

Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter



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President's Corner

Hi all,

Special thanks to Amy Vogt and Tricia Spayer who organized the October 2013 NEO STC Workshop, "Content Lifecycle and Topic-Based Authoring."

Mollye Barrett led the workshop, sharing a wealth of tools, techniques, and strategies that allowed participants to define a content strategy.

The conversation further included: using the content lifecycle as a strategic collaboration tool, how to define and meet single sourcing challenges, understanding topic-based authoring, preparing for structured authoring, and using methodologies and solutions for content management.

It was well-attended and University Hospitals (thank you, Amy) provided a terrific venue.

November's Community Meeting will be a panel discussion titled "Careers In Communications: Technical Writing, Communications Management, and Information Architecture." The meeting will be held on Wednesday, November 13, 2013, a different day; typically the Community meets on Thursday.

Our panelists are:

- ◆ Janean Voss of Parker Hannifin, who will speak on "A Career as a Technical Writer"
- ◆ Heather Schofield of the Dairy Farmers of America, who will discuss "Communications Management"
- ◆ Denise Kadilak of Blackbaud, Inc., with "What the Heck is an Information Architect Anyway?"

We look forward to seeing everyone at the meeting.

Click here for more information and to register![USS Forestal](#)

As always, if you are interested in getting more involved as a volunteer, please feel free to contact me.

Paul Holland

PS. This month's lady is the USS Forrester, CV-59. She is topical, because last month, she was sold for one penny to a firm in Texas who will scrap her. This is an inevitable end for most ships, and while sad, not all can be preserved as museums. Her career is notable as she was the first supercarrier (carriers that exceed 65,000 tons) and the first carrier designed to handle jet aircraft. She has an angled flight deck that allows her to launch and recover aircraft simultaneously. Her nickname,

which also became part of her patch, was FID. It stands for First in Defense, as her namesake was James Forrester, the first Secretary of Defense. She was launched in 1954 and served until 1993. She was a noble and lovely ship and the predecessor to the Nimitz Class Carriers sailing today.

Membership Renewal

It's November, and that means the STC membership renewal season is now open!

Benefits of belonging to STC include:

- ◆ Networking and employment opportunities
- ◆ Chances to learn about new technologies and trends
- ◆ Ways to sharpen your existing skills

Your 2014 STC membership provides all of these and more! Additional information on the value of an STC membership is available on the STC website.

Nonmembers who join now will not pay a pro-rated cost for the remainder of 2013. The 2014 membership will include the remaining months in this year.

Corporate memberships are available for companies who employ five or more technical communicators, allowing you to save on membership dues.

Members who recruit new members are eligible to win some great prizes!

Visit the <http://www.stc.org/membership> and renew your membership today! Please remember to join NEO STC when you renew – you and the chapter both receive additional benefits from your membership in NEO STC.

Mark Your Calendars for the Holiday Banquet!

The Annual Holiday Recognition Banquet is coming up on December 12 at the beautiful Signature of Solon Country Club! We will recognize and award the 2013 NEO STC Competition winners, and enjoy a fantastic meal with our colleagues and friends. This event is a fabulous celebration of your peers' accomplishments and a great end of year celebration of 2013 with NEO STC! More information, including registration information, about the event will be sent in the next few weeks.

Trends in Documentation – 2012 Research (Part 2 of 2)

By *Tricia Spayer*



Note: This is part 2 of the article. To read part 1, please visit the newsletter archives.

Where documentation is going in the future

Part of my research was to investigate ways to make Pressco's documentation less daunting for customers. We have machines that do A LOT; therefore we have a lot of documentation. Instead of 1,000-page manuals, people want their help in easy-to-digest portions. Based on research, the following are trends that are developing for technical communicators. Some of these are currently in use, and I have found that these items will still be in play over the next 10 years. These are some techniques I can use to make my documentation more appealing to customers.

1) Trend away from "documents"

This trend focuses on topic-based authoring, rather than document authoring. Instead of publishing a 700-page manual, you create 700 one-page topics. To create a different purposed guide, you can use the first 100 topics, plus the last 100 topics, and not use the middle 500 topics.

Users have many more devices to access content; some devices have not even been invented yet. You must create content that does not rely on a specific platform. Use topic-based writing, structured authoring techniques, or use metadata tags to prioritize content and configure it on different devices.

2) Trend towards structured authoring

Structured authoring means defining topic types and creating templates to ensure that anyone creating information is consistent with everyone else. Topic types include: Concepts, Tasks, and References.

A Task topic may have a template where the author must input 1) title, 2) description, 3) required materials, 4) steps, 5) outcome, and 6) expected results or conclusion. Making the authors follow these templates means that authors a) will not forget what to put in each topic, b) cannot get 'creative' and make up their own styles, and c) makes it look like each one of these topics came from the same person or company (consistency).

Each structured topic can be used in any book (where appropriate), and would be consistent across the board. News organizations are a great example of structured content.

3) Developing a Content Strategy

Content is a corporate asset. It needs to be supported and managed. Analyze the content and ask questions such as:

- ◆ Who makes the final decision of what is published? This is especially important if multiple departments are involved and they are writing disparate information.
- ◆ If another department in your company doesn't use your software, who has the power to tell them they need to?
- ◆ What are the business requirements? Examples: do we need Localization or videos?
- ◆ What devices are your customers reading your information on? Know your customers. You can't design for everyone – design for the majority.
- ◆ What is the typical customer like? Try using personas.
- ◆ What can be eliminated and in what situation?
- ◆ Why would people come to us rather than a competitor? Think about the experience.

4) Trend towards Doctrine of Flexibility

This means that, rather than using absolute font sizes or pixel sizes for pictures, you use percentages. Rather than specifying 14 point Arial for your output, you could specify 120% font size, making that text larger than your default.

Making things flexible in this way lets you create information not only now, but into the future. You could output information to a web page or help file now, or to some yet-to-be-discovered device in the future. Using flexibility now allows you to publish information to mobile devices without having to re-code everything to fit on those tiny screens.

More smartphones and tablets were purchased over the last year than laptop computers. People are looking for information instantly. Developing for these applications requires more than just pushing a button to output to another format. Some content needs to be re-worked to make it readable, scrollable, and useful on small devices.

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5) Shift from Documentation to Embedded Interface Design

Instead of providing descriptions for wizards, parameters and fields in a document, some companies (IBM, for example) write content that gets displayed on the device. They don't repeat it in the documentation. Developers and writers must work with each other, and be open to input on wording, placement, and size of fields.

6) Trend towards instant gratification

Today, the customer wants the information instantly. "Back in the day," companies would provide you with a manual and you would find where you put it, go to the index, find a topic, go to the page, and look for the answer. Today, many people go to Google to find answers immediately. They want instant gratification.

7) Trend towards Progressive Information Disclosure

This means providing the right information in the right place at the right time. You develop a set of personas for your users, from beginners to experts. Reveal advanced topics only to experts. Organize the content so that experts do not have to skim through beginner information.

With this technique, you do not repeat information from one level to the next. You progressively disclose more information only when necessary. Also remember that not every topic needs a help file.

8) Trend towards Crowd-sourced information

Some online companies allow users to contribute videos, instructions, and any other information a user wishes to contribute. Content is editable, like a wiki. Look at www.iFixit.com as an example.

9) Trend towards Dynamic Content Delivery

Author-it's Knowledge Center is an example of dynamic content delivery: <http://kc.author-it.com/#b77038t77659n/s-1/s299/s299b32990>.

You filter your choices by product, platform, or software version. You can also search and filter the results to narrow your choices.

What does all this mean for you?

Documentation needs to be supported by the organization. There may be a need for organizational changes where tech pubs become more part of the new product development team – to use Progressive Information Disclosure and Embedded Interface Design.

Also there may be a need for management to enforce using structured authoring tools across departments so that many inconsistencies and inefficient methods are not perpetuated. How do you get Company Management to buy into these changes? Appeal to the bottom line. The quality of the documentation can affect the company's bottom line:

- ◆ Quality of documentation reflects the quality of the product
- ◆ Well-written documentation makes the product easier to use, which reduces the number of tech support calls
- ◆ Well-edited documentation reduces the cost of translation and allows for better machine translation
- ◆ Properly copyrighted and recorded documentation protects against lawsuits
- ◆ Technically inaccurate documentation can lead to customer losses and lawsuits
- ◆ Poorly produced documentation with typos, organizational, and grammatical errors can adversely affect an organization's brand and its reputation for quality

"Technical Documentation shouldn't be an afterthought. It shouldn't be a dumping ground for legal disclaimers. Documentation should be vital to companies. We've learned that people really appreciate good instructions... When companies produce sub-par documentation, they're only hurting themselves. Great content creates lifelong customers. It empowers people. It inspires loyalty." ~ Kyle Wiens, co-inventor of iFixit.

I wish to acknowledge the help of Neil Perlin of Hyper/Word Services, Inc. for providing me with some of the trends mentioned in this article and advice he shared with me for improving my company's documentation.

Remembering Cheryl Bennett

The NEO STC Administrative Board received notification that one of our former senior members, Cheryl Bennett, passed away this summer. Cheryl "found her professional calling in technical writing" according to the touching obituary at:



<http://obits.cleveland.com/obituaries/cleveland/obituary.aspx?pid=165806535>

Cheryl was a member of the NEO chapter from 1987 to 2006. In her professional life, she was a technical writer at Swagelok for many years. She was also an active chapter member, having organized many of our chapter Competitions.

Her beautifully written obituary includes wonderful details about Cheryl, including that she was an "avid mystery reader who enjoyed Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum series" and that "she will be remembered for her quiet loving ways by all who knew her."

Our sincerest sympathy goes to Cheryl's family and friends.

In the Spotlight: Joann Rasmussen

By Lynn Nickels

How many of us have worked as journalists before delving into our careers as technical writers? Probably more of us than one would think!

Joann Rasmussen is one of those journalists-turned-tech writers, and is our featured "In the Spotlight" colleague this month. Joann started her writing career as a newspaper reporter and public relations copywriter.

In 2004, she was hired part-time by Microsoft Dynamics to write marketing web content, and as fate would have it, when managers of other departments asked her if she would work extra hours to write technical and educational content, without hesitation, she said, "Yes!"

She currently uses Adobe Captivate and Articulate to create e-learning modules for the Cleveland Clinic. She also teaches Adobe Captivate for Devore Technologies, a technology services and training provider. Joann's involvement with NEO STC began fairly recently when former president, Janean Voss, invited her to manage the chapter's webinars.

She currently is the co-chair of the Programs Committee with Kevin Tousey. She holds a B.A. in Communications and English and an M.B.A in Project Management from Cleveland State University, and lives with her husband, Bob, in Avon, Ohio.

They have two daughters; Jayni, 22, is a lobbyist for the Ocean Conservancy in Washington D.C., and Maree, 20, is a manager for Jimmy John's in Avon.

Joann is a hobby beekeeper and manages two hives that produce organic honey. She loves to hike and backpack with Bob and their Shiba Inu dog, Balta. Ultimately, Joann is a science and science fiction-loving geek and

loves writing technical and scientific content. She says, "In my dreams, I provide technical, science and other writing to a non-profit organization dedicated to animal welfare."

Considerations in Creating a DITA Style Guide (Part 2 of 2)

by Kevin Tousey

Note: This is part 2 of the article. To read part 1, please visit the newsletter archives.

Processes

Why should the process of creating content be included in your style manual? Because topic based authoring involves more stake-holders, and requires management of an exponentially greater number of files. It is vitally important to have a process in place that allows your team to work with consistency and confidence.

Create a list of the tasks to be included in each process. By spelling out each task, gaps and inefficiencies become self-evident early on.

Sample Task: Creating Complex Topic Modules

When an author encounters a complex topic that tempts them to include not only a procedure, but also related reference and conceptual information inside a module, allow the procedure to become the organizing element and follow these steps:

- ◆ Write the task module, keeping in mind the user's perspective in completing their specific task (be sure to include the elements shown in the formatting section)
- ◆ Write the the associated concept module(s)
- ◆ Leave out or remove unnecessary reference information while editing (even though it is tempting to include it for clarity)
- ◆ Create links between the procedure and concept module(s)

The Process

The creation of a topic based authoring process flow should illuminate some of the possible trouble spots in your implementation. To minimize finger pointing and improve productivity, your process description should at least provide:

- ◆ Lines of authority and responsibility

- ◆ Milestones required at each stage of production
- ◆ The location and naming conventions for all work-products
- ◆ Procedures for tracking multiple versions of files
- ◆ The maintenance of an index of work-products that guides authors to critical information

The beginning of the process should also include instructions for topic mapping. Where one application may require only a parent project table of contents, others will require more complex database mapping or form creation. Ensure that authors take a unified approach to using your system and documenting their modules.

Along the way, a list of quality requirements should be considered for review at each step or work-product. This list should be specific to each role and can be presented in a table (see the sample table below), along with a list of critical quality concerns or Key Project Indicators.

| DITA Implementation Process (by Role) | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Step 1 Document Map/TOC | Step 2 Module Development | Step 3 Schema/DTD Assignment | Step 4 Targets and Revision | Step 5 Web Implementation | Step 6 Publication |
| Editor | | | | | | |
| Writer #1 | | | | | | |
| SME #1 | | | | | | |

Table 1: Use a DITA Implementation Table to clarify assignment of responsibilities

What's next?

After creating a style guide, use it not as a hard-and-fast way to constrain content, but as a springboard for conversation and refinement. To encourage this discourse, consider holding a monthly meeting or lunch-and-learn style sessions conducted by a different member of the documentation team each time.

Since the goal is universal adoption by writers, maintain flexibility. Updating and maintaining a living DITA style guide may be the best way to ensure that users not only adopt it as a standard, but also remember it and take ownership of its content.

References

- ◆ <http://kaiweber.wordpress.com/category/topic-based-authoring-2/>, September 12, 2013
- ◆ "The DITA Style Guide: Best Practices for Authors," Tony Self
- ◆ <http://www.sdcorp.com/Resources/Presentations.aspx>

Book Review

The Writer's Notebook II: Craft Essays from Tin House by Christopher Beha (2012)

By Jeanette Evans

What do prominent writers, writing teachers, and editors write about when they write about writing today? The answer in part comes in *The Writer's Notebook II: Craft Essays from Tin House*, a book that continues with a second set of essays.

Beginnings, middles, and endings – these topics as you would expect appear throughout the essays in *The Writer's Notebook II*. Author Ann Hood in her essay, *Beginnings*, gives us plenty of ideas about how to start a piece of writing. She looks at what other successful writers do and includes writers such as Jane Austen and Charles Dickens.

"It was a dark and stormy night," as a beginning, of course makes it into the essay. You should have fun seeing what Hood has to say. The idea of an effective beginning – according to Hood – is that it makes the reader want to know more and keep reading.

The beginning, Hood argues, can be in media res, facts, a character description, a setting, a philosophical statement (as Tolstoy does in *Anna Karenina* and the "happy families are all alike" statement), dialog, introduction, or what Hood calls "an old saw," such as "once upon a time."

If you wonder as I do, what happens at a writer's workshop of this sort, you can now wonder no more, at least when it comes to the workshop held by this impressive group. If you also enjoy thinking about writing outside of what is your normal sphere of technical communication, as I understand that many of us do, this read could be for you.

Note to readers: A similar book review is scheduled to appear in *Technical Communication*.

Talk of the Town

Ginny Haas and Kim Lindsey from our chapter will be representing STC/NEO STC at a booth at the AMWA (American Medical Writers Association) conference on November 6-9 in Columbus, OH. We look forward to hearing back from them about this experience!

Intercom: Thoughts on Publishing

Intercom is the STC monthly magazine that according to stc.org "publishes articles about issues and topics driving the conversation in the world of technical communication."

NEO STC Senior Member Denise Kadilak says about her experience in publishing in Intercom that "it was a very good experience. The proposal and review processes were handled professionally, and the folks I worked with at Intercom were terrific."

"I found the experience of working with Intercom exciting! While in my normal, every day job, I often get caught up in the mechanics of the software or product I'm writing or editing about. Learning about Intercom style rules and methods of getting published was refreshing," says NEO STC Senior Member Lisa Adair on her experience.

How do you write for Intercom? According to stc.org – the Intercom staffs looks forward to hearing from you and asks that you read the author guidelines at <http://intercom.stc.org/write-for-intercom/author-guidelines/> (for information about formatting, style, and copyright), and refers you to an editorial calendar at <http://intercom.stc.org/write-for-intercom/editorial-calendar/>. The author guidelines state that you should write a 100-word summary of your article idea and send it via email to intercom@stc.org.

The guidelines also state that "Intercom does accept complete, unsolicited manuscripts from STC members and other industry experts. However, sending a summary of your idea enables our editorial staff to respond more quickly. It also saves you time in the event that another writer has already proposed a similar article." Here is some more from the site:

"Intercom publishes articles of professional interest to technical communicators, including writers, editors, illustrators, teachers, managers, consultants, and others involved in preparing technical documents. It provides practical examples and applications of technical communication that promote readers' professional development. ... Before writing an article, look over

several recent issues of the magazine to make sure your topic and approach are appropriate for our readers. The purpose of Intercom is to inform. You should therefore write in a clear, informal style, avoiding jargon and acronyms. All decisions on style and usage should be guided by common sense: What is the clearest way to present the information?"

Good luck to you if you decide to submit and get published in the magazine. The process may be time consuming and at times overwhelming, but worth the time and effort. When you flip through the pages and see the results on the day the article appears, it can make for an interesting and enjoyable experience. The chance to get published is a worthwhile service STC provides its members.

Helping Students Pay for STC Membership

NEO STC is seeking students who are interested in exploring technical communication as a career field and are currently enrolled in a Northeast Ohio educational institution.

Our chapter continues to offer to cover half the cost of one-year student memberships in the Society for Technical Communication (a \$37.50 value) to students that meet the requirements outlined below.

Visit <http://www.stc.org/membership> and <http://www.stc.org/membership/join-or-renew-now/membership-dues> for more information.

Requirements include the following:

- ◆ Interest in the field of technical communication
- ◆ Current enrollment as a student at a Northeast Ohio community college, college, or university
- ◆ Willingness to participate in a three-month chapter mentoring program

Contact studentmemberships@neostc.org if you have any questions or are interested in participating.

Editor's Newsletter Notes: Giving Thanks (and thinking about books)

By Jeanette Evans (co-editor, Lines & Letters)

November is of course a time to give thanks, so again, we should all thank our officers, committee chairs, and speakers as we look at the great programs and activities in our NEO STC community. In addition to our monthly programs, workshops, and networking activities, we

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have almost too much to mention with our competitions and other activities. Soon, you can also look for announcements about our scholarship call for entries and judges.

Our book club is yet another great community activity. Some of you are maybe like me in that you were not able to attend our book club meetings, but are curious about the book chosen. Information about the Too Big To Know book is at <http://www.amazon.com/Too-Big-Know-Rethinking-Everywhere/dp/0465021425>, and we all know that discussion leader Jill McCauslin makes sure the group holds lively discussions.

Further on the topic of books, some of you might be thinking about being a book reviewer for *Technical Communication*. If you are interested, please let me know if you would like some information, or contact Jackie Damrau, the current book review section editor.

Enjoyable is the word that comes to mind when I think of working with Jackie on book reviews. She follows in the footsteps of predecessor Avon Murphy, providing thoughtful and most helpful edits. Of course, I also like getting the books for free, a great perk.

My last book review was a bit of a misadventure. I checked the wrong column for my selection on the Google spreadsheet Jackie provides reviewers and got a book I did not expect. Since a promise of a review is something I felt was a commitment I should honor, I went ahead with reading and reviewing the book. That is a decision I do not regret.