

**Inside**

From the Editor	2
President's Column	3
Masters of Style	5
Good Intent, Poor Outcome	8
The Writer-Editor Relationship	9
Floci...pification	11
Successful Technical Writing	12
European Credit Transfer System	14
Cliché Expert	16
Net Notes	17
History	18
Professor Grammar	23
IPCC 2002	24

## How to Write Readable Reports and Winning Proposals

By Peter Reimold and Cheryl Reimold

### Part 3: Save Readers and Yourself Precious Time

Perhaps the most annoying thing about reports is the way they gobble up time. First, *writers* spend hours sketching the complex background of the project and describing results in sufficient detail to impress higher-ups with the thoroughness of the work. (If the facts aren't impressive enough, fancy wording must come to the rescue, at further cost in writing time.) Then *readers* groan as they try in vain to find shortcuts through the thicket of irrelevant or baffling detail and convoluted language. Nobody is happy, important information gets lost, and a lot of time disappears into a black hole.

Some writers learn from such mistakes and scratch out most of the irrelevant and confusing things they put into their draft before they send it out. Now the writing takes even longer for them, but at least their readers are better off.

Isn't there a way to avoid all the waste of time from the start? Yes—and it's as simple as respecting three commonsense laws:

1. Don't make your readers read anything they don't want to know.
2. Don't write down things you'll end up deleting.
3. Don't make the reader read anything twice.

#### Reimolds' Law #1: Don't Make Your Readers Read Anything They Don't Want To Know

No matter how much you'd like to get upper-management readers to appreciate the intricacies of your work, they will only resent being held up by technical details or puffy language. So save them time by including only *significant* information and keeping the language simple.

How do you achieve this? By preparing an outline based on an analysis of reader needs. The needs analysis takes the form of an imaginary dialogue with each reader group. Begin by noting the questions of the primary reader, then those of other readers. Answer the questions in list form and you have an outline of the significant points. Anything else you're burning to add doesn't belong in the report.

#### Reimolds' Law #2: Don't Write Down Things You'll End Up Deleting

Many writers begin the drafting process by expanding their data tables into detailed results, expanding those further in a discussion section, then adding some detailed background as an introduction, and finally trying some conclusions and a summary. At that point, they may begin to spot irrelevant details and start the tedious cutting process.

(continued on page 4)



Rudy Joenk

Letter to the Editor

I enjoyed reading Dr. Jean-luc Doumont's article about secondary audience (July/August Newsletter, p. 12). It seems that more and more we are being asked to create documentation that can be read by a variety of audiences. I'd like to add to his analogy of the Harry Potter novels and suggest that one reason J. K. Rowling's books reach beyond a primary audience of kids is that they can be enjoyed by a secondary audience of adults, most notably the parents of the primary audience. While it could be argued that people of all ages enjoy reading J. K. Rowling's books, I would not have read them apart from my son's interest in them.

The parent audience is an applicable analogy for technical documentation because it addresses audiences of different types. In this analogy, the parent or adult reader as secondary audience is analogous to management (or at least system administrators or advanced users) whereas end users or technical readers may be the primary audience. To reach both, or

at least to offer both some valuable information, in a single document is the real challenge.

While one way to reach multiple audiences is to have a database of content (a single source) that can be packaged differently for different audiences, I find that we as technical communicators are still being asked to create documents that can reach several audiences without modularizing the content. And the way to satisfy both audiences (first-time users and advanced users, for exam-

ple) is to start simple but provide quick navigation to more in-depth material for those willing to find it.

—Bill Albing  
Raleigh, North Carolina

Deadlines are the 15th of the odd-numbered months.

The author responds

Thanks for your interesting comments about secondary audiences. I agree with you wholeheartedly. As a matter of fact, I find the Harry Potter novels such a subtle parody of real life—and of our educational system in particular—that I sometimes wonder how much kids get out of them. Writing a single text that can be interpreted and enjoyed at

several levels is a difficult art; I cannot think of very many examples of it, I must say.

If you are a Harry Potter fan, you may be interested to know that I am preparing for our Transactions an Interface article on teaching professional communication, based on the teaching practices at Hogwarts. Perhaps by then the long-awaited volume 5 of the series will be on the shelves.

Anniversary

This is PCS's 45th year. In this year's Newsletter issues I am extending by five years the lists of historic data that first appeared throughout the issues of 1997, which marked our 40th anniversary. On page 18 is the extended list of PCS award winners and on page 22 is the list of PCS editors. If you'd like to contribute or suggest a recollection, please send a note to r.joenk@ieee.org.

Instant Fame

This is the final call for help (until next year); this is how we get coverage of our IPCCs for the Newsletter.

I offer INSTANT FAME to volunteer authors who write just a paragraph or

(continued on page 7)

IEEE Professional Communication Society

Officers

- Beth Moeller, President
Ed Clark, Vice President
Jean-luc Doumont, Secretary
Steve Robinson, Treasurer

Staff

Rudy Joenk, Editor

- PCS IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter is published bimonthly by the Professional Communication Society of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc., 3 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10016. One dollar per member per year is included in the society fee for each member of the Professional Communication Society. Printed in U.S.A. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices.
Copyright 2002 IEEE: Permission to copy without fee all or part of any material without a copyright notice is granted provided that the copies are not made or distributed for commercial advantage and the title of this publication and its date appear on each copy. To copy material with a copyright notice requires specific permission; direct inquiries or requests to the copyright holder as indicated in the article.
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, r.joenk@ieee.org. Articles, letters, reviews, and proposals for columns are welcome.



Elizabeth Weise Moeller

## Finances (Again) and Opportunities

I had a really hard time sitting down to write this column because I didn't know where to start. Since the last issue we've seen some changes that need to be addressed. There are financial consequences to some of those changes. There are also some upcoming events you should be aware of.

### Finances

First, the good news: At the IEEE Technical Activities Board (TAB) meeting in June we were told that the Institute is doing well and that the staff has identified a number of savings. This is good news for us because it should reduce the portion of the infrastructure charges that all societies and councils will pay this year.

Even with this good news, however, we have had to raise PCS dues for 2003 to USD 30. At the TAB meeting, all society presidents were encouraged to increase dues so that the amount you pay is equal to or greater than the amount it costs to service you. In our case, your dues should be at least equal to the cost of producing and mailing your copies of the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* and the *PCS Newsletter*.

As it stands (and even at USD 30 per year), PCS loses money on every member. We have always been able to make up the difference through the ASPP distribution (a bonus we receive for participating in the All Societies Publications Package) and our conference surplus, and it's been that way for as long as anyone can

remember. The drawback to this, though, is that we are rarely able to bank anything to fund new initiatives. The new IEEE financial model (which increases our share of some costs), inflation, and poor stock market performance have made it so that we are just keeping our heads above water financially.

### Consequences

There are two consequences to the changes: The first affects our share of infrastructure costs. The new financial model is based on a pay-by-the-drink model—meaning we pay only for services we use. In theory, PCS should do well with that type of model because we have a small number of members. In reality, though, our allocation has increased due to some costs that everyone shares, no matter what size the membership. It appears that the break-even number for us is around 2800 members.

The second affects our ability to launch new initiatives. In the past we funded new initiatives out of reserves and conference surpluses. Since reserves have been frozen and conference surpluses are low, especially in the wake of 11 September 2001, we need to look at alternative sources. Many initiatives can be planned and brought very close to launching (or launched entirely) through volunteer efforts. This is where we have to start.

### How You Can Participate

Membership is the first area; for

example, when you're finished with this issue of the *Newsletter*, pass it on to a colleague you feel would enjoy PCS membership. If your colleague doesn't need the whole IEEE range of services, she or he can join PCS as an affiliate member, paying just PCS dues and an IEEE processing fee. If you don't want to give up your copy, point prospective members to the Web URL for the *Newsletter* (<http://www.ieeepcs.org/newsletter.html>). We also always have some surplus *Newsletters* available. Let the editor know if you would like to distribute sample copies within your organization.

We're asking for help with specific projects.

Time is the big area. I have always felt that what you get out of an organization is directly related to what you put in. We're not asking for multi-year commitments—we're asking for help with specific projects. If you could write some content for the new Web site, if you could help draft or review a Web-ed course, if you could serve on a conference committee, if you could distribute PCS brochures at your local IEEE section or other meeting, please contact us. Use the volunteer form at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/volunteer.html>. I know everyone is busy, but if we can get 20 people to donate 5-10 hours each, that would really give us a running start on some of those projects.

### Upcoming Events

First and foremost: IPCC 2002 in Portland, Oregon, from 17 to 20 September. The conference commit-

tee has put together a strong program and if there aren't any delays in the delivery of this *Newsletter*, you may still have time to catch a flight to Portland. Please join us to share experiences, learn from others, and celebrate our award winners.

By the time you receive this issue, the polls will have closed on the first PCS online election. We'll have a report in the November/December issue for you. Those of you who are IEEE members still have time to

vote in the general IEEE election. Please pay attention to the candidates' platform statements and choose the ones you feel are best suited to lead the IEEE through some difficult transitions as new financial models are put in place.

Other events include our AdCom meeting 20 and 21 September in Portland. We will also meet in May 2003, just before the STC conference in Dallas, Texas (details are still in the works).

## English Is a Crazy Language

- There is no egg in eggplant nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple.
- Sweetmeats are candies whereas sweetbreads, which aren't sweet, are meat.
- We find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square, and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig.

## Readable Reports and Winning Proposals

(continued from page 1)

Instead, ***begin the whole process with the summary***. This answers the reader's first question: "What are you trying to tell me?" (For instance: *Our new teamwork approach to the problem with absenteeism has shown significantly better results than previous one-on-one confrontations.*) Then explain or back up that main message *only as much as needed for your readers*. When did the absenteeism problem begin? How did you try to solve it in the past? What did you do differently with the team approach? What do your findings suggest? What obstacles remain? What are the next steps for you and the readers?

When your main message is in place, you can judge easily which details serve it and which detract from it or add nothing important. By contrast, when you start with

the details, you miss the yardstick for measuring relevance, and overwriting is inevitable.

### Reimolds' Law #3: Don't Make the Reader Read Anything Twice

Readers don't like having to reread a sentence because it is unclear, ambiguous, or deliberately constructed so as to require parsing twice (that's the drawback of words like *former*, *latter*, and *respectively*). Look at your style. Is it more like **A** than **B**? Then it's time to work on clarity and simplicity!

Cutting information of no value to readers is smart; never writing it down in the first place is smarter.

**A.** From consideration of these facts, the probability presents itself that the unfavorable work environment on Project X, as opposed to the more propitious circumstances surrounding the efforts on Project Y, in no small way impeded the presence and effec-

tive contributions of team members of the former, leading inescapably to the noticeable problem of absenteeism therein, versus the latter.

**B.** Our findings suggest that the poor working conditions on Project X contributed greatly to the problem of absenteeism on that project. Project Y, which had better working conditions, did not have this problem.

*Cheryl and Peter Reimold have been teaching communication skills to engineers, scientists, and businesspeople for 20 years. Their firm, PERC Communications (+1 914 725 1024, [perccom@aol.com](mailto: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>.*





Ronald J. Nelson

## Stephen Jay Gould's Stylistic Legacy

Legacy and loss are inevitably and inextricably interwoven. Specifically, the world is the poorer for the loss of one of the great columnists of our time: the evolutionary biologist, paleontologist, and essayist Stephen Jay Gould, who died on 20 May 2002. His legacy includes the enlightening columns titled "Reflections in Natural History," written month after month starting in January 1974 for *Natural History Magazine*. Those columns, which were gathered into his many books, stretched the minds and hearts of his readers, making them the richer for that expansion of self.

Complacency was not possible for any who would enter the fascinating world of his writings. He had an uncanny knack for drawing the reader in to share his perceptions of the world around and within. Although he was not without his detractors—like Richard Dawkins in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (pp. 193-203), who claimed that Gould's writings sometimes employed "bad poetry" that led to bad science—his remarkable output inspired readers and stimulated controversy for nearly three decades. Rather than get drawn into this controversy, I will call attention to some of the sources of his stylistic potency, from which we could derive insights into how we too might express ourselves.

The titles of his books, for example, prompt the reader to reflect on what the content might be—an excellent ploy for scientists and professional communicators alike to put the

reader into an engaged frame of mind. Here are some of his titles: *The Flamingo's Smile* (1985), which encourages the reader to picture a humanized, perhaps enigmatic image of the bird; *Eight Little Piggies* (1993), which causes a person to recall a childhood story ("and then there were none"—the extinction of *Partula* snails from the island of Bali Ha'i); *Dinosaur in a Haystack* (1995), which represents, as Gould suggests, "the gem of a detail always sought to ground a generality" or "the marriage of alluring detail with instructive generality" (p. xi). In this, the year of his death, he came out with two final books: *I Have Landed: The End of a Beginning in Natural History* (New York: Harmony Books) and his magnum opus at 1433 pages, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University). The latter title suggests the utter seriousness of this monumental work, perhaps intended to encompass the essence of his legacy, as he saw it.

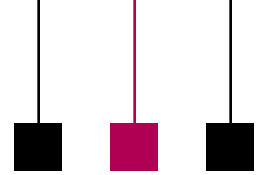
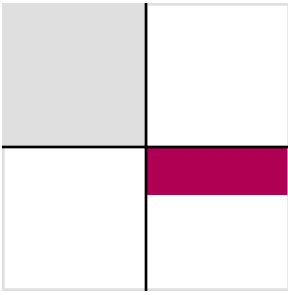
From the dedications to his books we can learn much about a crucial matter in all our dealings, whether scribal or oral: attitude. *Wonderful Life* is dedicated to "Norman D. Newell who was, and is, the most noble word of all human speech, my teacher"; *Full House*, "For Rhonda, who is the embodiment of excellence \*\*\* *Das Ewig—Weibliche zieht uns hinan*" ["The eternal

woman draws us on."]; *Eight Little Piggies*, "For Agnes Pilot for her unfailing intelligence, loyalty, and integrity"; *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*, "For My Mother: Brave woman, Wise owl"; *Ever Since Darwin*, "For My Father, who took me to see the Tyrannosaurus when I was five"; and *The Flamingo's Smile*, "For Deb, for everything." Here is a man who is grateful for what has been given him, a trait that we would do well to remember and nurture, especially when far less accomplished people sometimes think the world revolves around them.

Use analogy to facilitate comprehension of a challenging topic.

From Gould we can learn the value of selecting interesting details about a subject with which the reader is unlikely to be familiar. As he puts it in *An Urchin in the Storm* (1987), "...I am most moved by general themes,

but find them vacuous unless rooted in some interesting particular..." (p. 10). For example, in *The Flamingo's Smile*, we learn about a curious detail of the flamingo's behavior: "Flamingos feed with their heads upside down. They stand in shallow water and swing their heads down to the level of their feet, subtly adjusting the head's position by lengthening or shortening the s-curve of the neck. This motion naturally turns the head upside down, and the bills therefore reverse their conventional roles in feeding. The anatomical upper bill of the flamingo lies beneath and serves, functionally, as a lower jaw. The anatomical lower bill stands uppermost, in the position assumed by



upper bills in nearly all other birds” (p. 25).

We can learn about the importance of apt analogy to introduce or expand upon a challenging topic, and so to facilitate comprehension. His essay, “Integrity and Mr. Rifkin” (from *Urchin*), for example, begins this way: “Evolution has a definite geometry well portrayed by our ancient metaphor, the tree of life. Lineages split and diverge like the branches of a tree. A species, once distinct, is permanently on its own; the branches of life do not coalesce. Extinction is truly forever, persistence a personal odyssey” (p. 229). These words lead into a topic that has evoked fear and opposition, genetic engineering, which purports “to place genes of one species into the program of another, thereby combining what nature has kept separate from time immemorial.”

Clearly stating one’s position on a subject is perhaps anathema these days of political correctness. Yet it is essential to take a stand on important issues. Here is Gould’s take on Jeremy Rifkin’s *Algeny*, directly stated: “I will state my conclusion—bald and harsh—at the outset. I regard *Algeny* as a cleverly constructed tract of anti-intellectual propaganda masquerading as scholarship.” He then proceeds to debunk Rifkin’s arguments, despite the fact that he agrees with the latter’s “basic plea for respecting the integrity of evolutionary lineages” (p. 230).

To become immersed in what we write and freely to acknowledge that immersion can generate equal involvement on the part of the reader. He says, in his prologue to *The Panda’s Thumb* (1980), that Pliny’s statement, “Nature is to be found in her entirety nowhere more than in her smallest creatures,” “captures the essence of what fascinates me about natural history.” He finds joy in “the mysterious ways of the beaver” and “how [the] spider weaves her supple web.” He finds gratification in exploring “the duality of natural history—riches in particularities and potential union in underlying explanation” (p. 12).

Give your readers interesting details about an unfamiliar subject.

And how could such matters fail to arrest all but the brain-dead, for they address identity (who we are) and meaning in the arenas of learning about a topic or issue?

Finally, I refer the reader to Gould’s lamentably timely essay, “Why the Death of 0.400 Hitting Records Improvement of Play” (*Full House*, 1996)—lamentable because we have also just lost the last of the 0.400 hitters, Ted Williams, “The Splendid Splinter” (whose body, as I write, lies hideously frozen). In this essay, the prose is appropriately illustrated by convincing graphics, as it must be to reinforce content. Gould’s thesis rests on two formulations of a single argument: “Complex systems improve when the best performers play by the same rules over extended periods of time. As systems

improve, they equilibrate and variation decreases” (p. 112) and “As play improves and bell curves march toward the right wall, variation must shrink at the right tail” (p. 116). Williams’s achievement is for Gould “a consummate rarity,” but it may be repeated as often as once a century in his opinion. Gould notes that Tony Gwynn came perilously close to breaking 0.400 recently, but “the great pissing contest of 1994 (otherwise known as a labor dispute),” ended the season prematurely (p. 132).

As Gould concludes, “Every season features the promise of transcendence” (p. 132). We too as professional communicators might transcend our former selves as we stretch our minds by challenging ourselves carefully to observe (Williams apparently had the visual acuity to see not only the stitches of a baseball as it approached, but also the moment of impact of bat and ball) how great writers articulate themselves in published form. Then we too can become part of “The Show.”

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

“The [Mars] rovers will be exact duplicates, but that’s where the similarities end.”

— NASA Press Release

## From the Editor

(continued from page 2)

two about some of the IPCC 2002 presentations they attend. The idea is to capture a point of view, Q&A, discussion, etc. that isn't in the proceedings. Photographers, too, are eligible for this award. Up-close shots are best. If you work *fast* right after (or during) the conference, we might get the fruit of your labors into the November/December issue rather than waiting until January.

### AdCom

All-member voting will be closed by the time you receive this issue; voting by AdCom members will take place at the 20-21 September meeting at IPCC 2002 in Portland, Oregon. Results will be posted on our Web site (<http://www.ieeepcs.org/>) and printed in the next *Newsletter*. PCS members are welcome at AdCom meetings.

The July/August *Newsletter* on our Web site as a PDF file has active e-mail and Web *and* table-of-contents links. Issues are being posted about one month after distribution of the print version.

### Potpourri

Grammar hotlines still exist. PCS was identifying and publicizing them in the *Newsletter* or *Transactions* (I forgot which) about 15 years ago and we thought they had great potential. Whereas there was only phone access then, you can now e-mail your problem to most of them. I queried five with the same *who-whom* question on a Saturday (a non-business day for them) in the middle of July.

By the following Tuesday I had received two correct and two incorrect answers; a third incorrect answer arrived a week later. So maybe their potential (or staff?) isn't so great, even after a decade and a half. Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach, Virginia, maintains a list of grammar hotlines (currently 87) and posts it on the Web at <http://www.tc.cc.va.us/writcent/gh/hotlinol.htm>.

The test question is, Does *X = who* or *whom* in the following sentence? "It goes straight from the designated starting person to Xever his or her most distant known ancestor is." E-mail me your choice and I'll keep score.

"It's a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word!"  
Attributed to U.S. President Andrew Jackson.

"A paper at Gainesville, Ga. remarks: 'All of the twenty-one buildings destroyed by fire in this city are now rebuilt, except nineteen.'" From the *Zanesville [Ohio] Daily Courier*, 13 November 1877.

Surprising Advertising: "Dog for Sale. Eats anything and is fond of children." "Man, honest. Will take anything." "Tired of cleaning yourself? Let me do it!" "No matter what your topcoat is made of, this miracle spray will make it really repellent." From *The Saturday Evening Post*.

### Information for Authors

One thousand words makes a nice page-and-a-half article, though longer

and shorter articles may be appropriate. Proposals for periodic columns are also welcome.

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

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

The *Newsletter* issues on our Web site can be used as examples (<http://www.ieeepcs.org/newsletter.html>).

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

### Deadlines

The 15th day of each odd-numbered month is the deadline for publication in the succeeding odd-numbered month. For example, the deadline is 15 November for the January/February 2003 issue, 15 January for the March/April issue, etc. You won't be far off (and never late) if you observe the Ides of November, January, March, and so on.



Jean-luc Doumont

### The Forest and the Trees

Over the last few months I have been involved in several teams entrusted with the challenge of describing a given something with a short phrase: Recommend a new name for a society, come up with a title for a training program, and coin a slogan for an institute of continuing education, respectively. Each time, what we had anticipated as a reasonable task turned into a major hurdle, with the discussion hardly converging after many meeting hours or electronic exchanges, despite obvious goodwill on the part of all involved.

The divergences within each team were clearly linked to trying to say so much with so few words.

- We had difficulties making the description both *accurate* (something we found intellectually satisfying) and *attractive* (something our audience would find appealing, even if we deemed it inaccurate).
- Even when we agreed on a word's *denotation*, which dictionaries often list several of, we seldom agreed on the word's *connotations*, which are of course a question of personal sensitivity.
- We often debated how detailed the description should be, some pleading for an encompassing few words, others wishing for something more specific but unavoidably less compact.

The shorter the desired description, the more unsolvable the issues: You simply can't have it all, so you have either to favor one end of the spectrum over the other or to find a compromise somewhere in between.

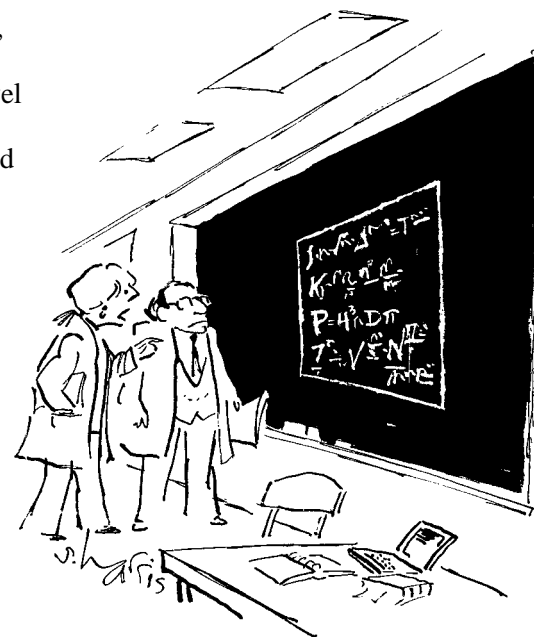
With a few more words, however, possibilities open up, especially regarding the third issue—the level of detail—which plagues professional communication way beyond names, titles, and slogans.

The subject lines of the letters, memos, and e-mail messages I receive, for example, seem to specify the forest (global level) or the tree (detail level), but seldom both. While the intent is a concise subject line, the outcome is simply a short yet unsatisfying one.

As an example, suppose you are involved in the preparation of a large conference, such as IPCC 2003, and receive numerous e-mail messages about it. A tree subject line such as "getting sponsors" will fail to remind you of the context (sponsors *for what?*). Conversely, a forest subject line such as "IPCC 2003" will help you situate the topic or file the message, but is insufficient as a selection tool (*what about IPCC 2003?*). Very different messages might indeed end up with the same subject line. A solution, whenever possible, is to specify both the forest and the tree, not unlike how biologists specify both the genus and the species: "IPCC 2003: getting sponsors" is a more useful, if longer, subject line.

The forest-then-tree approach can be applied to many instances of professional communication, for example by adding a tag line to a society's name or a subtitle to a title.

The forest is an elegant sign of integration. When a course covers, say,



"PUTTING A BOX AROUND IT, I'M AFRAID, DOES NOT MAKE IT A UNIFIED THEORY."

Copyright 2002 by Sidney Harris.

both apples and oranges, titling it "Apples and Oranges 101" strikes me as denoting a mere juxtaposition of two topics that might as well be covered in two separate courses, not a well-thought-out integration of them. It always reminds me of this cartoon, popular two decades ago when physicists were desperately trying to integrate the four fundamental interactions into a grand unified theory. The course would more effectively be titled "Orchard 101: Apples and Oranges."

*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>).*



## Part 3: Variations in Preferences and Styles

By Eliza Drewa

Part 1 (May/June 2002 *Newsletter*) of this three-part series pointed out that writers and editors don't often discuss their relationship (roles, abilities, expectations) openly, a relationship that should constantly work toward developing better communication strategies for working together. Part 2 (July/August issue) provided further information on the specialized abilities editors should have, which writers should look for and editors should work toward providing. The purpose of the final portion of this series is to discuss issues of flexibility in language, for both writers and editors need to know that language is not static. Understanding the difference between preferences and rules, and variations among preferences, helps editors provide writers with informed answers to questions regarding changes or recommendations and gives writers the understanding they need to provide informed responses to the editor's comments.

To achieve this kind of communication, writers and editors alike must be familiar with the concept of preferences and have an idea of how to differentiate preferences from rules. Although practices are changing in the current school system, many people learned prescriptive rules for language and writing, rules which indicate that language is static and inflexible. Today, however, the focus on language is descriptive; that is, language "rules" are a function not so much of how language *should* be used but of how it *is* used.

For example, "Ain't ain't a word cause ain't ain't in the dictionary" was a saying that was once popular, and it was an indication of prescribed rules of language: Because it's not in the dictionary, it's not correct to use it. However, "ain't" certainly is in the dictionary today because it is a word that is currently in use. Dictionaries now contain words that *describe* what's in use rather than dictate what should and should not be used. Thus, the correctness of language use depends on whether and how people use it, and the context in which they use it, not by whether it should be used. (Given rules of register and tone, "ain't" wouldn't be something a writer would want to include in a professional manuscript.)

When considering editorial recommendations, writers and editors must keep in mind that the real rules of the English language are basic, few, and for the most part learned by native speakers at a very young age. For example, subjects must agree in number with their verbs. We instinctively know that "*Editors are* trained professionals," not "*Editors is*..." Also, pronouns must agree in gender with their antecedents; e.g., "*Vicki* took *her* vacation early," not "*Vicki* took *his*..." Perhaps more tricky for some, but definitely a rule, is that sentences must have subjects and predicates; sentence fragments are not correct in professional writing.

On the other hand, there are rules many of us were taught that are not real rules, but are remnants of the bygone prescriptive era. Consider these three:

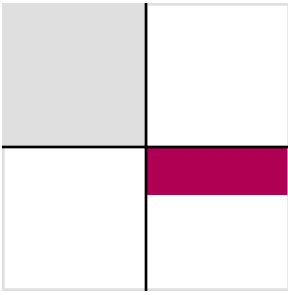
- Don't end a sentence with a preposition.
- Don't split infinitives.
- Don't use the first person "I" or second person "you" in professional and academic writing.

It is not wrong to adhere to these so-called rules; it is simply a matter of preference, which is up to individual writers and writing contexts.

Publishing offices, too, have established preferences. Some capitalize references to figure 1, table 1, and chapter 1; others consistently use these in the lower case. Some use title case for figure and table titles; others capitalize only the first letter of the first word. Some use a comma inside a closing quotation mark, while others place it outside. And comma use in a simple series is a preference too: Some use a comma to separate the last two items; some don't. (And note that both this sentence and the last begin with "and." This is not incorrect as many of us were taught; rather, it is a stylistic preference.)

Because this paper is not intended as a lesson in grammar, these are only a few examples; they are meant to point out the room for negotiation in writing—the necessity for writers as well as editors to be informed of variations in preferences and styles. For

Enhance clarity, redesign information, and shift tone.



example, I consulted with a troubled writer not long ago who was reviewing a paper of his that was in the final publishing stage for a journal in the biological sciences. He was unhappy and confused because an editor had hyphenated two key sets of words throughout the document. I reviewed those changes and asked him, an expert in his field, whether and how those words appear in the current published literature on the same topic. He replied that they were used without hyphens.

I then explained to him that hyphenating noun modifiers generally serves one clear purpose: It is a *courtesy* that eliminates potential reader confusion. If readers will not be confused without the hyphens, and if a particular field by convention does not hyphenate certain words, then hyphens are unnecessary. After providing him with this information, he was able to communicate his concern and preference to the editor he was working with instead of feeling that his hands were simply tied.

These variations further emphasize how important it is for editors to communicate changes and recommendations to writers and, at the same time, for writers to become better informed about the changes made to their documents. And again, editors must also be aware of where these documents are going, whom they are directed to, and how they will be used—general rhetorical concerns of message, purpose, and audience.

These variations also demand that writers understand that not all editorial recommendations are “correct” in a black-and-white sense (sometimes interpreted as indicators that their writing is filled with error). Rather, recommendations should (1) indicate that there is a better, more strategic way to communicate the message and (2) offer reasons why. If an editor’s feedback does not include one or both of these, writers should request this information to ensure that they make the best decisions for their documents. After all, writers are the ones who will be judged accordingly.

Finally, it is apparent how easily communication breakdown is possible between writer and editor. It is also obvious that both writer and editor have a responsibility to communicate with each other. Editors should make recommendations for optional revisions, including revised sentence structures that enhance clarity by reducing nominalizations and unnecessary wordiness, redesigning information into functional form for accessibility, and shifting the general tone of the document by using second instead of third person or using the active first person instead of passive constructions. Writers, too, have responsibilities, including being open to considering editors’ recommendations, knowing how to evaluate those recommendations, and asking questions instead of blindly accepting advice.

*The author has an M.A. degree in English and five years of combined experience as technical editor,*

*writer, writing consultant, and researcher. Her expertise includes planning, developing, creating, analyzing, and revising written materials and editing processes. She can be contacted at pedrewa@yahoo.com.*

## MIT Distance Learning Courses

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Advanced Study Program (MIT ASP) has become an IEEE Education Partner. IEEE members can now continue their life-long learning with graduate-level credit courses provided by MIT at a 10 percent discount.

Taught by MIT faculty and offered over the Internet since 1995, the ASP is in its 33rd year of providing courses to off-campus graduates. Admission is based on the applicant’s academic and professional background. Current ASP courses include systems dynamics, a 24-month certificate program; and economic concepts for engineers, a semester-long course.

Applications, course prerequisites, and systems requirements are detailed at the MIT Web site for IEEE members. At <http://www.ieee.org/EduPartners>, choose MIT among the university partners. You must use your IEEE member number to receive the 10 percent discount.

To learn more about the partners program contact Sasha Eydlin, [s.eydlin@ieee.org](mailto:s.eydlin@ieee.org).

## Dullness Antidote

By Michael Brady

Scientific writing is reputed to be dull. Keying in “scientific writing” and “dull” in Google.com brings up some 300 hits. By that measure, technology, the most applied of all sciences, is thrice as dull: Keying in “technical” instead of “scientific” brings up more than 900 hits. Is there a cure for dullness?

Perhaps. The dullness of a piece of writing is of two sorts: rhetorical and conceptual. Many professional writing publications, including this *Newsletter*, advise their readers to steer clear of the pitfalls of rhetorical dullness, such as overuse of the passive voice. But there are precious few antidotes to conceptual dullness, perhaps because it starts at square one of the scientific thought process. Fortunately, some scientists have shown by example how to ward off dullness, among them mathematician Lewis Carroll in the 19th century and physicist George Gamow in the 20th.

But the illuminating examples of centuries past no longer can serve as contemporary benchmarks of engaging scientific writing, principally because the game has changed. Immediacy and accessibility now are as essential as lucid texts and catchy titles. Maybe the rules should be bent to suit.

That’s what cosmologist Janna Levin has done in *How The Universe Got*

*Its Spots*,\* a tour de force of the frontiers of knowledge about the universe. In it she has forsaken wonted ways. Her square one wasn’t the plan for a book—it was a letter to her non-scientist mother. Then came other letters, many unsent, together making up a diary over two and a half years from late 1998 to early 2001. The book evolved like a

scientific theory, one step at a time. And that’s the way you can read it, without having to flip back at the command of every *ibid*. Scientific objectivity is there, but so is personal opinion. The third person is used sparingly and mostly for people not in

the dialog between the author and her reader.

Literature and art are frequently mentioned; the title of the book paraphrases *How The Leopard Got Its Spots* in Kipling’s *Just So Stories* and accurately describes the appearance of cosmic microwave background radiation. Personal anecdotes pepper the book, from her respect for fellow scientists, past and present, to the occasional pangs of being an American expatriate at the University of Cambridge to the ups and downs of a relationship with a boyfriend. If the book were fiction it would be the cosmological equivalent of the recent best-selling *Sophie’s*

\* Janna Levin, *How the Universe Got Its Spots*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002, ISBN 0-297-64651-6 hardcover, GBP 16.99; and Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2002, ISBN 0-691-09657-0 hardcover, USD 22.95.

“I try to find a simple expression for my ideas. I figure if there is none, the ideas might be wrong.”

*World* by Jostein Gaarder, in which philosophy is explained in a series of letters to a young girl. But this book isn’t fiction. It’s physics as lively as the notes you may have taken at the inspired lectures of a college professor you’ll never forget.

Ms. Levin’s dicta to herself, such as in remarking that “I try to find a simple expression for my ideas. I figure if there is none, the ideas might be wrong” and in admitting that “when I finally understood this language (of topology), I learned to hang English words on it” blueprint her clarity. Nobody has seen singularities in space-time, yet she describes them as if you could walk into the corner drugstore and buy one. Her overview of the newest string theories covers just three pages. Memorable one-liners abound, such as “doughnuts and coffee mugs are topologically equivalent” and “stars die, light bulbs expire.”

Writers of science and technology take heed; this is new turf, and Janna Levin has charted it well. Like Richard Feynman’s *Six Easy Pieces*, this is a book to value now and pass on to the next generation.

**S**o... You Think You Know Everything?

- The average person’s left hand does 56 percent of the typing.
- A shark is the only fish that can blink with both eyes.
- There are more chickens than people in the world.

## Successful Technical Writing: It's a Mind Game

By Debbie Davy

Technical communicators need to present scientific and technical information in a way that streamlines the cognitive processing required of the user to ensure more accessible and effective documentation. Because of the preponderance of information available to us today, being presented with information in an easy-to-understand format ensures a happy user.

It is not enough, however, just to present information to satisfy cognitive needs; the communicator needs to present the information logically as well to satisfy both the right and the left sides of the brain. Information presented cognitively and logically results in a less-than-stressed user and more of the information's being retained and understood.

For example, a man asks for directions to the airport. Instructions given *cognitively* tell him to turn right and drive until he sees the building with the red roof, turn right, drive past the restaurant with the big fish-shaped sign, turn left at the stop sign, and follow the yellow brick road until he gets to the airport. Instructions given *logically*, however, tell him to drive west 10 km, then south 4 km, and east 2 km to the airport. But for communication to be effective, both cognitive and logical directions need to be present: Turn right (west) and drive 10 km to the building with the red roof, turn left (south) and drive 4 km past the restaurant with the big fish-shaped

sign; at the stop sign turn left (east) and drive 2 km on the yellow brick road to the airport. Combining cognitive and logical instructions reduces the man's stress by giving him a reward as he reaches each landmark (the building with the red roof, the restaurant with the big fish-shaped sign, the stop sign, the yellow brick road).

Successful information design addresses physical, cognitive, and motivational needs. To successfully absorb technical information, the user needs to:

- Find the information
- Select the information that may be relevant
- Decide whether the information is relevant
- Avoid information that is not pertinent
- Use the information

Good physical design allows the user to find information of interest easily. For the user to find the information, the following physical needs should be addressed:

- Effective page and screen design (layout, white space, headings, type, graphical devices, site maps, table of contents, indexes, links, tabs, media selection)
- Effective production (the process of preparing a communication

product for duplication and distribution to its intended readers)

- Basic technical writing and editing (using appropriate syntactic clues)

Next, cognitive needs must be addressed and are usually identified through:

- An analysis of the user's needs (why the reader is seeking the information)
- Setting project or product goals and guidelines
- Choosing how the information is to be communicated (the genre and communication medium)
- An information map showing the structure of the communication

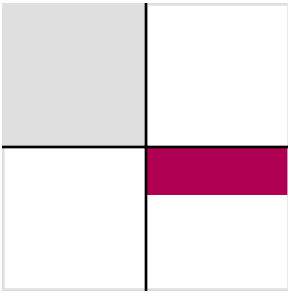
For your message to be delivered effectively you must take care not to stress the user.

Technical communicators need to be aware that users are routinely exposed to more messages than they can effectively handle. Using universal visual symbols rather than words and reusing information

can mitigate this. Examples of reused information are a news story that has been edited for use in different newscasts to fit the length and slant of the programs, and a new manual created for an upgraded product from an existing manual.

Information must be presented in a way that makes the user want to use it. The information must be perceived in a positive light—the user's motivation must be considered. Do users





need the information, or is the information interesting but of little immediate value? Although the technology described in technical communication has the potential to change the way users work or live, how prepared (or willing) are the users for the change? Was the technical language chosen to gain credibility with technical users, even if simpler terms were available to express the same concepts? And is the information presented in such a way as to reduce the user's stress?

An example of induced user stress through poor communication occurred in a hypothetical shopping mall with its washroom signs. Stores were complaining to mall management that their customers could not find the washrooms, and that their clerks spent a large part of their day giving directions. The mall management hired a professional communication company to redesign the signs. This company did a wonderful job with the signs, using the best font size and background color for the application. To test the efficacy of the signs, the communication company even hired testers to walk around the mall at the busiest times of the busiest days. The testers reported that they found the washrooms without difficulty, and the signs were proclaimed a great success.

The following weekend, however, the stores again complained that they were being asked for directions. What went wrong? Apparently, because the testers knew where all

of the signs were located and did not actually have to use the washrooms, they did not have a need for the information. The signs were redesigned again, this time successfully addressing the needs of the stressed user.

Because the majority of scientific and technical communication texts are written for a specialist audience, integrity and acceptability are lost if part of the complexity is removed. In presenting streamlined scientific or technical information cognitively and logically, technical communicators are not "dumbing down" the message; rather they are presenting the information in a clear, concise way without stressing the user.

Although the principle of using both cognitive and logical ideas in communication may seem simplistic, remember that for your message to be delivered effectively you must take care not to stress the user. And if you still have any doubt as to the value of this, when was the last time you programmed your VCR?

*Debbie Davy is a science and technology writer with Ernst & Young's Canadian Scientific Research and Experimental Development Tax Credit Team; she has been writing the technical portion of SR&ED claims since 1986 and her technology articles have appeared in major industry publications. Debbie has also written process manuals and documentation for nickel vapor deposition plants, neurodiagnostic devices, large-scale medical data*

*capture programs, and an aircraft engine bleed air facility. Contact her at [debbie.davy@ca.eyi.org](mailto:debbie.davy@ca.eyi.org) or +1 905 882 3367.*

## STC Regional Conference

The Canada West Coast chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is hosting a regional conference 7-9 November 2002 at the Sheraton Wall Centre Hotel in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The conference theme—ShapeShifters: New roles, new tools, new challenges—reflects the evolving nature of the technical communication field and highlights new ideas that are bound to change the way we approach our world of work.

The keynote speaker, usability guru Jared Spool, heads the schedule of over 60 presentations, workshops, and progressions on new tools, information design, managing teams, instructional design, and basic writerly skills.

Vancouver is a choice vacation destination and it is also alive with high-tech startups and related industry. Here's a chance to sample the best of both worlds with mental stimulation and outdoor adventure. To learn more about the STC conference, visit the Web site <http://www.region7conference.com> or contact Rahel Bailie, conference manager, +1 604 837 0034, or Duncan Kent, program manager, +1 604 683 3136.

## European Credit Transfer System and PC Programs

By Herb Smith

Study abroad programs grew in popularity during the last two decades. The 10 December 1999 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that a total of 113 959 United States students earned credit for work abroad in 1997-98, an increase of 14.6 percent over 1996-97. Europe still remains the most popular destination with almost two-thirds of American students studying there. Study abroad programs will undoubtedly remain popular in the 21st century due to the widespread emphasis on internationalism and e-learning.

There is no uniform procedure, however, for evaluating course work taken at a host university. Few, if any, professional communication programs use the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as a basis for establishing guidelines for evaluating course work in study abroad programs. Nothing has been written in professional communication journals about the ECTS.

This article discusses how the ECTS, a system already in place and used widely throughout Europe, can help PC programs in the United States and Europe enrich the international study abroad experience by establishing a consistent procedure for evaluating course work.

### Background of Study Abroad Programs

Most study abroad programs are set up on a case-by-case basis. The home institution (the institution from

which the student will earn a degree) sets up a partnership with a host institution (the institution offering the course work). Students select the best match for their majors and their travel interests among the host institutions and normally spend at least one semester or one quarter there.

As productive as these exchanges are, however, they are not without some major drawbacks. Many home institutions in the U.S., such as the University of Washington, frequently warn students to select their major courses wisely because courses in the major taken abroad may not transfer. In addition, the student often must have the course work approved before departure. For professional communication majors, this problem is more pronounced because there are fewer hosts offering courses in PC than those offering courses in more traditional fields like engineering and management. Nonetheless, Germany is one country that has several well established PC programs—more than 15 awarding diplomas in technical writing; almost all of those programs are housed in the Fachhochschulen (technical schools), not the larger Hochschulen (universities) where student exchanges with American academic institutions are more likely to exist.

### Description of the ECTS

Developed by the Commission of the European Communities to pro-

vide common procedures to guarantee academic recognition of studies abroad, the ECTS began as an experimental program in 1988. Its specific goal is to promote academic partnerships between higher education institutions in different countries or between higher education institutions in the same country by providing common language and procedures so that students can study abroad and not be penalized for doing so.

The ECTS system provides grade equivalency among academic institutions.

During its first six years, 145 higher education institutions were involved in coordinating programs in business administration, chemistry, history, mechanical engineering, and medicine. In 1997-98, 772 new institutions joined the ECTS. In 1999-2000 more than 1200 institutions and between 3000 and 6000 departments in the European Union and European Economic Association, Cyprus, and associated countries of Central and Eastern Europe were using the ECTS system for student exchanges. Countries that use the ECTS include England, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and the Netherlands. Missing from the list, of course, is the United States.

### Benefits of the ECTS

The ECTS guarantees the student that courses taken in a host country will be recognized by the student's home institution. The student even has the option of finishing his or her degree abroad because the course of studies has been preapproved by the student,

ECTS Grade	Frequency (%)	Definition
A	10	EXCELLENT Outstanding performance with only minor errors
B	25	VERY GOOD Above the average standard but with some errors
C	30	GOOD Generally sound work with a number of notable errors
D	25	SATISFACTORY Fair but with significant shortcomings
E	10	SUFFICIENT Performance meeting the minimum criteria
FX	—	FAIL Some more work required before the credit can be awarded
F	—	FAIL Considerable further work required

the home institution, and the host institution.

Academic institutions benefit because an agreement is worked out ahead of time determining what courses and what credits are assigned to the work the student does. Academic rigor is maintained because course work and assessment methods have been agreed upon by the student, the host institution, and the home institution.

### Components of the ECTS

The ECTS consists of four components: the information package, the learning agreement, student transcripts, and the ECTS grading scale.

#### Information Package

Produced by the participating institutions and updated annually, this package provides information on the institution and its location, courses available, living arrangements, and administrative details of registration procedures and the academic year. Additional information describes

course content, prerequisites, assessment procedures, teaching and learning methods, and the ECTS credits allotted for each course.

#### Learning Agreement

The learning agreement identifies the courses that the student will take at the host institution and the number of ECTS credits to be awarded per course. This agreement is signed by the student, a representative of the host institution, and a representative of the home institution.

#### Student Transcripts

Student transcripts are included to document the courses and grades each student has received prior to participating in the study abroad program.

#### ECTS Grading Scale

Because there are many grading systems in Europe, grade equivalency between academic institutions is difficult to achieve. The ECTS grading scale offers a uniform grading system to solve this problem. ECTS

credits are a value assigned to courses to describe and measure the student workload required to complete a course. In short, ECTS credits indicate the worth of a course, given the materials covered, the course objectives, and the examinations, papers, or other assessment measures used. As described in the ECTS user's guide, the grades are shown in the table.

Academic institutions with professional communication programs will undoubtedly continue to emphasize the need for students to have an international experience by encouraging them to participate in study abroad programs. The ECTS provides an established approach for setting up learning agreements between partnership institutions, a popular approach that has worked well for the European community. It is now time for U.S. institutions offering degrees in PC to follow the European model and use the ECTS as a basis for their study abroad programs.

*Herb Smith is associate professor of technical and professional communication at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia. He coordinates the undergraduate communication programs and was guest professor of technical writing (spring 1998) at Fachhochschule Merseburg, Germany. He has been teaching technical and professional communication for 20 years. Dr. Smith currently reviews articles for Technical Communication Quarterly and has published widely in most of the major technical communication journals.*

## Cliché Expert Opens the Kimono

By Dan Danbom

With clients in professional sports and the executive suite, Frank Lingua, president and CEO of Dissembling Associates, is the nation's leading purveyor of buzzwords, catch phrases, and clichés for clients too busy to speak in plain English. We interviewed him in his New York City office.

*Is it a full-time job being a cliché expert?*

Bottom line is I have a full plate 24-7.

*Do you work by yourself?*

There's no "i" in "team."

*How do you know if you're successful in your work?*

At the end of the day, it's all about robust, world-class language solutions.

*Where do most clichés come from?*

Stakeholders push the envelope until it's outside the box.

*Is it hard to keep up with the seemingly endless supply of clichés that spew from business?*

Some days, I don't have the bandwidth. It's like drinking from a fire hydrant.

*Do people notice that you're a cliché expert?*

No, they can't get their arms around that. But they aren't incented to, and benchmarking the metrics is a challenge.

*Is it hard to keep up on all the new clichés?*

Harder than nailing Jell-O to the wall.

*How do you keep track of all the clichés?*

It's like herding cats.

*How do people know you're a cliché expert?*

I walk the walk and talk the talk.

*Can you anticipate if a phrase is going to become a cliché?*

Yes. I skate to where the puck's going to be. Because if you aren't the lead dog, you're not providing a customer-centric proactive solution.

*Give us a new cliché that we'll be hearing ad nauseam.*

"Enronitis" could be a next-generation player.

*Did incomprehensibility come naturally to you?*

I wasn't wired that way, but it became mission-critical as I strategically focused on my go-forward plan.

*Is your work difficult?*

It isn't rocket science. It isn't brain surgery. When you drill down to the granular level, it's basic blocking and tackling.

*How do you stay ahead of others in the buzzword industry?*

Net-net, my value proposition is based on maximizing synergies and being first to market with a leveraged, value-added deliverable. That's the opportunity space on a level playing field.

*Does everyone in business eventually devolve into mouthing the sort of mindless drivel you spout?*

If you walk like a duck and talk like a duck, you are a duck. They all drink the Kool-Aid.

*Do you read DILBERT in the newspaper?*

My knowledge base is deselective of fiber media.

*Does that mean "no"?*

Negative.

**DOES THAT MEAN "NO"?**

Let's take your issues offline.

**NO, WE ARE NOT GOING TO TAKE MY "ISSUES" "OFFLINE."**

You have a result-driven mind set that isn't a strategic fit with my game plan.

**I WANT TO PUSH YOUR FACE IN.**

Your call is very important to me.

*How can you live with yourself?*

I eat my own dog food. My vision is to monetize scalable supply chains.

*When are you going to quit this?*

Are you on top of the world of clichés?

(continued on page 22)



## Have You Created a Site Map?

By Elizabeth Weise Moeller

Very often the best way to represent something as complex as a Web site is visually: Draw a picture of what it will look like. This works for most people. They start by drawing a picture of what it will look like—but what about the structure? How will you know which pages will link to which other pages? How will the content be organized? Those are fairly complex questions that should be addressed before you even begin to think about what the site will look like.

A clearly organized and well documented site map can also significantly help during the design and programming of the Web site. Designers will use the site map to help them create the navigation scheme and buttons. Content developers will work off the site map to create the content, ensuring that no major piece of information is left out. Programmers will work off the site map to verify that all pieces of the site have been created. Finally, reviewers can use the site map to verify that all the functions and content have been included. All that is a heavy load for a site map to carry.

### Where To Start

The first step is to create a list of every topic you think should be addressed. That would be a brainstorming session—no idea is too odd or too boring. This is your opportunity to think about everything you have ever wanted to say about your organization.

Now step back and look at the list. The second step is to prioritize. This list represents every possible item you could put on a Web site. Your budget will dictate how much of this information is included when you launch your site. Remember that Web sites are living documents; keep that list of lower priority items to add to the Web site as time and budget permit.

How do you know what to include, and what priorities to assign? Look at your organization. The first thing people should see when they reach your site is who you are and what you do. Making them guess is only going to make it harder to keep visitors at your site. So answers to those questions should be your top priority.

To determine what should be prioritized next, talk to the people who answer the phones. Some people balk at the idea of asking an administrator or an hourly employee for assistance in developing an organization's Web site. That is not something to balk at. These people are "in the trenches" talking to your customers on a daily basis. They are the ones who know what questions are being asked on a regular basis, what sentiment exists regarding your organization, and what can make your customers happy. The people who answer the phones can be much more productive if they are not answering the same questions time after time, day after day. Those

questions need to be answered on your Web site.

Now look at what is left on the list. What would make your customers happy? That should be your next priority. After that, the rest should be just a list of things that would be nice to include but are not necessary to get your message across. As time and budget permit, include those items.

A clearly organized site map gives everyone a common ground.

### How To Organize

The last thing I like to see on a Web site is a whole series of buttons on the home page. So the third step is organization. Take the list of items, with priorities attached, and put them into categories. Start with some basic categories that should appear on all sites (e.g., About Us, Contact Us, etc.). Which items on your list fit in those categories? Now find a way to categorize the rest of the items on your list. Some categories could be products or services, process, and customer support.

You could also categorize information by who needs to use it. Some Web sites have more than one target audience; organize your information by audience. Perhaps some of your information is targeted for members only. Make that part of the Web site a password-protected area where you can add value for your customers.

Finally, prioritize your categories. Which categories should be at the top of the list and which should be near

*(continued on page 21)*

## The PCS Joenk Award

An interesting history: The PCS award for best paper in the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* the previous year was proposed by past president Charles A. Meyer in 1975. The first award was not presented until 1982 to Janan Al-Awar, Alphonse Chapanis, and W. Randolph Ford for Tutorials for the *First-Time Computer User*, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 30-37. An even longer hiatus followed, with the next award being given in 1995. Since then the presentations have been annual. In 2000 the AdCom renamed the award in honor of Rudolph J. Joenk, Jr., who had been editor of the *IBM Journal of Research and Development* for ten years, editor of the *PCS Transactions* for eight years, editor of the *PCS Newsletter* almost as long, and chair of the PCS editorial advisory committee (which annually selects the best paper) for more than eight years.

### 1995 R. McIntosh Shand

*User Manuals as Project Management Tools: Part I—Theoretical Background*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 75-80; and *Part II—Practical Applications*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 123-142.

Rod McIntosh Shand received his B.Sc. degree in marine biology from the University College of North Wales, Bangor, U.K., in 1975. He then worked in genetics before moving to computer programming in 1979. More recently (pre-1995) he was involved in the design, control, and repair of software projects covering a variety of application areas

and geography. He is an independent project consultant and shares his time between research and consulting.

### 1996 Charles J. Kostelnick

*Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 182-196.

Charles Kostelnick is a professor in the English department at Iowa State University where he has taught technical communication and both a graduate and an undergraduate course in visual communication in professional writing. He has published on visual communication in a variety of journals and was coauthor (with David D. Roberts) of *Designing Visual Language: Strategies for Professional Communicators*.

### 1997 Hans van der Meij

*Does the Manual Help? An Examination of the Problem-Solving Support Offered by Manuals*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 146-156.

Hans van der Meij studies questioning, instructional design, minimalism, use of information communication and technology (ICT) in schools, self-study materials, and usability testing. In the field of technical documentation the majority of his research concentrates on finding better ways of supporting users. His research with elementary school children focuses on developing critical thinking (questioning) skills in combination with an integrated use of ICT. He has authored or coauthored chapters in 30 books and has written over 80 articles.

### 1998 (tie) Robert Krull

*What Practitioners Need to Know to Evaluate Research*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 168-181.

Robert Krull is director of the M.S. degree programs in communication and professor of communication at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. He conducts research and teaches courses in computer documentation and user interface design. He also has worked in performance support for physical skills and the effects of educational television. He has won best-article awards from the Society for Technical Communication and received the PCS Goldsmith Award in 1997 for outstanding contributions to engineering communication. His research has been supported by the National Institute for Mental Health and by several multinational corporations. Dr. Krull has been associate dean for graduate programs and research in humanities and social sciences at RPI; he has been on the PCS AdCom and was codirector of the Technical Writer's Institute. He taught RPI's first distance education course in technical communication and one of RPI's first two video streaming distance courses.

### 1998 (tie) Leo Lentz and Menno de Jong

*The Evaluation of Text Quality: Expert-Focused and Reader-Focused Methods Compared*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 224-234.

Leo Lentz is associate professor at the Utrecht Institute for Linguistics at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. He conducted research

projects on language teaching and wrote a Ph.D. thesis on the functions of the school curriculum as a communication document between school and government. Text evaluation is the main focus of his research. He develops evaluation methods for reader-focused and for text-focused evaluation. Another part of his research consists of field studies on career writers in the Netherlands and on the development of textual features in the history of written instructions.

Menno de Jong is an associate professor of communication studies at the University of Twente, Enschede, the Netherlands. His research interests concern the use and methodology of applied research to optimize communication. He has published about formative text evaluation, Web evaluation, usability, and document design. His Ph.D. dissertation (1998) deals with the value of the plus-minus method for pretesting public information brochures.

**1999 Susan M. Katz**

*Learning to Write in Organizations: What Newcomers Learn About Writing on the Job*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 107-115, and *How Newcomers Learn to Write: Resources for Guiding Newcomers*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 165-174.

Susan Katz, associate professor, spent 12 years in television and advertising before turning to the study of writing in public and private organizations. She earned her Ph.D. degree in communication and

rhetoric at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1996 and now teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in technical, professional, and business writing at North Carolina State University. She is currently co-authoring a textbook for St. Martin's Press with Dr. Lee Odell and writing case studies for the Center for Innovation Management Studies at NCSU.

**2000 Michael A. Bridgwood**

*Guidelines for Communication and Engineering Problem Solving at the Basic Level*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 156-165.

Michael A. Bridgwood is an associate professor of electrical and computer engineering at Clemson University, teaching mainly in the electronics and instrumentation areas. His research interests include electromagnetic compatibility, electrostatic discharge modeling and the effects of power-quality events on industrial control systems. He currently has research contracts with the U.S. Air Force and Duke Power Corporation. For many years he has been concerned with teaching technical communication within engineering courses.

**2001 Ann S. Jennings**

*Employed Students: Ethical and Legal Issues in the Technical Communication Classroom*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 368-385.

Ann S. Jennings, Ph.D. in humanities, learned technical writing and editing on the job. She is grateful to

the university hiring slowdown she faced after graduate school: The lack of teaching jobs propelled her into university public relations, grant writing, and fund-raising; then to a long stint as a stockbroker and writer-editor in a broker training firm; and finally back to universities as a teacher. She continues to freelance as an editor and trainer in various fields.

**2002 F. Zahedi, W. V. van Pelt, and J. Song**

*A Conceptual Framework for International Web Design*, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 83-103.

Dr. Fatemeh "Mariam" Zahedi is Wisconsin Distinguished Professor, MIS area at the School of Business, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She received her doctoral degree from Indiana University. Her present areas of research include information systems quality and satisfaction, e-commerce and Web development, intelligent decision support systems, and IS-related policies and decision analysis. She has published extensively in refereed journals and serves on the editorial board of several journals. She is the author of two books, *Quality Information Systems* and *Intelligent Systems for Business: Expert Systems with Neural Network*.

William V. van Pelt is an associate professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he teaches technical writing, rhetoric, and literature. He received a Ph.D. degree in literature from the University of California-Santa Cruz. Dr. van Pelt worked as a technical writer

(continued on page 21)

## The PCS Schlesinger Award

This award is for outstanding service to the society. Named in honor of Emily K. Schlesinger, the first award was presented in 1995 (see the July/August 1997 issue of this *Newsletter* for the early awardees). Dr. Schlesinger was president of PCS in 1976 and 1977; previously she had been secretary 1970-72. During her long active involvement with the society, Emily edited this *Newsletter* 1976-82, established our education committee, and widened the reach of the society outside North America to include those who communicate in English as a second language. In retirement, Emily is still a staunch supporter of the society.

### 1997 Ronald S. Blicq

Ron Blicq has practiced and taught technical communication for nearly 50 years, as a technical writer with the Royal Air Force, technical editor with CAE Industries in Canada, and teacher of technical communication at Red River College. He has been an IEEE and PCS member since 1958, serving as PCS education chair for 18 years. Since retiring in 1990 he has taught numerous courses on oral and written communication skills for technical and business professionals. In 1976 Ron received the Alfred N. Goldsmith Award; in 2000 he received one of the 11 PCS-sponsored IEEE Third Millennium Medals; and in 2001 PCS created the Ronald S. Blicq Award for innovative teachers of technical communication.

### 1998 Mark P. Haselkorn

Mark Haselkorn is professor and

founding chair (1985-97) of the department of technical communication in the College of Engineering at the University of Washington. He is currently conducting a study of the Washington State Department of Transportation's strategic management of information and has recently completed an international project for the National Research Council entitled "Managing Vulnerabilities Arising from Global Infrastructure Interdependencies: Learning from Y2K." For two decades Dr. Haselkorn has led organizations and projects in interdisciplinary technology areas such as multimedia, usability, international technical communication, and use of new information and communication technologies to deliver user services. Since 1989 he has been a leading researcher in the area of Intelligent Transportation Systems with funding between 1989 and 1995 of over USD 5 000 000. Mark was chair of our Seattle chapter 1992-96, and vice president and president of PCS 1994-97. He has also been active on the IEEE Technical Activities Board.

### 1999 Rudolph J. Joenk, Jr.

Rudy Joenk served PCS in several capacities: 15-year member of the AdCom; vice president and president, when he developed a lasting relationship with our Russian counterparts; *Transactions* editor, when he restored regular publication in the late 1970s; *Newsletter* editor; and chair of the editorial advisory committee, when he recruited other editors for both publications. A senior member of the IEEE, Rudy received

the Goldsmith Award in 1980 and a PCS-sponsored IEEE Third Millennium Medal in 2000. In 2001 the annual best *Transactions* paper award was renamed the Joenk Award. Now retired, Dr. Joenk was a physicist and editor for most of his 30 years with IBM.

### 2000 Henrich S. Lantsberg

Dr. Lantsberg has been head since 1955 of the science information department of the Institute of Radio-engineering and Electronics of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow. He is best known to PCS as a driving force in the interactions between PCS and the Professional Communication Section (which he founded) of the Russian A. S. Popov Society. This collaboration, begun in 1990, marked our entry into truly international activities and resulted in the joint sponsorship of colloquia near Moscow in 1991 and 2001. Henrich sponsored a group of Russian-authored papers in the *Transactions* in 1994 and a group of U.S.-authored papers in the Russian journal *Scientific and Technical Information* in 1995. A senior member of the IEEE, he received an IEEE Third Millennium Medal in 2000. Dr. Lantsberg is vice chair of the IEEE Russia Section and chair of the PCS Russia chapter.

### 2001 William P. Kehoe

Bill Kehoe has an M.B.A. degree from George Washington University in Washington, DC, and is a retired senior staff member of the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory in Laurel, Maryland. He has been a member of PCS for 21



years and an AdCom member for 18. He was society treasurer from 1986 through 2000—PCS’s longest serving officer. In 1992 Bill received the Alfred N. Goldsmith Award, and in 2000 received one of PCS’s 11 IEEE Third Millennium Medals for contributions made to The Institute over the years.

**2002 George F. Hayhoe**

George F. Hayhoe is professor and director of the M.S. degree program in technical communication management in the School of Engineering at Mercer University. A fellow of the Society for Technical Communication, he has edited its journal, *Technical Communication*, since 1996.

He is a senior member of the IEEE and was president of PCS 2000-2001, vice president 1998-99, and secretary 1997. He holds a Ph.D. degree in English from the University of South Carolina. His professional interests include online documentation, software interface design, and product and document usability.

**The PCS Joenk Award**

*(continued from page 19)*

at Bechtel Engineering and as a training specialist at Intel Corporation. He has published articles on technical writing and postmodernism and edited *Speculations: Readings in Culture, Identity, and Values* (Prentice Hall, 1995).

Jaeki Song is an assistant professor in the information systems and quantitative sciences department at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. He received a Ph.D. degree in management information systems from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. Dr. Song specializes in e-commerce and his research examines e-business strategies including electronic marketing and Web design, emphasizing important factors for selecting the appropriate market strategy and how an individual’s belief system is influenced by Web contents. Other research interests include the economics of software development, adoption of information technologies, and Web-based decision support systems.

**Net Notes**

*(continued from page 17)*

the bottom? In some organizations this could become a political issue—try to avoid that at all costs. Organizing a Web site based on internal structure rarely works well, simply because the general public does not think in terms of your organizational structure.

**What Comes Next**

Now that you have the prioritized and categorized list of items, start creating your navigation scheme. Which items will appear as links off your home page? Try to keep the number of links off the home page minimal. Which items can be subpages off those links? What will the site look like when it’s finished?

We have found the best way to do this is a visual representation. There are a number of pieces of software available to help with this task. Be careful of software that forces a format you are not comfortable with. Since mine is a Web site *organization*, we’ve found that our customers

respond best to an organizational chart format. The home page is the equivalent of the top executive, the links off the home page are mid-level executives, and the subpages are all low-level managers or assistants. This provides a graphical representation that makes it clear which topics fall under which categories and how site visitors will move from one category to the next.

Prioritize, categorize, and prioritize some more.

A clearly organized Web site makes it easier to design and program the site. A clearly organized site map gives everyone a common ground—think of it as a blueprint for your site.

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

## PCS Editors

The past five years have been stable ones for PCS editors.

### Transactions

In the March 1997 *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, editor **Scott P. Sanders**, then in his second term, wrote an excellent editorial titled Forty that capsulized all the previous editors, starting with volume 1, number 1, March 1958, when the PCS *Transactions* was known as the *IRE Transactions on Engineering Writing and Speech*.

In that editorial Scott finessed saying anything about himself. He had previously been editor from June 1990 through December 1993 and came back for the year 1997 to help PCS with a transition. Scott ushered in and coped with the new three-column *Transactions* format, which debuted in the June 1997 issue. He graciously exited his second term saying "this job has been always and is still a joy."

In his primary life Dr. Sanders was, and is, on the faculty of the University of New Mexico; he is currently serving as chair of the English Language and Literature department. In addition to authoring many poems and several technical papers, Scott is coauthor of *The Physics of Skiing* (1996). He is an associate fellow of the Society for Technical Communication (1998), won the National Council of Teachers of English award for best article in 1988 on theory of technical or scientific communication, and received the PCS

Alfred N. Goldstein Award for contributions to the field of technical communication in 1993. In 2000 he received a PCS-sponsored IEEE Third Millennium Medal.

With Dr. Sanders temporarily at the helm, the AdCom issued an RFP for an editor-editorial home, multi-year contract for the *Transactions*.

Recipient of that contract for 1998-2000 was **Kim Sydow Campbell** and the Air Force Institute of Technology in Ohio. Dr. Campbell was then associate professor in the department of management. By the time her first *Transactions* issue was published she had moved to the department of management and marketing at the University of Alabama, successfully transferring all the support and contract requirements to that institution. The Campbell-University of Alabama contract has been extended through 2003.

Dr. Campbell added two features to the *Transactions*: Interfaces and Profiles. The Interface feature summarizes a research study readers might not otherwise see and demonstrates the relevance of that study to the practice and pedagogy of technical communication. A Profile is the transcription of an interview with a practicing technical communicator. (This feature was discontinued last year as not fitting the IEEE definition of archival material.) In the wings is a revised front cover.

The March 2000 *Transactions* was a joint issue with *Technical Commu-*

*nication* of the Society for Technical Communication and it received an APEX® Award for Publication Excellence. Dr. Campbell has emphasized both methodologically rigorous studies and organizational communication in selecting *Transactions* papers. She has also moved the *Transactions* to entirely electronic submission and reviewing processes and has posted searchable abstracts (from 1996) on the PCS Web site.

### Newsletter

A previous list of PCS *Newsletter* editors appeared in the September/October 1997 issue. The *Newsletter* has been edited by **Rudy Joenk** since the November/December 1997 issue. Dr. Joenk has already received plenty of *Newsletter* ink (e.g., Schlesinger Award, November/December 1999 issue, p. 1; renamed best paper award, September/October 2001 issue, p. 6) so he is finessing anything more, as did Scott Sanders in 1997.

## Cliché Expert

(continued from page 16)

I may exit the business to pursue other career opportunities.

*I hate you.*

Take it and run with it.

Copyright 2002 by Dan Danbom. Used with permission. Mr. Danbom is a Denver writer. E-mail him at [ddanbom@qwest.com](mailto:ddanbom@qwest.com).



## Pick a Verb, Not Any Verb

The Professor had to tear herself away from watching Worldwide Wrestling to write this lesson tonight. Actually, she has to stop watching every time the Rock loses a match. The Rock consistently fights a good battle, but the occasional loss makes the Professor seek a distraction.

Speaking of consistency and distraction, the Professor and her colleagues find quite a bit of inconsistency in the use of verbs that mean the same thing. This inconsistency can be terribly distracting to users who want to get a job done, not interpret creative writing exercises. Consider the following groups of verbs and their usage:

Create, Develop, Generate, Produce

Use *create* in most cases, even if writing about, for example, something called an SQL generator: “The SQL generator creates SQL statements.” You can *develop* software, but *create* really says the same thing. *Produce* is something the Professor shops for at the Farmer’s Market.

Enter, Execute, Invoke, Issue, Run

You can *issue* or *enter* a command, but you cannot *execute* one. (Surely, *issues* are better left to magazine subscriptions and your psychotherapist’s office.) Nor can you *execute* programs, though there have been times when the Professor has wished she could sic Stone Cold Steve Austin [a professional wrestler] on some of her desktop applications.

You can *run* a program, or a program can *run* on its own. As for *invoke*, the Professor would rather limit its use to those occasions when one is calling forth spirits from beyond.

Alter, Change, Edit, Modify, Update

Some of these words have specific meanings in certain contexts: for example, the ALTER TABLE statement in SQL and the Edit menu in any Windows product. Unless you are describing an action related to the ALTER statement, do not use the word *alter* to mean change. Unless you are describing an action related to the Edit menu or a text editor, do not use the word *edit*. Limit your use of *update* to situations related to time: “The database is updated hourly.” The Professor would like to see *modify* go the way of American Gladiators.

Allow, Enable, Let, Permit

Perhaps it’s best to leave these words and their related concepts out of technical information entirely. The Professor has seen many product descriptions start like this: “InfoProduct *allows* you to...” Yet the Professor never asked permission of InfoProduct for any such thing. *Let* is used in the same manner but, being a shorter word, it appeals more to writers who try to cut syllables. *Permit* works best as a noun when discussing what you need before you can use a campsite

in California. *Enable* describes what a program does; you should write instead about what the user can do with the program.

Get into the habit of choosing the preferred word, one that is appropriate for your audience. To determine the best verb to use, the Professor recommends that you follow the advice given by her dear friends in their book *Developing Quality Technical Information*: Use the option

that is derived from Anglo-Saxon, rather than any derived from Latin, Greek, or programmerese.

Here are more groups of verbs that you can review on your own, and the Professor will get back to her wrestling match:

- Delete, eliminate, erase, remove
- Begin, boot, initiate, kick off, start
- Abort, close, end, quit, stop, terminate
- Demonstrate, describe, explain, illustrate, show

*Copyright 2001 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, recently authored by the Council.*

Users are distracted by inconsistent verb use.

## Final Preview of IPCC 2002

IPCC is just around the corner (17-20 September in Portland, Oregon, to be exact). Are your bags packed? E-mail out-of-office notification turned on? Cell phone charged? Good, because you want to be ready for what promises to be a *great* conference. Besides the great program, which can be found at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/2002/>, here's some details about other conference activities.

### About the Banquet

Thursday evening (19 September) you won't want to miss great food and entertainment. The banquet will be held a short five blocks from the conference hotel at Al-Amir. This restaurant occupies a building known as The Bishop's House, which was constructed in 1879 as the residence of the Roman Catholic bishop of Portland. The ornate Gothic Revival facade is relatively unchanged, but the inside has evolved from residence to Chinese

speakeasy to studio to restaurant. The cuisine at Al-Amir is Lebanese, a Mediterranean mix of sunshine and herbs.

International cuisine isn't all that sets this banquet apart from those at other conferences. The program features not a speaker, but a band. JVA is a Portland duo, Jim Walker and Tim Ellis, who also make up two-thirds of the Craig Carothers Trio. JVA plays an eclectic mix of mostly original music. Jim (formerly known as Jeroan van Aichen) leads most of the vocals and Tim is a masterful guitarist who can blend his playing to enhance anything his colleagues throw at him.

### As You're Packing...

To celebrate PCS's 45th anniversary (as well as Oregon's recycling movement), bring your tote bag(s) from past IPCCs. We'll award a

prize for the oldest one. Show it (or them) to Paul Seesing at the registration desk so he can track the years. You might even want to use it all week to show off your IPCC history and avoid picking up the wrong bag in a crowded room.



### After the Conference

On Saturday, 21 September, PCS is sponsoring workshops to expand your communication skills. Gain exposure to usability methods in an all-day workshop led by Judy Ramey; learn strategies for computer-supported collaboration in an all-day workshop with Beth Kolko; or practice designing writing assignments for technical courses in a half-day workshop with Richard House and Anne Watt. You can register online for these workshops at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/2002/> when you register for IPCC 2002.

### See You in Portland!

