere blog triumphalism, but surely three million bloggers can't all be wrong?

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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 an 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 travel allowance is USD 2000 for AdCom members outside North America.

You need not be a member of the AdCom to play a role in these and other PCS activities. There's plenty of rewarding work for anyone who wants to volunteer by contacting Tom Orr, our volunteer coordinator, at t-orr@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/>.

The author is a member of the AdCom and program chair for IPCC 2004.

Special Issue of *Technical Communication Quarterly* on Cultural Studies Approaches to Technical Communication

The guest editors invite original essays on research, teaching, theorizing, and practice of technical communication that draw on concepts and strategies of cultural studies. We broadly define cultural studies as the critical study of cultural conditions, relations, circulation, and effects of power-laden practices—in this case technical communication—that are socio-historically situated and are involved in the shaping of subjects.

The cultural studies framework we propose can encompass a wide array of (inter)disciplinary and methodolog-

ical traditions. These include not only those widely designated as cultural studies, such as the Frankfurt and Birmingham schools, but also traditions developed out of anthropology, cultural geography, communication studies, critical pedagogy, composition studies (e.g., ecocomposition and institutional critique), and other fields.

Articles should address both the strengths and limitations of using cultural studies and should propose specific ways to adapt

cultural studies to the study and practice of technical communication.

Send proposals in .DOC or .RTF format via e-mail to: **Blake Scott**, bscott@mail.ucf.edu, or **Bernadette Longo**, blongo@umn.edu.

Contact the editors if you have any questions or would like to be considered as a reviewer for this issue.

Deadlines

1-2 page proposal for paper	1 July 2004
Full paper (if proposal is accepted)	15 January 2005
Scheduled publication of issue	Winter 2006

Call for Papers IPCC 2005 Making Connections

10-13 July 2005 Limerick, Ireland



Ceangail (KANG-guhl)—Gaelic, tying or connecting together. Communication is the tie that binds people around the world, crossing boundaries of knowledge, cultures, languages, and values. Technical communication connects engineers, educators, managers, and communicators in a global community. Come to IPCC 2005 in Limerick, Ireland, to explore these connections and share knowledge. <http://ieeeps.org/Limerick>

Proposed Program Threads and Topics

- **Localisation**
 - Technical writing
 - Technical translation
 - Vendor management
 - Writing for International English
 - Project management
 - Localisation teams
 - Software issues
- **Engineering Management**
 - Managing virtual teams
 - Cross-cultural communication
 - Knowledge management
 - Compatibility issues
 - Managing technology
- **Teaching and Training**
 - Teaching engineers
 - Preparing practitioners
 - Distance learning
 - Writing in new fields
 - International English training
- **Tools and Technology**
 - Translation tools
 - E-learning tools
 - New technologies
 - Authoring tools for the Web
 - International documentation
- **Cross-Cultural Communication**
 - Design and graphics
 - Web design
 - Training
 - Outsourcing issues
 - Documentation challenges
 - International English; ESL
 - Usability

Session Type
Paper (2-3 presentations in a 90-minute session)
Panel discussion (1-4 speakers, brief presentations with discussion in a 90-minute session)
Conference workshop (90 minutes)

Proposal Instructions

Please submit these items:

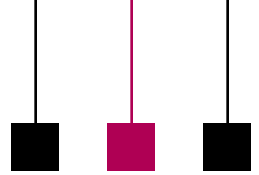
1. Description of topic (250 words)
2. Description of intended audience
3. Brief (100-word) biosketch of each author, including contact information (e-mail address and telephone number)
4. The suggested thread
5. The suggested session type
6. Statement of agreement to present: "If this proposal is accepted, I agree to register for IPCC 2005 and make the presentation described in this proposal."

Send your proposal to **Helen Grady, program chair**, at grady_h@mercer.edu no later than 15 October 2004. Electronic submissions are preferred. If you have questions, contact her at +1 478 301 2211.

For other conference questions, contact **general chair, Marj Davis**, at davis_mt@mercer.edu or call +1 478 301 2356.

Program Calendar

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| 15 Oct. 2004 | Proposals due |
| 15 Nov. 2004 | Acceptance notifications sent |
| 15 Jan. 2005 | Draft of paper due |
| 15 Feb. 2005 | Feedback to authors |
| 15 March 2005 | Final papers due |



Conference Program Preview

By Jana Kunde

Communication is rapidly evolving before our eyes; each day new communication frontiers are etched in our workplaces, homes, and minds. Find out how to navigate this ever-changing landscape at IPCC 2004, Communication Frontiers, 29 September–2 October in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This three-day conference (plus workshops) will give you an opportunity to preview cutting edge communication technologies, explore undeveloped areas within your discipline that are profitable for research, and discuss ideas with experts whose work pushes the boundaries of science, engineering, medicine, and other fields. You will also gain insight from other communication professionals and listen to presentations from industry experts, including a keynote address by William Horton, acclaimed author and communication specialist.

We look forward to seeing you at the conference, a valuable opportunity to explore new tools and strategies for navigating the evolving frontiers of communication. Here are a few of the exciting topics that will be addressed:

- Assessing oral presentation and writing skills
- Content management
- Developing and managing Web sites
- Health communication
- International communication issues
- International outsourcing
- Management issues in communication
- Research methods and analysis



NAVIGATING
THE EVOLVING
FRONTIERS OF
COMMUNICATION

29 SEPTEMBER –
2 OCTOBER, 2004

- Research reports
- Teaching with technology
- Understanding visual communication
- Using and developing small devices
- Web site navigation
- Working on teams

Early registration is available online through 15 August at <http://www.ieeepcs.org> (click on IPCC 2004).

