

Language and Usability

By Whitney Quesenbery

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- Net Notes

Usability For All

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- Tools of the Trade

Considering Open Source CMS

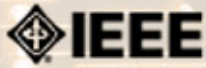
The Budapest Index is a web site featuring information on real estate, shopping, dining, transportation services, and other activities in Budapest, Romania. The New Zealand Opera Society's online home offers the latest information on professional opera, especially that found in New Zealand. In addition to providing a calendar of upcoming opera productions and news on opera both in New Zealand and elsewhere, the site allows users, just like the Budapest Index, to register and contribute news or to engage in online discussions on a variety of issues...[Read more.](#)

- Events

Register Now for Ireland Conference!!!

The IPPC conference is being held in lovely Limerick, Ireland on **10-13 July 2005**. IEEE Professional Communication Society invites you to register now to attend IPCC 2005. Link directly to the registration page: <https://www.iccbookings.com/ipcc/registration.php>

[Read more.](#)



Feature Article

Language and Usability

by Whitney Quesenbery, Whitney Interactive design

Usability is an important part of good technical communication. Many writers incorporate usability techniques such as site visits, user task analysis and usability testing into their work.

We can see how closely usability and document design are related in two definitions by leading experts. In both of these definitions, the goal is to ensure not only that their product is useful, but that it helps the users succeed in their own work:

Usability:	Document Design:
The extent to which people can find what they need, understand what they find, and use the information they find to meet their goals. (Ginny Redish)	The work of creating texts (broadly defined) that integrate words and pictures in ways that help people to achieve their specific goals for using texts at home, school or work. (Karen Shriver)

But we can also look at the relationship from the other direction. If usability is part of technical communication, language – the building block of technical communication – is an important part of the usability of a web site or software application. The better a product communicates, the more helpful it is, the easier it is to use.

When user assistance and instruction are woven into the interface, users learn seamlessly, as part of the natural experience. This is especially true in web applications, where marketing, instructions and the actual application all converge in a single window.

A helpful interface is a usable interface

Even a simple user interface, such as this form is filled with words – over 100 of them in this part of the form alone.

Let's look at how these words are used, and how they enhance the usability of the sign up process.

First, we need to understand a little more about the context in which the form is used. This is the sign up for a free trial of an inexpensive online blog service. The business goal is to make this as simple and easy as possible so that people will try the service.

There will be many different kinds of people who sign up, each with their own goals, but one persona is especially

interesting, because she's a new kind of customer, and one who might need a little extra help to be willing to sign up.



Elaine

- 29 years old
- Works in a travel agency
- Uses the web and email for personal use
- An avid user of IM to talk to her friends

Elaine just bought her first house, and has started to renovate it. She uses the web regularly for both information and entertainment. For example, she found a site with how-to tips for some tricky problems like re-hanging her windows.

Lately she's seen a number of sites that are a sort of diary of bike trips. She likes the format a lot, and thinks that it might be an easy way to keep her family and friends in touch with progress on her renovations. She wants to be able to write postcards, with pictures, with all her progress.

One of the sites calls itself a "blog" so she Googles the word looking for information. She finds the TypePad web site and decides to sign up for their free trial so she can test it out.

Now, that we've met Elaine, let's look at how the sign up form helps her successfully register to use the service.

- The title is an active instruction, and includes a tag line that clearly states the purpose of the form – "follow the steps below to register..."
- The first step is marked with a bullet image, and is also written as a clear instruction.
- Even better, a short prompt below the instruction lets Elaine know why she needs a user name and a password. She's going to use this user name a lot, so she wants to make it one she can remember easily.
- As she starts to fill in the form, she sees that there are short explanations for each field, giving her the reason why this information is needed, or hints on how to fill it in correctly. This text is clearly of lesser importance, but having it available right on the screen means she doesn't have to click on a help link to read the information.
- The page is also nicely designed, with a clear grid, and use of color to help highlight the headings.

Even without a usability test to collect real users reactions, we can guess that this form makes Elaine feel more confident in signing up, and increases her sense that this will be a good company to work with.

Did you notice that many of the things that make this form better involve language and information design?

For a comparison, let's take a look at this form without them. This form is simple enough that Elaine might not have any problems supplying the information it ask for, even without the good headings, prompts and explanations. If the form was more complex, however, or Elaine was a little hesitant about creating a user name, this version does not do anything to help her.

Sign up for TypePad

User name and password

Member Name:

Password:

Password (again):

Password Recovery:

The user assistance in this form makes the difference between one that offers a friendly, helpful experience and one that is prone to errors or misunderstandings.

Making interfaces helpful

The process of making a web page or application helpful is similar to the process for designing any user assistance. Four principles can guide your work:

- **Be informative.** Don't make users guess at what the form, page or application will do or what the web site is for.
- **Be understandable.** Use language and terminology that are meaningful to the audience.
- **Be helpful.** Provide instructions throughout the process, putting the information where it is needed.
- **Anticipate.** Answer questions before they are asked.

In order to follow these principles, you must learn about the people who will use your products. What are their goals? What questions do they have about your product or service? What will help them have a successful experience?

Understanding the answers to these questions will help you not only create better technical documentation, but can also help you improve the usability of the product.

Copyright (c) 2004, Whitney Interactive Design. (Reprinted with permission. This article originally supplemented the **Tekom** July 2004 keynote.) Whitney Quesenbery is a user interface designer and usability specialist with a passion for clear communication. She is president of UPA and was appointed to a committee for the US Election Assistance Commission, where she works to ensure the usability of voting systems. Before she was seduced by a little beige computer, Whitney was a theatrical lighting designer. The lessons from the theatre stay with her in creating user experiences. She can be reached at www.WQusability.com

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President's Column



President's Column

by Eduardo Clark

It was a dark and stormy night... no, not really, actually, a documentation usability workshop that got me involved with the Professional Communication Society (PCS) as a volunteer awhile back. In the mid 1990s, I had the opportunity to attend this workshop in Austin, Texas and the instructor was Roger Grice, now past-president of PCS. He was the first PCS member I ever met and the one who inspired me to get more involved with PCS.

At that time, I had already been a PCS member for more than 10 years and a card-carrying IEEE member for a few more years. My connection with PCS back then was limited to just reading its publications – mostly the Newsletter. This year, I started my third term with the AdCom, and my second and final year as president. Looking back, I sure got some usability instruction from attending that workshop--in more than one way.

Usability in a product does matter and, if the use of the product is intuitive, the documentation becomes less necessary no matter how usable the documentation itself is. Whenever and wherever a product requires constant reference to the manual for its use, the user interface is lacking in connecting with the user graphically, or otherwise. You should never have to wonder where the wandering manual is to use a product in an everyday fashion. You should be able to “play it by ear” most of the time.

Product usability matters most if it comes with an attractive design because the user expectations increase. Proof of this is the immense popularity of the iPod music player and the Motorola Razr cellular telephone -- neither of which is cheap but both are quite intuitive to use. People gladly pay a premium to own a stylish product that even changes the way we do things. Nowadays, car stereos are becoming iPod-ready, following the trend that apparently started with the BMW – not exactly “the people’s car”.

The other day, I visited an Apple Store and I was amazed by the stylish beauty and usability of Apple products. Since Apple introduced OS X, with UNIX behind the scenes to provide the operating system with robustness, high security, and nerd appeal, even the command-line hackers have switched to Apple's elegant usability – sure, they can always use the Terminal console if they get tired of the usability. Apple computers “are no longer just for graphic designers and grandmas” as programmer guru Paul Graham says in his Web article Return of the Mac (www.paulgraham.com/mac.html). An engineer friend of mine at work recently bought a Mac Mini and brought it to the office to show it around. A co-worker jokingly asked if he carried its picture in his wallet. He probably would have never shown around an IBM PC XT, nor attempted to emulate a Motorola processor on it, as he is planning to do with the Mac.

At this point, you would think that I work for Apple but I don't. In fact, I used to dislike Macs before they acquired UNIX

strength. Now, I am writing this column on my very dear Mac PowerBook (powered by Freescale Semiconductor's G4 PowerPC chip). I am planning some day soon owning an iMac G5 to go Mac all the way and stay reasonably safe from spyware, adware, and malware in general, of which I have been a victim: The Web domain: killinghoikiuc.com was fraudulently acquired by whomever stole my personal information and credit card number from my "commodity" computer after it got infected with seemingly innocuous adware. This perpetrator even bought Adobe GoLive with my credit card to publish the Web site. (Do you want French fries with that "perp"?)

My problems aside and, to be fair, though, I have to admit that the Wintel platform outperforms the Mac in usability in some significant ways. Whenever (and wherever) I have to write the name of, my fellow AdCom member, Michaël Steehouder, I have trouble producing the letter "ë" (e with diaeresis) in his first name using my PowerBook. On my Wintel PC, in which I have the US International keyboard set up, it is just a matter of entering "e. That is, find something equal or similar to the diacritical mark and then press the corresponding letter: Now, that's intuitive! For Mac OS, I searched Google for "OS X accented characters". I found almost 200k hits and many of the listed Web sites had the .edu extension. Well, if academics have trouble figuring this out, there is little hope for the rest of us. Anyway, Portland Community College (webct.pcc.edu/support/langmac.html) has a good guide. Then again, key sequences such as Option-e, Option-Shift-l, are not good examples of usability. It is much easier to open the Character Palette to copy the needed character.

In some products, like analog watches, the usability has always been there. A pull-out crown adjuster with only three degrees of freedom is intrinsically easy to use. Digital watches are the opposite; the usability (and style differentiation) has been missing so much that their prices have plummeted to the dollar bin in the US. In most digital timepieces, you find buttons A, B, and C. And, of course, you have to RTFM (read the *fantastic* manual) to find out which one is which and what it does. When I switched to radio-controlled, so-called "atomic clocks" because they receive a time signal from the atomic clock in Colorado, I thought that I would be free of the manual. Well, not quite. Twice a year, when I have to switch to and from daylight savings time, I have to get the manual. I just cannot memorize that pressing the Mode button (the one with an arrow and no label) for a few seconds reactivates the radio controlled setup after the seemingly mandatory re-setting of the time zone.

Well, it's getting dark (although no storm in sight), and I have to send this article to the Newsletter editor who is nagging me for it.

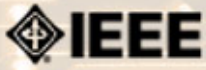
"Thereover, hereunder

You'll never have to wonder

We can always play by ear

But that's the deal my dear"

From *Whenever, Wherever* -- song by Shakira



Net Notes

Usability for All

by **Beth Weise Moeller**

With a small budget to create a website, many small businesses bypass usability testing. While it is not always possible to do a full-blown usability test on a small website, there are steps that website developers can take to help make sure users are not ignored during the process.

Early Intervention

Start by discussing the users of the website with the customer. Does the company cater to tech-savvy people, or is this an organization with members bordering on luddite status? The perceived technical prowess of a website's users can go a long way in determining the site's final level of complexity and its navigational structure.

During this conversation, developers should also discuss what the customer wants on the website. The end result should be a site map, very much like an organizational chart, that shows the breadth and depth of the site and the internal connections from one location to another.

Both developers and users will benefit from this early intervention, before the design is actually created.

The Design Phase

Armed with knowledge of the user as well as the necessary navigation and text elements, the graphic artist can begin work on the design. Obviously, the artist will need to incorporate the customer's logo and colors, as well as the likes and dislikes of the customer.

Once a rough design is decided, the graphic artist can create a paper prototype of the design for the customer. The customer can use this prototype to show it around the office and ask his/her customers where they might click on the screen to find a specific piece of information. While this is not a scientifically robust usability test, it still provides the designer and customer with valuable feedback on the design before the website is programmed.

Programming the Website

The best way to make the website user-friendly is to program using standards set forth by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). W3C guidelines help to ensure compatibility with a variety of browsers and assistive devices. This does not mean a website has to be "boring" or lack pizzazz. Flash and JavaScript are still permissible, but they need to be used with care to make sure they do not hinder the usability or accessibility of the website.

After programming, developers and the customer can test a beta website before it goes live. To conduct the beta test, upload the website to the final production server and perform the following tests:

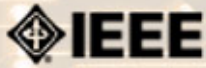
- View all pages to verify the site looks and behaves as expected.

- Test all forms to make sure data is captured and distributed as expected.
- Check the data that arrives at the customer's location to verify it meets their needs and the workflow process defined will work once "real" data arrives.
- Crash test the website by submitted data that would not normally be expected on all forms.

Conclusions

Creating a user-friendly website on a low budget is possible with some basic techniques outlined here. The end result will be a website that is easy for customers to use and that will serve the developer's client well.

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Newsletter



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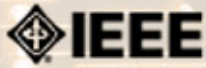
Reviews

Usability Resources

I've compiled the following list of usability resources that you may find helpful. The list is by no means exhaustive, and if you know of others, please write and share with the rest of us.

- Dumas, J and Redish, J. *A Practical Guide to Usability Testing*. 1999. ISBN: 1841500208. UK: Intellect Ltd.
- Flanders, Vincent. *Web Pages That Suck*. <http://www.webpagethatsuck.com/>
- Hom, James. *Usability Toolbox*. <http://jthom.best.vwh.net/usability/>
- Krug, Steve. *Don't Make Me Think! A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*. 2000. ISBN: 0789723107. New Riders Press, 2nd edition.
- Nielson, Jakob. <http://www.useit.com/>
- Nielson, Jakob. *Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity*. 1999. ISBN: 156205810X. New Riders Press.
- Nielson, Jakob. *Usability Engineering*. 1994. ISBN: 0125184069. Morgan Kaufmann.
- Quesenbery, Whitney. Various articles. <http://www.wqusability.com/publications.html>.
- Spool, Jared. <http://www.uie.com/>
- Usability News. <http://www.usabilitynews.com/>
- Usability Professionals Association. <http://www.upassoc.org/>

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Editor's Column



Usability

by Kit brown

As you probably guessed if you read my [meeting reports](#), April has been somewhat frenetic, with a week and a half of travel in addition to my usual deadlines and work commitments. And 7 May, I'm off again--this time to the [STC annual conference](#) in Seattle, WA.

So, what does this travel have to do with Usability, our theme for May? Well, as any weary traveler will tell you, airports are notoriously lacking in user friendliness. While most of them have reasonably good signage, many don't have clocks placed very prominently (maybe to keep us from realizing how late the plane really is), and the departure/arrival information is often difficult to find (especially if your gate is at the back-end of nowhere and you have less than 20 minutes to get to the opposite end).

Then, there is security. Some airports make you take off your shoes, others make you take off your sweater or jacket (pretty soon, they will want us to strip to our underwear). All of them require you to remove your laptop computer but don't provide a convenient place to do this without holding up the line. There is little consistency in how airports screen passengers, or in what they confiscate at the scanners.

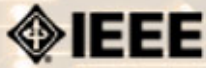
One very useful and usable feature of modern travel, however, is the e-ticket. With an e-ticket, you can check in the night before using the Internet, give your baggage to the skycap, and waltz straight to the security line. If you can't check in the night before, you can use one of the kiosks to print your boarding pass. These kiosks use the information stored on your credit card or frequent flyer card to bring up all your flight details and to print your ticket. For most of them, the user interface is wonderfully simple and self-explanatory.

Unfortunately, most of the airlines have placed them at the check-in counters where the poor schmucks with paper tickets have to stand to make their arrangements. It can be difficult for the harried business traveler to get past the maze of luggage and screaming children to access the kiosks. A better idea would be to place the kiosk (with a skycap nearby for checking luggage) off to the side and out of the way of the other agents.

Which brings us to some key concepts in usability:

Without consistency and accessibility, even the most beautiful design will fail because it doesn't meet the needs of the user.

Happy Reading!



Tools of the Trade

Considering Open Source Content Management Systems

by Brian Still

The **Budapest Index** is a web site featuring information on real estate, shopping, dining, transportation services, and other activities in Budapest, Romania. The **New Zealand Opera Society's** online home offers the latest information on professional opera, especially that found in New Zealand. In addition to providing a calendar of upcoming opera productions and news on opera both in New Zealand and elsewhere, the site allows users, just like the Budapest Index, to register and contribute news or to engage in online discussions on a variety of issues.

What both of these sites have in common is that they rely on open source software (OSS) for their content management. For them and other organizations that may lack significant funds to pay for a web presence built from scratch (let alone purchase and implement a proprietary content management system), open source software content management systems (CMS) offer affordability, flexibility, and in many cases outstanding performance.

The Rise of Open Source CMS

Over the last few years, there have been countless OSS content management systems deployed. Talented developers from around the world are contributing their skills to supporting CMSes that are generally free and that possess capabilities equal to many purchase-only CMS options. The result is that organizations like the **Intersex Society of North America** (ISNA), staffed by non-technical volunteers and working with a minimal operating budget, can employ **Drupal**, an OSS CMS, to manage a vast repository of information, recruit support and donations, manage blogs, push news via email newsletters, and in general, display a crisp design and easy-to-use navigability that makes it appear to any visitor that it is a definitive, reliable source of information. Thanks to open source CMS, gone are the days when under-funded, non-technical individuals or groups could only post poorly designed, generally static web sites.

Pros and Cons

Of course, open source CMS is not without its negatives. It can be technically challenging, if not overwhelming, for those not familiar with Linux or other non-Windows technology. Some also have **pointed out correctly** that with so many open source CMS solutions available, developers, often working for free, are stretched thin. Rather than supporting just a few projects, they are providing their crucial skills and experience to so many, which stagnates the potential for a few of the better systems to gain increasing technical sophistication, and thus, break out from the pack. Finally, with so many options available, it is difficult for users to determine which one is the right fit for them, their clients, or their organizations.

Despite these negatives, open source CMS is just too cheap and too capable to ignore. OSS offers content management solutions that otherwise might not be available to individuals, small, or medium-sized organizations. In addition, because its code is open, it can be modified, and this allows more technically capable users to extend its capabilities even further. Because of these capabilities and potential applications, we technical communicators need to learn more about open source CMS, including where to find it, what different options are available, and also how to evaluate it.

Questions to Ask

When considering open source CMS, answer the following questions:

- How long the software has been available?
- How many developers support it?
- How popular is it? (frequency of download or how highly it is rated)

Recommended Systems

For ratings on open source CMSes, go to www.opensourcecms.com. This site carries the latest news on open source CMS, and it also provides listings of the open source CMS rated best in particular categories, such as web portal, blog, e-commerce, e-learning, and wiki (user-maintained web site).

Relying on those ratings and my own experience working with both open source and proprietary CMS, the following list shows what I consider to be the more stable, more robust, and also more popular open source CMSes available:

- **XOOPS** (Extensible Object Oriented Portal System)—XOOPS works well for maintaining web sites of all sizes. It allows user customization. Modules, including ad management, mailing list managers, and e-commerce, can be added to it. Site administrators can also choose from dozens of different looks, just by clicking the mouse to change from one theme to another.
- **Exponent**—Running on PHP with the MySQL database driving it behind the scenes, Exponent is a popular CMS choice because users who don't know HTML or CSS can easily modify pages, and web administrators can easily establish permissions that govern which parts the user is allowed to modify.
- **Drupal**—Already mentioned, Drupal is growing in popularity, in part because of the many modules that users can attach to extend its core functionality.
- **PHPWCMS**—This is the most highly rated open source CMS. It runs on Linux and Windows. Its backend supports 13 different languages. Users can create email newsletters, links with thumbnail images, and, among other things, a site map and article menu.
- **Mambo**—Ranked just behind PHPWCMS, Mambo is a popular choice, primarily because it is more capable than other open source CMS of extending beyond the small or medium size market. In fact, it can serve as a corporate web site portal. It allows for multiple user designations, including registered users, editors, and guests. Go to the [Ottawa School of Management](#) or [Porsche Brazil](#) for examples of it in action.

This list is by no means exhaustive. There are definitely other portal CMSes worthy of consideration, including [e107](#), [Simple Machines](#), and [PHP-Fusion](#). In addition, [Moodle](#) is a great e-learning CMS. [Moodles](#), in fact, are managing courses everywhere now. Also [Zen Cart](#) should be looked at for e-commerce, [Guppy](#) for a non-database, lite CMS, [PunBB](#) for discussion boards, and [Nucleus CMS](#) for blogs.

If you want a more complete list of open source CMS, go to the [Open Source Content Management Systems Directory](#). [Sourceforge](#), [Freshmeat](#), and [OSCOM](#) are also invaluable sites for anyone interested in learning more about open source CMS or any other type of open source software.

[Brian Still](#) is an information technology consultant and lecturer teaching technical communications at Texas Tech University.



Newsletter



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Society News: Events

Let's Go Ireland! Only 10 Weeks to the Conference

by IPPC 2005 Conference Committee

The IPPC conference is being held in lovely Limerick, Ireland on 10-13 July 2005.

Register Now

IEEE Professional Communication Society invites you to register now to attend IPCC 2005. Link directly to the registration page: <https://www.iccbookings.com/ipcc/registration.php>

See Featured Speakers

Dr. Reinhard Schäler, a noted localization expert, will deliver the keynote address. A number of outstanding invited speakers are on the program, together with more than a hundred others whose presentation proposals passed the selection process. You will see a broader range of communication-related topics than ever before at IPCC!

See the conference program preview (<http://ieeeps.org/limerick/conference.htm>).

A list of all the presenters and their affiliations will be posted on the web site this week.

Meet International Colleagues

The presenters are from all over the world, and represent a broad cross-section of engineers, managers, professional communicators, practitioners and academics. IEEE Engineering Management Society, INTECOM, ATTW, CPTSC, tekcom, and others will be represented.

Become a Sponsor

Want to sponsor or co-sponsor the conference to draw attention to your company's services and products, or to your university's academic offerings? Link to <http://ieeeps.org/limerick/conference.htm#sponsors>.

Make Your Travel Plans

Shannon Airport is an easy destination from anywhere! Ireland is a beautiful, hospitable country to visit!

Limerick Travel will be happy to help you discover it. Here's their link: <http://www.letsgotravel.ie/>.



Newsletter



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Tidbits

Peer Review Process

Provided by Kim Campbell, *ieeepcs Transactions* editor

Debbie Davy, an IEEE-PCS *Transactions* Peer Reviewer, wrote an article for *The Quill*, the newsletter for STC-SW Ontario chapter. The article discusses the peer review process. [Read the article](#).

Webby Awards

Sent By bonnie Yelverton

Established in 1996, the Webby awards honor "excellence in Web design, creativity, usability and functionality". The nominees have been announced, with winners selected on 6 June 2005 at a gala event in New York City. [Take a look at the current nominees...](#)

Adding Value

Contributed by George Hayhoe

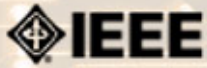
What do you know?! Someone is finally noticing that effective technical communication improves revenue. SoftwareCEO.com recently published an article called "Tech writers as sales reps? Interface Software's award-winning docs boost brand, revenues, and customer satisfaction" by Gordon Graham. A provocative (if long) title... [Read More](#).

Fake Paper Accepted to Conference

From *The Boston Globe*, April 20, 2005

What will they think of next?! Three MIT graduate students, with way too much time on their hands, invented a computer program that uses randomly selected words to create a grammatically correct, though nonsensical research paper. The fake paper was even selected for a conference...To read the article, go to <http://www.boston.com/news/globe/>, and search for "MIT" in the past 30 days. (The article appeared 20 April 2005.)

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Newsletter



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Society News: Members

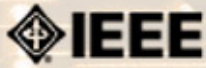
April 2005 Senior Member Announced

Congratulations to this Professional Communication Society member who achieved IEEE Senior Member status in April 2005:

- Michael Steehouder, the Netherlands

If you have 10 years or more of professional communication experience you can apply for IEEE Senior Member status. The forms are available on the Web: <http://www.ieee.org/organizations/rab/md/smforms.htm>. For more information or help in completing the forms, contact PCS.

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Society News: Meeting Reports

US-TAG

IEEE Editor's meeting

US-TAG Meeting Washington, DC 3-6 April 2005

by Kit brown

In April, I attended the US-TAG meeting as the alternate representative for IEEE-PCS. (Mark Haselkorn is the primary representative.) US-TAG is the US Technical Advisory Group for ISO. About 30 people from all over the US attended the meeting, where we reviewed and discussed various standards that are out for review.

Day 1

I flew into Baltimore because it was about \$300 cheaper than flying into Dulles (I found out later that the Cherry Blossom Festival was the same week). Luckily, I used to live in a big city, so the rush hour traffic didn't phase me that much. Unfortunately, in Sterling, VA (where the hotel and System and Software Consortium, Inc. are located), they are doing a lot of construction on the highway, so the mapquest map was completely wrong. I finally arrived at the Country Inn and Suites about 2 hours late, after being blinded by a lovely sunset as I drove up and down looking for the exit. The hotel staff was great and the check-in went smoothly.

By this time I was starving--they don't feed you on the plane anymore, and I'd had to leave at the crack of dawn to get to DC at a reasonable hour. The hotel manager suggested a great little Chinese place down the street called the Hula Inn, where I had a great meal (thank goodness I had a car because the restaurant option in walking distance was limited to Burger King). After dinner, I caught up on email using the free internet connection that the hotel provided.

Day 2

The hotel provided us with a shuttle to System and Software Consortium, Inc., which significantly reduced the hassle factor of finding it. I met Carol Dekkers on the shuttle; she's been working with the US-TAG for a long time, so it was great to have a guide. The only way into the System and Software Consortium, Inc. building was climbing over a chain across the entrance ramp and walking up the steep hill to the main entrance, where we were directed to the conference room.

SSCI provided a continental breakfast, coffee, tea, and juice in the morning. That made it easier to wake up (my body was still on GMT-7/Mountain Time, so it felt very early, even though it was 9am GMT-5/Eastern Time).

As folks introduced themselves, I was struck by the dedication and experience of everyone in the room. This group is passionate about improving our daily work lives by developing standards that improve quality and consistency.

For the morning session, each Work Group leader presented a status report, and discussed what we'd be doing during the meeting. The slides contained a dizzying array of numbers and acronyms that I'm still muddling through.

After lunch in the building cafeteria, each work group met to discuss the standards that they were reviewing. I found out that I was assigned to Work Group 2, with Annette Reilly and Tom Kurihara. We discussed several of the pending standards, and Annette and Tom brought me up to speed on our tasks for the week. This week turned out to be a great opportunity to get to know Annette better (I've known her for years through STC, but hadn't ever had the opportunity to work closely with her.) She turned out to be a great mentor.

After the work was done for the day, we all felt in need of some spiritous refreshment, so we headed to the local Outback Steakhouse, where we broke all the rules about discussions by talking about both religion and politics. It was a rousing good time.

Day 3

Annette and I worked all day on a couple of standards. One we needed to discuss with another Work Group because it affected both documentation and testing. The others were really long, and we didn't quite get through them.

That night, several of us went to the local dive bar and had some great burgers and beer.

Day 4

In the morning, we all gathered back together to evaluate our progress and to vote on some of the standards we had reviewed. We were done by noon, and since it was a gorgeous day and I was stuck in DC until the next day, I drove over to the Washington Mall to have a look around.

I walked the whole perimeter of the mall, including a detour along the banks of the Potomac (which were overflowing) to see the cherry trees in bloom. It was gorgeous and a great day for people watching. I was so very lucky to get there for the festival. Bands were playing around each of the memorials and the weather was beautiful. I stood in the Jefferson Memorial for a long time contemplating the words carved into the walls, and wishing that some of the US leaders would take them to heart....

As the day waned, I wended my way through rush hour traffic (almost dying in the process when a car behind me came very close to hitting me at about 80mph) north to the Quality Inn in Baltimore and began preparing for the next leg of my journey--the IEEE Editor's Meeting in New Orleans.

IEEE Editor's Meeting in New Orleans, LA 8-11 April 2005

By Kit Brown

IEEE holds an annual editor's meeting to discuss publication issues, processes, and strategies for the coming year. This year, the meeting was held in the Sheraton Hotel on Canal Street, just across from the famous French Quarter, where the French Quarter Festival happened to be going on. IEEE provided three great meals each day, and beignets (the quintessential New Orleans pastry) for snacks in the afternoon.

When I got there, I didn't know a single soul. I left with pockets full of business cards. The networking was the best part of the meeting, which focused a lot on the *Transactions* and other peer-reviewed journals. Very few of the newsletters are online, so we are breaking new ground. Even fewer of the editors are actually professional technical communicators--most are engineers or research scientists who work for universities. Everyone was very friendly and helpful.

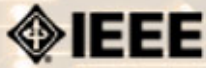
We all had wireless Internet access during the meeting, which made it easy to view the URLs and applications that were being discussed.

Each night, several of us went out to wander the French Quarter, where we found some great blues bands, danced our legs off, and tried the infamous Hurricane and Hand Grenade drinks. We also ate some great food.

I'd never been to New Orleans and my flight left in the evening, so I decided to tour the city and to take the river cruise. It threatened to rain all day, but I had a great time wandering around and absorbing the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, the deluge happened right when my flight should have departed--lightening mixed with sheets of rain and some hail delayed my flight just long enough that I ended up getting stuck in Denver (which was still cleaning up from the snowstorm). Luckily, I have tons of friends there, so I imposed on one of them for the few hours until my flight left the next morning. I was glad to get home.

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Guidelines

Newsletter Article Submission Guidelines

by **Kit Brown**

Submit articles by the 15th day the month before you want the article to appear. The newsletter is published monthly around the 1st of the month. The [editorial schedule](#) provides the proposed themes for each month. Additional suggestions are always welcome.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact [Kit Brown](#).

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Guidelines: Moving the newsletter from a print to an electronic format has necessitated some changes in the submission guidelines. Please review the following information when submitting articles or regular columns to the newsletter:

- **Submit articles electronically in MSWord or RTF format to pcsnews.editor@ieee.org.** These formats are more easily available to me than other word processing applications.
- **Provide articles that are 200-700 words in length.** People tend to scan rather than read in an online environment. Short, well-written and relevant articles will be more beneficial to the audience than longer ones.
- **Provide a short bio (~25 words) and contact information.** Readers want to know about you. At a minimum, write a bio that tells your name, company, primary job title, email address and why this topic is of interest to you or what experience you have in the area you wrote about. (This doesn't count as part of your word count.)
- **Indicate whether the article is time sensitive.** Because of size considerations and editorial schedule, newsletter articles may not be published immediately upon submission, unless it is date critical (e.g., information about the upcoming conference or an article about a current event that relates to technical communication.)
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- **Insert the URL into the text so that I can easily create the link.** For example, if you want to reference the w3c, you would say "refer to the W3C (<http://www.w3c.org>) guidelines". Don't create the hyperlink in Word.
- **Provide complete bibliographic information for references.** Include author(s), title, date of publication, publisher, page numbers, or URL.
- **Use a friendly, casual tone.** We want to invite people to read and to make the information as accessible as possible.
- **Use 1-inch (2.54 cm) margins; don't indent paragraphs.** I have to reformat the text so it's better to minimize the formatting you include. Instead of indenting, put an extra line between paragraphs
- **Avoid using lots of formatting within the text.** I will have to format the articles for the online environment, so

don't put lots of bold and italic in the text.

- **Use subheadings generously.** Subheadings help the reader identify the information that is important to them. Subheads are especially helpful in orienting the reader in the online environment.
- **Use active voice and short sentences.** At least 40% of our audience is outside of N. America. For many members, English is their second (or third) language. Short sentences and active voice are easier to absorb and understand than complex sentence structures.
- **Avoid jargon and "big" words when a simpler term will work.** Approximately 90% of our audience is engineers who need to write effectively on the job. Avoid using writer's jargon, or explain the term in the context. By "big" words, I mean complicated, less commonly used words that may have the same or similar meaning to other, more commonly used words (e.g., instead of "obfuscate", just say "confuse").
- **Avoid idioms.** Idiomatic phrases are those colorful sayings we use to mean something else. For example, "once in a blue moon", "jump right in", "on the fly". Unfortunately, these sayings often have no equivalent in other languages, and can be difficult for non-native English speakers to interpret.
- **Submit graphics as JPGs or GIFs.** Web graphics need to be in one of these formats for most browsers. SVGs and PNGs are not yet universally accepted. If you want graphics included in your article, you need to give me the JPG. Don't just embed it in Word.

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Guidelines

Editorial Schedule for 2005

by **Kit Brown**

The following table shows the proposed themes for each issue through January 2006. If something particularly timely occurs during the year, these themes may change.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact **[Kit Brown](#)**.

Editorial Schedule for 2005

Month	Theme
February	Electronic Publications
March	XML
April	Multi-site, Multicultural Project Management
May	Usability
June	Content Management
July	Caengail (KANG-guhl): Making Connections
August	Internationalization
September	Content Modeling
October	Writing and Editing in English
November	Working with SMEs
December	Proposals
January 2006	Trends

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