

BE IN THE BUSINESS OF GOOD WRITING

BY HARVEY MACKAY

Writing is becoming a lost art, many of my colleagues tell me. No, the novel is not in trouble, but day-to-day business writing is taking a major hit, and most fingers point at the informal prose composed millions of times a day on office computers.

Fix-it software doesn't solve the problem. Spell-check and grammar-check can go only so far in preventing embarrassment.

Bad sentences with unclear meanings can often be remedied by actually reading what you write. If your writing makes your own eyes glaze over, consider getting help.

Robert Louis Stevenson put it well: "Don't write merely to be understood. Write so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood."

As an author, I have the luxury of having editors, publishers, and trusted family and friends who will look at my work. As an everyday writer of memos, letters, and reports, I rely on my assistant to keep me sounding reasonably articulate.

But quick hits online or on paper tend to be what people read. If you're concerned that your e-compositions will haunt you once they're printed out or your memos will reach the "hall of shame" board, I've prepared a five-step refresher course that just might help.

1. Content is central. Get to the point immediately so that your readers know what you need or have to offer. Keep their interest by staying on message. Organize the information so that your points don't get confused. That means one topic to a paragraph. If your corre-

spondence demands a second or third reading to be understood, you're wasting your colleagues' time.

2. Be as clear as possible. Words such as *many*, *numerous*, and *some* usually improve by being made specific. "Several people called to complain" or "Ten people called to complain"; which would make you take action? Also, be clear about what you're requesting: Who will shoulder responsibility? What is the deadline?

3. Be mindful of tone. Write like a person, not a machine. Use words like *I*, *we*, and *you* to remind people that they are working together, not just for a company.

4. Try to keep it interesting, even if your topic is mundane. Generate a little enthusiasm, and let people know that every part of every job is worth doing well.

5. Brevity is not only the soul of wit—it's considerate of your reader's time. Eliminate every word that adds nothing to or detracts from the meaning of your message. Two short sentences are often better than one monster.

Furthermore, according to *Personnel Journal*, studies show that routine memos are rewritten an average of 4.2 times, occupying 54 minutes for planning, composing, and editing. Over the course of a year, the cost for an employee to write one memo weekly can be thousands [of dollars].

It's also important to remember that the same folks correspond with your customers, too. You can't afford to risk

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FROM THE EDITOR



RUDY JOENK

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

Letter to the Editor

I just finished watching the song round of Melody Grand Prix, the Eurovision Song Contest, and I saw a shift worth reporting.

A couple of decades ago, any language was OK. So the contestants from many countries eyed commercial possibilities and sang in English. Hence the success of ABBA and innumerable Irish groups. Then came a rule that required native tongue. That lasted about 10 years, maybe less. Now, any language is OK, again.

In this evening's contest, for the first time, the French song had a final verse in English, as did the Turkish, Danish, and German songs, while others were completely in English. No doubt about it; the worth of English is undisputed in the marketplace.

I work in two or three languages, five days a week. But the fingers at the keyboard work mostly in English, and that's what generates income. The worth of my observation, to the members of PCS, is that most, as native English speakers, have an advantage. While writing, think of the communication aspect, as if you were writing a hit song.

— *Michael Brady
Asker, Norway*

Oops!

I hope this doesn't become a regular feature. In Jamie Hutchinson's May/June cover story about an image long used as an optical processing standard, I mistakenly labeled "Lenna" as the Swedish spelling, whereas the model's Swedish name is "Lena"; the double-*n* version was intended as a guide to pronunciation. Also, "photonics" should be interpreted as descriptive rather than as a magazine title.

Instant Fame

Once again here's my version of public radio's pledge drive (but at least mine is only annual). If you're going to attend IPCC 01 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, 24-26 October, I'd like to offer you temporary appointment as a reporter (or photographer) for the *Newsletter*. Usually a paragraph or two about each presentation in a session—what was said, not what's in the proceedings—is appropriate unless you're really hooked by a topic. E-mail me at r.joenk@ieee.org if you're interested.

AdCom

On page 6 PCS secretary Ed Clark reports the highlights of the 27-28 April AdCom meeting held at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. The next meeting will be in two parts on 24 and 27 October at La Fonda in Santa Fe, New Mexico, along with IPCC 01. PCS members will be welcome at this meeting, which is the annual election meeting. The schedule for 2002 has not been determined.

The Bulletin Board on our Web site has been renamed Online Discussion Forum at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/wwwboard/>.

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**IEEE
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COMMUNICATION
SOCIETY**

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN



GEORGE HAYHOE

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE: RESULTS OF OUR SOCIETY REVIEW

Every five years, the IEEE Technical Activities Board (TAB) conducts a review of each society and council within the Institute. The Professional Communication Society had its most recent review in June 2000, when Bill Kehoe (then society treasurer), Kim Campbell (our *Transactions* editor), and I met with the TAB Society Review Committee to discuss PCS operations and governance. We have now received a draft of the committee's report and recommendations, and I'd like to share the most important of their suggestions with you.

Society Governance

The review committee noted that PCS is one of relatively few IEEE societies whose members do not directly elect at least part of the society's Administrative Committee (AdCom). Although the review committee stated that there are good reasons for the AdCom to elect a portion of its membership internally (to ensure representation of geographic regions or other constituencies, for example), they expressed concern that all of our AdCom members-at-large are selected solely by the AdCom.

This electoral practice has always seemed peculiar to me. When a governing body such as our AdCom is self-elected, the opportunity for fresh ideas to permeate the group is diminished. But, more important, society members and others can easily perceive the group as a clique. Although I don't believe that this has actually been a problem during my tenure on the AdCom, the appearance of cliquishness is as significant a problem as the reality would be because it discourages participation.

There have been good reasons in the past for PCS to choose not to elect AdCom members directly. We have always been a small society and conducting elections by society members can be very expensive. In addition to the cost, sending ballots to the membership by post and then receiving and processing cast ballots can be time-consuming.

Finally, when direct elections were tried in the past, relatively few members voted. So when the question of opening up elections to the membership was raised previously, it was generally dismissed as unrealistic.

Using the power of the Internet, however, we could easily overcome the problems of cost and time. If we announced in our July/August *Newsletter*, for example, that members could vote at our Web site during the last two weeks of August, we would eliminate any extra cost and avoid the problem of members' needing to return ballots through the mail. We would also be able to tabulate the results automatically at no cost.

Internet voting would not solve the participation problem, but if only 18 people outside the AdCom voted in such an election, our level of voter participation would *double!* In response to the Society Review Committee's recommendation, I have raised this issue with the AdCom and most of them agree that a change is in order. We will consider a bylaw amendment over the summer and will work to open election of a substantial portion of AdCom members to the full PCS membership beginning in 2002.

Conflicts of Interest

The review committee noted that the PCS president is also the editor of a competitor organization's journal and raised the possibility that there might be a conflict of interest between those two roles.

I have indeed served as journal editor for the Society for Technical Communication (STC) since 1996 and I have been an officer of PCS during that entire period, as secretary, vice president, and now president. I have never concealed my roles from either group, nor, indeed, have the many other members of our AdCom who are similarly active in other non-IEEE societies. Together we have been quite successful in lobbying other technical and professional communication organizations to

*Full membership
voting is being
planned for 2002.*

work collaboratively for the benefit of the discipline and the profession.

Our successes in that arena include the ongoing annual summit meetings of technical communication organizations organized by Mark Haselkorn in 1997, seven conferences planned in cooperation with ACM SIGDOC since 1994, and a special joint issue of our *Transactions* and STC's *Technical Communication* last year. The review committee praised this pattern of collaboration.

Nevertheless, the review committee's broaching of potential conflicts has had a helpful effect. It encouraged AdCom members to examine how and where their businesses and their volunteer activities overlap, and where those overlaps could result in real or perceived conflicts of interest. We had a good discussion of this topic at our April AdCom meeting and agreed to review the subject annually to ensure that we avoid such problems.

Society Finances

It's no secret that PCS is not the most fiscally healthy of IEEE's 39 technical societies and councils. In recent years we have managed to generate modest surpluses because the healthy stock market resulted in substantial returns on our invested reserves. Additionally, we have shared in significant income that various IEEE periodicals packages have generated for participating societies.

However, 2000 was not a good year for investments and, because of the economic downturn and our decision to invest some of our reserves in programs, we had a deficit in 2000 for the first time in a number of years.

The review committee expressed concern that a slowdown in the world economy over several years, combined with a projected decrease in revenue from periodical sales, could have dire consequences for our society. They have encouraged us to identify and pursue other revenue streams that would help us remain fiscally healthy in the years ahead. In response to this



Nancy Coppola and Kim Campbell

situation, the AdCom has identified a new source of revenue on which we will concentrate our efforts in the next year.

We plan to develop training in professional and technical communication topics that meets the needs of professional engineers, especially our members in Regions 8, 9, and 10. A committee chaired by AdCom member Nancy Coppola is working on a 2002 initiative that will identify communication competencies that engineers need and then will work with vendors to design and develop courses that can be delivered over the Web to help engineers develop those competencies.

You will be reading more about this project in future issues of the *Newsletter*. I welcome your comments and suggestions about the society review and our responses to it (g.hayhoe@ieee.org).

Web-based education will be developed as a revenue source.

“If life were just, we would be born old and achieve youth about the time we’d saved enough to enjoy it.”

— *Jim Fiebig*

CALL FOR AdCOM NOMINATIONS

The Professional Communication Society is managed by an Administrative Committee (AdCom) comprising 18 volunteers who work to assure that our society serves its members, the IEEE, and the field of technical and professional communication. At the AdCom meeting this fall during IPCC 01 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, elections will be held to fill six vacant at-large positions. If you are interested in a higher level of involvement in PCS and IEEE, I urge you to consider being a candidate for the AdCom.

The primary mission of PCS is to help engineers and technical communicators develop skills in written and oral presentation. To fulfill our mission, we:

1. Promote advanced practices and theories for writing technical and scientific documentation that achieve both technical accuracy and user friendliness
2. Develop presentation skills that capture the audience and deliver information across technical and cultural boundaries
3. Provide information about state-of-the-art technologies for document design and publication
4. Explore the integration of visual communication tools (e.g., drawings, diagrams, 3-D models, animation) with written and spoken communication
5. Conduct research on ensuring effective communication in a modern engineering environment

AdCom members-at-large must be both PCS and IEEE members (i.e., a higher

level of membership than affiliate). New members are selected annually by vote of the current AdCom. The term of office is three years and begins 1 January following the election.

Typically, AdCom members attend three business meetings each year. (In 2001, one of those meetings was online using NetMeeting.) AdCom members also engage in e-mail discussions between meetings. Each member has an opportunity to provide leadership in the society by, for example, chairing a standing or ad hoc committee, serving as a society officer, or playing a lead role in an upcoming International Professional Communication Conference (IPCC).

Although AdCom members are volunteers and are expected to seek travel support from their employers, PCS currently provides up to \$1200 yearly for attending the three meetings.

You do not need to be a member of the AdCom, however, to play a role in these and other PCS activities. There's plenty of rewarding work for anyone who wants to volunteer by contacting me or a committee chair. But for those of you with a special desire and exciting ideas, working with the AdCom can be both significant and rewarding.

If you're interested, please contact Kim Sydow Campbell at k.s.campbell@ieee.org by 15 September to throw your hat in the ring or even just to learn more. You can also learn more about our society by visiting <http://www.ieeepcs.org/>.

There are many ways to serve PCS members.

BE IN THE BUSINESS OF GOOD WRITING

(continued from page 1)

your company's reputation with unclear or confusing writing. Demand that your staff learn the write stuff.

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syndicated columnist Harvey Mackay, author of The New York Times bestsellers Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive and Pushing the Envelope. Send e-mail to harvey@mackay.com.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE APRIL ADCOM MEETING

BY EDUARDO H. CLARK

The Professional Communication Society Administrative Committee (AdCom) convened at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), in Troy, New York, on 27 and 28 April 2001. The two-day session included business the first day and strategic planning and discussions the second day. Roger Grice, immediate past president of PCS, was host at RPI and sponsored the use of campus facilities. Peter Wiesner, director of IEEE continuing education, was a guest and reviewed Educational Activities Board projects.

President's Report

George Hayhoe and Beth Moeller attended the Technical Activities Board (TAB) meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in February, which dealt mostly with finances. IEEE ended the fiscal year with a larger-than-planned deficit (\$11.2 million), some of which resulted from the stock market decline. When the IEEE corporate reserves

are spent, the societies must cover the deficit. This will affect PCS reserves.

The name change of the best *Transactions* paper award to the Rudolph J. Joenk, Jr. award and the creation of the Blicq education award were approved at that TAB meeting.

Treasurer's Report

Copies of the 2002 budget, the IPCC 2002 preliminary budget, and the current 2001 report were distributed. IPCC 2000 resulted in a \$15k surplus for PCS (\$2.5k additional is expected). The bottom line for PCS was \$75.4k as of the end of March. The budget for 2002 based on a 10 percent increase in membership was approved.

Conferences

IPCC/SIGDOC 2000 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had an attendance of 169 people. About 20 of those were single-day registrants attending tutorials. The banquet had 84 attendees and just about broke even with the sponsorship from Compaq and ticket sales.

The anticipated conference surplus is approximately \$17k per society. Each society has received \$15k with the

Membership has begun to increase, award winners will be assisted with travel expenses, and IPCC/SIGDOC 2000 generated a surplus.



Center photo:
Bernadette Longo

Far right:
Marj Davis



remainder to be distributed after the audit (see Treasurer's Report). The major income sources in addition to registrations were sales of conference proceedings to ACM SIGDOC and the IEEE (about \$15k) and sponsorships (about \$11k).

IPCC 01 program chair, Roger Grice, reported a full program of high quality. Next issue is the timing, nature, and distribution of the program, which is a determinant of marketing effort for the conference. For information about the event, visit the conference Web page at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/2001>.

IPCC 2002 has chosen "Reflections on Communication" as its theme and has signed a contract with the Marriott on Broadway in Portland, Oregon, for 18-20 September.

The **Suzdal colloquium** was also discussed. After the January AdCom meeting, Lisa Moretto informed PCS that Dr. Henrich Lantsberg, the PCS Russia chapter chair, had accepted the original \$1600 budgeted for the colloquium, rather than the requested \$3000.

Ten presenters and one travel companion from the U.S., Canada, and Belgium will represent PCS in addition to the local Russia chapter attendees.

Awards

The AdCom approved Ann Laster as recipient of the first (2001) Blicq education award. Bill Kehoe, longtime PCS member and former treasurer, was announced as winner of the 2001 Schlesinger award for

Photo below:
Rudy Joenk and Ron Blicq
Bottom photo:
Sherry Steward



Photos at right:
Tom van Loon,
Lisa Moretto



Photos below:
Peter Wiesner,
Beth Moeller



service to the society. Compensation (gift, travel stipend, and invitation to speak) for award recipients was discussed. The cost of this compensation was budgeted for 2002.

Membership

Marj Davis, membership chair, reported that PCS showed the highest growth (1.9 percent) of any of the Division VI societies. Engineering Management was next with 0.7 percent growth, while the other societies in our division showed losses. International members (those outside of North America) now make up 37 percent of PCS membership. *[PCS membership was up 4.0 percent in the later April statistics. Ed.]*

Student membership is up almost six percent, the highest growth by grade category next to associate members, which is up almost 21 percent. Affiliate membership is up 13 percent. Senior membership

growth was low, at 0.9 percent, but Davis is actively promoting upgrading. Visit <http://www.ieee.org/membership/upgrade.html> for information on how to upgrade your IEEE membership.

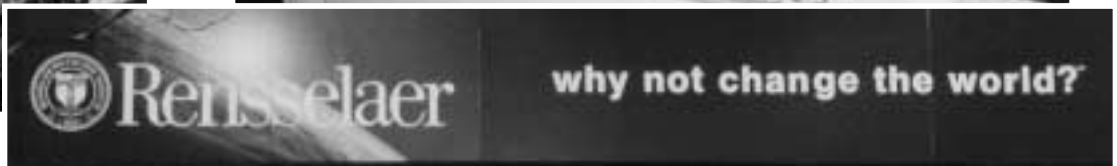
Future Meetings

The next and last AdCom meeting of 2001 will be held with IPCC 01 at La Fonda in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on 24 and 27 October. PCS members are welcome at these meetings.

Ed Clark is PCS secretary.



Photo at right: *Ed Clark*
 Far right: *Steve Robinson, George Hayhoe, and Muriel Zimmerman*
 Photo below: *Ron Blicq, Lisa Moretto, Joe Chew, and Cheryl Reimold*



CHAPTER NEWS

PHILADELPHIA

BY JOHN SCHANELY

Left to right:
Student activities chair
Barney Adler, chapter chair
John Schanely, Caleb
Shetland, Richard Aleong,
and Tushar Parlikar.



In April the Philadelphia PCS chapter held its annual student writing contest for Delaware Valley area college students and an interesting variety of papers was submitted. The panel of distinguished judges awarded first prize to a team of three Swarthmore students: Richard Aleong, Roger Foltz, and Tushar Parlikar. Their paper, “An Introduction to Adaptive Filters and the LMS Algorithm,” presented a complex subject in an accurate and reader-

friendly manner. This team went on to win third prize in the Region 2 student paper contest held at Pennsylvania State University in Harrisburg.

Two other Swarthmore papers took second and third place in the Philadelphia section contest: Second prize went to Caleb Shetland for “Image Thresholding and Object Recognition.” Third prize went to Pukar Malla and Nathaniel Fairfield for “Analysis of Processor Performance Gains Yielded by L1 Cache.”

This annual event encourages development of writing skills in engineering students. About 65 percent of the judging criteria address communication aspects of the papers. Certificates and awards of \$200, \$150, and \$100 are given for first, second, and third place winners, respectively.

WINNIPEG

BY DAVE KEMP

Officers in the IEEE Winnipeg Section of IEEE Canada are pleased to announce the reactivation of the ManCom chapter. This chapter is joint among three IEEE technical societies: Engineering Management (EMS), Professional Communication (PCS), and Education. The chapter officers are Ron Blicq (*r.blicq@ieee.org*), chair; and Wayne Wagner (*w.wagner@ieee.org*) and Dave Kemp (*d.kemp@ieee.org*), members of the executive committee.

Three programs are planned:

1. Lisa Moretto and Ron Blicq (PCS AdCom members) will present a one-day workshop, Writing Effective Letters, Reports, and E-mail, as a joint project with the Association of Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Manitoba and the IEEE Winnipeg Section. They will demonstrate techniques technical professionals can use to ensure that the documents they write will

evoke the correct response from their readers. The workshop has been presented in other Canadian and U.S. cities, always with positive response.

2. For the past year two couples have been living in a remote area of Manitoba, surviving only with the tools and facilities that would have been available to settlers 130 years ago. Called Pioneer Quest, the project has been videotaped for the History Channel. Its director and scriptwriter, Andy Blicq, will talk about how the project was managed and the problems that the couples (and he) experienced during the wettest summer and coldest winter for 120 years.
3. For many years floods have presented serious problems for residents and businesses in the Red River Valley. A spokesperson for the Manitoba government will discuss flood management and control structures.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

HOW TO BRIGHTEN YOUR STYLE



PETER REIMOLD AND
CHERYL REIMOLD

Part 4: Try Variety for Spice

In our writing classes we often advise people who want to improve their style to practice *reading as a writer*. It's like visiting a museum as a painter. You stand in front of a painting, enjoying it. Then, after a while, you move in closer to examine the artist's composition, brush strokes, use of colors and textures, and so on, to discover techniques that you may be able to adapt to your own painting. Similarly as a writer, you can pause in your reading to discover verbal tools you can use for your own writing.

You need not choose a business or technical article; strong style tools are adaptable to any type of writing. For instance, we recently read an evocative book by Jonathan Raban on sailing through the 1000-mile inside passage between Seattle and Juneau, *Passage to Juneau* (Vintage, 2000). As Raban describes his experiences, interweaving them with those of other sailors before him, he makes you want to go on reading. Surely this is a primary goal of every writer, whether he's describing the turbulence of Alaskan waters or the outcome of a project meeting.

How does Raban do it? One of his stylistic tools is variety. It's effective because it keeps our mind engaged, even unsettled: We never know what comes next.

Vary the Length of Sentences

Monotony is boring; variety reflects the flow of life and thought. Don't believe those who tell you all technical writing should be done in short sentences. Strong writers breathe life into their sentences by mixing length and structure, as in this Raban passage (p. 209):

But the wind snuck through [*short, clipped sentence without adjectives*]. Fierce squalls raced across the width of the whitening channel and heeled the boat hard against the dock, where it shivered from masthead to keel at each new gust [*longer, complex sentence, expanded only at the end of clauses and con-*

taining a few well chosen adjectives]. The fenders squealed [*short sentence*]. The mooring ropes, sounding thin and taut as ukulele strings, sawed against the fairleads and wrenched at the cleats [*medium-long, expanded at beginning and end of clause*].

Business application: We have sent the customer a detailed analysis of the samples he submitted, discussed and explained the results in person and by phone, and performed a second set of tests that yielded the same results. Unfortunately, our efforts have failed. Despite proof that our product did not cause his specific problem, the customer demands that we fully cover his losses if we want to keep his business. The choice, he says, is ours.

Vary the Construction of Sentences

Instead of stating and developing a message, a writer can sometimes use a suspense form of building up to a surprise (p. 35):

Now full of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and polychlorinated biphenyls, fouled with oil from grounded tankers, fished-out, its clams poisonous, its Dover sole riddled with liver cancers, its species dying out in catastrophic numbers [*end of suspense portion — we still don't know who does what!*], the polluted ocean held up a looking glass to the heedless, stupid face of humankind.

Business application: With employees slamming down phones, sending off rude e-mails, engaging in shouting matches at meetings, and quitting in record numbers, it's high time to look into ways to reduce stress in our company.

Vary the Type of Words

Notice the variety and liveliness achieved by the contrast of juxtaposing short, simple words and more erudite ones (p. 76):

I felt sorry for my boredom with the evening. I shouldn't have accepted the invitation. Yet what I'd seen was revelatory, in its jumble of long-disused customs, ecstatic Christianity, careless translation, ethnic pride, anthropology, New Age mysticism, and Oprah Winfrey-style therapy.

*Keep interest by
varying sentence
length, construction,
and word choice.*

Business application: Although X is a long-standing, important customer, acceding to his demands for compensation regardless of responsibility may set a dangerous precedent. Can we afford to keep this account? Let's meet to discuss.

Why not try reading as a writer to discover stylistic tools you can adapt and use to

brighten your own style? If you have some good examples, we'd love to hear from you.

Cheryl and Peter Reimold (telephone +1 914 725 1024, e-mail perccom@aol.com) have taught communication skills to engineers, scientists, and businesspeople for 18 years. Visit their new educational Web site at <http://www.allaboutcommunication.com>.

FROM THE EDITOR

(continued from page 2)

Potpourri

Celestial Seasonings does have some aptly named teas (e.g., Tension Tamer), but not the ones I listed in the last Potpourri; I was April-fooled.

Tom Wilson's *Ziggy* on escalators: "It's the only time taking the path of least resistance gets you anywhere!"

Languageware.net, a Colorado Springs company that filed for bankruptcy in February, announced that its Vice President of Solutioneering and other executives had been relieved of their duties.

Have you been exposed to the *interrobang*? It's a punctuation mark from the sixties that never caught on but which still exists in a couple of character sets. Consisting of overlaid question mark and exclamation mark (printing term: *bang*), it might be useful for parents: "You did *WHAT?*" From *World Wide Words* by Michael Quinion.

On my way to the April AdCom meeting the NBC in Flight video entertainment included excerpts from the *Tonight Show* in which Jay Leno displayed newspaper headlines about teaching computer skills to inmates on death row "so they'll have careers," about cars with "reproductive" parts, and about clients' being a company's best "asses."

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.iecepcs.org/pub.html>).

I prefer to receive articles by e-mail; most WordPerfect, Word, RTF (rich text format), and ASCII files are acceptable. My addresses are in the boilerplate at the bottom of 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 September for the November/December issue, 15 November for the January/February 2002 issue, etc. You won't be far off (and never late) if you observe the Ides of September, November, January, and so on.

*Be a guest reporter
or photographer
at IPCC 01.*

NET NOTES



ELIZABETH MOELLER

IS YOUR WEB SITE TOO MUCH WORK?

When talking to colleagues or other business owners, one of the biggest complaints I hear lately is how much work their Web site is. I often give presentations to local business organizations and the last slide of my current presentation is titled *Enjoy!* If your Web site is “too much work,” something is wrong with your process. This column discusses steps you can take during the planning process and once the site is launched to minimize the work on your part.

What Is Too Much Work?

First, we need to define what “too much work” is. Generally, it’s when you feel overwhelmed with the maintenance and upkeep of the site. Web sites need to be treated like any other dynamic document. They need to be updated periodically with new information, whether it’s a press release, the addition of a new product to your listings, or a new feature on your home page. Updating once a month, or even once every other month, is a very realistic goal and should not overburden the person responsible for updates.

Adding a press release to your site should not take more than 15 or 20 minutes (not counting the time necessary to write the release). Adding a new product could take a little longer. If you are spending tens of hours each month updating a non-time-sensitive site, you are probably spending too much time. Two or three hours a month is realistic for a site not dependent on daily information changes.

What Can Be Done to Prevent Overload?

During the *planning* phase you need to consider site management. Who will be responsible for adding or modifying content on the site? If you assign this task to an already overburdened worker, you will find the Web site takes a low priority. If you assign the task to your IT department but do not assign a person to provide content to your IT department, nothing will happen. The key is a known information

flow, strong workforce organization, and well defined task assignment.

As people exchange information within your organization, they should always ask whether the information is appropriate for the Web site as well as for its intended use. For example, if a technical writer is preparing a specifications document for a new product, she or he should also discuss when it is appropriate to place that information on the company Web site. The actual update might be completed by the marketing department as it prepares the new product announcement, or it could be done directly by the Webmaster in the IT department.

A quick warning for planners: Beware of overly ambitious Web sites. Everyone starts out wanting the best site on the face of the Earth. When push comes to shove, how much can your organization realistically maintain? Do you have a dedicated person to keep the latest and greatest up to date, or do you have someone who might be able to squeeze a change in sometime next month?

I’m Overloaded; Now What?

Even if the site is already launched, you still have some options available to alleviate overloading. The most obvious is to scale back your maintenance of the site. Spend some time reviewing your visitor logs to find out what keywords people are using to find you and what pages they are spending the most time on. Enhance those areas of the site and start to scale back the rest. Let your site visitors help you determine what needs constant updating and what can be updated when you find some time or help down the road.

The second option is to outsource your maintenance. This still requires people within your organization to send content to the group maintaining your site. However, that group should have writers on staff to assist with content development. They write the content, prepare the new Web pages, and put them online for you to view in a test area before they go live.

*Beware of planning
an overly ambitious
Web site.*

This gives your organization a chance to edit and revise before the rest of the world sees the update. Most often, maintenance groups ask for a retainer and guarantee a specific time for updates. Others charge hourly for updates. This varies depending on the type of update, the frequency of updates, and general market conditions in your area.

The third suggestion is a better updating mechanism. Speak with your Web designer about creating specialized Web-based forms that people can use to update the site. This is a great alternative for people who need to keep items like a calendar of events or photos current. The Web interface is easy for just about any person to use and the content is placed in a specific spot on the site. The user really can't cause problems with the rest of the page because the form updates *only* the specific pieces specified.

Finally, if you are trying to keep your site updated with current events, you could consider using a content delivery service. With a content delivery service you put a small piece of specialized HTML code on your site that reads the content from the delivery service and places it on your site as though you wrote it. Some content

delivery services offer free services, such as iSyndicate (<http://www.isyndicate.com>) and the Weather Channel (<http://www.weather.com>), which require you to include their name and logo on your page. Other services, such as Moreover (<http://www.moreover.com>) and CBS Marketwatch (<http://www.marketwatch.com>), offer varying levels of pay-for-use services. In their case, you do not include the company's name or logo but you pay to license its content.

Enjoy!

If your Web site is too much work, you're doing something wrong. Keeping a site updated may require internal changes and a different way of thinking in the organization. But it's not impossible and it should not overburden you. Now, if you're trying to compete with CNN.com, that's another story....

Elizabeth Weise Moeller is vice president of PCS and chair of the Meetings Committee. 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.

The key is a known information flow, strong workforce organization, and well defined task assignment.

PCS MEMBERS RECEIVE GOULD AWARD

Two PCS members, Roger Grice and Robert Krull, were honored this spring by the Society for Technical Communication (STC) by being named recipients of the Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication. A maximum of three such awards may be presented each year.

The award honors the distinguished teaching career of Professor Jay R. Gould, who founded the first academic program in technical communication — at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where Krull and

Grice now teach — by recognizing excellence in teaching with an emphasis on mentoring and teaching beyond the classroom.

Dr. Krull is director of Rensselaer's master of science in technical communication degree program; he was a member of the PCS AdCom 1991-1993. Dr. Grice is director of the Rensselaer certificate program in human-computer interaction and is on the information technology faculty. He is a current member of the PCS AdCom and chair of the Editorial Advisory Committee.

“Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.”

— Woody Allen

MASTERS OF STYLE

GELB AND BUZAN ON JUGGLING FOR SUCCESS



RONALD J. NELSON

In *Lessons from the Art of Juggling: How to Achieve Your Full Potential in Business, Learning, and Life* (New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks, 1994), Michael J. Gelb and Tony Buzan both teach the reader how to juggle and take her or him into the realm of philosophy. Indeed, a person's outlook on the various aspects of existence can be favorably affected by learning to juggle. In fact, the very shape of three-ball juggling—a figure 8 on its side—suggests infinity and so an infinitely (or at least lifelong) satisfying activity.

The “Opening Poem” in the book expresses the position of the juggler as well as the multitasker in the world. Here is the first stanza:

I,
Juggler,
Stand between two spheres.
The expression
Of my Enlightened thoughts
Gives out
And up
To the Sun.
The soles
And balls
Of my feet
Hug the loam of the Earth,
As I weave the dancing patterns of Infinity.

Although juggling is a light-hearted subject, it can most profitably be approached with a certain gravity. Surely we are bound to the earth, but we can transcend our earth-bound status by engaging in uplifting experiences. In the process of learning to juggle, we ironically come to master intangibles as we gain control of the palpable objects we hurl into the air.

The overall organization of Gelb and Buzan's book suggests engaging possibilities: “The Adventure Begins,” “Toward Perfect Practice,” and “Beyond Infinity,” followed by useful features like a glossary, a bibliography, and an afterword entitled “The Spirit of Champions.”

Part I emphasizes the adventure of juggling, thereby intimating an attitude toward that activity that is transferable

to our diurnal responsibilities. The latter need not be drudgery. Such a stance relies on a receptivity to the tasks we undertake. It involves a willingness to learn, a trait that the authors speak of as “intrinsically rewarding.” And the greatest learners have an “attitude of relaxed concentration” and “a commitment to excellence with a positive approach to mistakes” (p. xvi).

The authors urge the reader to consider the beauty and elegance of juggling when done by one who has the composure of a master. Such a person is an avatar of “mind and body in harmony” (p. 5), having a combination of ambidexterity, poise, fitness, and balance. The person is able to divide attention between pressing elements while grasping the whole picture—a reminder of the need for the professional communicator to be aware of micro matters as well as the macro picture. Moreover, the energies that a juggler expends are appropriate to what is required—no more, thus leading to efficiency. Trying harder, incidentally, does not always work with juggling; unlearning bad habits and learning new ones does.

Gelb and Buzan describe a commonsensical approach to mastering juggling and, by extension, lives and careers. To begin with, one needs to pay attention to the external learning environment, involving sufficient space, proper lighting, plenty of air, the right equipment, and ball management (say, a bed or couch to reduce the number of dropped balls). The internal learning environment must also be considered: warm up, upright posture, free breathing, and commitment to learning. Then working up from one-ball juggling, to two-ball juggling, to three-ball juggulation (complete cycle of catching all three balls). Then flowing into multiple juggulations, and keeping count, builds confidence. Setting manageable goals like five juggulations, then ten, and so on has its parallel in the working world. Realizing that balls will collide and that they will get thrown errantly is part of accepting the fact that

See the author's previous article about juggling and writing, “Jugglito Ergo Sum,” in the May/June Newsletter.

mistakes will occur. The juggler realizes that problems are an inevitable part of progress toward success.

Part II, "Toward Perfect Practice," begins by emphasizing a commitment to excellence. That involves forming a mental picture or goal of juggling, and that in turn involves imitation of those who do it well. It is important to observe how skilled people do what they do. The great ones have a grace and economy of movement that make things look effortless: witness Fred Astaire's dancing and Muhammad Ali's boxing in his prime.

Other essential traits include commitment to learn at every opportunity and to maintain high standards and personal accountability. As the authors put it, "Champions demand the best from themselves and don't make excuses. They take full responsibility for the results they achieve" (p. 50). Discipline is also demanded: "...it entails an organized, intelligent, aware, consistent, enthusiastic, unrelenting commitment to a process that leads to the realization of a goal" (p. 51).

The ability to see clearly, to visualize, is essential to success in juggling and in other aspects of life. The authors speak of the need to see in a focused-analytical way (in which we observe technical aspects of how a person performs) and in an open-receptive way (simply breathing in the atmosphere of what is being observed). An important part of visualizing juggling, for example, is to see it not only as an image of excellence, but also as a multisensory experience: "...imagine the feeling of the shape, texture, and weight of the balls in your hands. See the color of the balls and picture their perfect trajectory. Listen to the rhythmic sounds of a perfect cascade" (p. 59). It is even helpful to attempt to visualize yourself "outside-in" (as if from the point of view of a judge evaluating your performance in a contest) and then "inside-out," thereby acquiring a kind of double vision.

Gelb and Buzan go to some length to point out that failure is inevitable but that attitude toward failure (dropping the balls, for example) is absolutely crucial. They remind the reader of how Thomas Edison,

Abraham Lincoln, Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Charles Darwin, and others failed miserably before ultimately succeeding. They quote Walt Hrinak, the batting coach of the Chicago White Sox, who said that "the ability to learn and maintain a good attitude when things aren't going your way" is key to breaking out of a slump (p. 76).

The authors even recommend deliberately dropping the balls and learning from the experience. To do so is analogous to learning to control the clutch of a stick-shift car by going to a vacant parking lot and deliberately practicing stalling the car. When the person gets out onto the road, that person will be better prepared for driving on hills, for example, because the person has acquired the feel of the clutch.

In a fascinating chapter entitled "Old Dogs, New Tricks," the authors speak of the need, as we get older, to foster new habits and to challenge ourselves rather than get in grooves of behavior. They describe how habits form in the brain, getting into minute, technical (yet fully understandable) details about the process. We *can change* by combining commitment, awareness, and positive visualization to forge new paths within our ways of seeing the world. At the heart of Gelb and Buzan's method is F. Matthias Alexander's art of unlearning negative behavior and substituting positive behavior.

In Part III, "Beyond Infinity," the authors describe some of the possible tricks that go beyond the three-ball cascade that they describe early in the book. Of the myriad variations and new tricks are under-the-leg routines, behind-the-back moves, body bounces, juggling with others, showering the balls, the embrace, front stealing, and passing routines.

The adventures, joys, and possibilities of learning to juggle are, to put it mildly, encouraging. We *can* go down new paths in the labyrinth of life toward new, satisfying goals.

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The professional communicator must be aware of micro matters as well as the macro picture.

WHITE PAPER WAY

BY MICHAEL BRADY

One measure of the pace of development of a technology might be the number of white papers written about it. And in this cyber age, white paper production is quickening. No doubt about it; pick any topic, surf the Web using it as a search word, and after you've filtered out the press releases, catalogs, data sheets, and correspondence, you'll be left with white papers. They're efficient and they're faster than textbooks or peer-reviewed journal papers in getting information to those who seek it. And they're a challenge to writers, principally because there are so many of them, often one from each company in a sector. How can a writer compile a white paper that sets itself apart from those of the competition?

*Meeting the challenge
of white-paper writing*

Part of the answer lies in accepting the genre of the white paper as inherently challenging. From the mid-18th century, when the first white paper was put before the British Parliament, until World War II, a White Paper (with capitals) was revised from a Blue Paper issued earlier the same day. The names Blue and White came from the distinguishing colors of the covers of the first draft and the second revision. The purpose of the final paper was to present information in a seemingly impartial, yet convincing manner. That remains the prime purpose of a white paper, now regarded to be an authoritative report or handbook issued by any organization. In technical fields, a white paper is considered to be evidence of expertise and hence essential to the image of a high-tech company.

The rest of the answer lies in the Harvard Business School approach of studying a case history to elicit the blueprint of its success. Fortunately, there's a current case history that contains many worthy clues. Professor John Bowker of Trinity College, Cambridge, U.K., and North Carolina State University responded to the ultimate challenge by compiling a handbook on the Bible. Alone, the magnitude of the task

daunts. The Bible is the cornerstone book of western civilization; it has been in print longer and arguably has generated more literature than any other book. Moreover, Christians and Jews are familiar with its content, so how can yet another book about the Bible set itself apart?

The answer lies in how John Bowker and his team of experts responded to their challenge. In the technical jargon of our age, they chose a user-driven approach. *The Complete Bible Handbook** clearly sets forth the whole of Judeo-Christian tradition, as its title implies. It does this by viewing all topics—the books of the Bible—from five aspects, so the book can be read in at least five ways by following the spreads dedicated to the aspects. The essentials are in the Book spreads, while the Story spreads focus on literary aspects. The Theology spreads focus on the religious significance. The History and Background spreads put the books in their historical and cultural context. And there's ample support material: Throughout, symbols locate texts within the overall Bible, tint boxes summarize content in keywords, maps locate events, and succinct capsules spotlight persons and ancillary details, such as money and measurements. Alone, the 63-page reference section at the back of the *Handbook* stands out as an easily navigable guide.

Aside from being a beautifully illustrated companion to the Bible, the *Handbook* comprises a superb case history of how the ultimate challenge of white-paper writing was met. Open it anywhere and you're drawn into the subject; it's a page-turner. Fittingly, the background color of its cover and dust jacket is white.

* *The Complete Bible Handbook* by John Bowker, London and New York, 1998, 544 pages hardcover; U.S. edition, DK Publishing, ISBN 0-7894-3568-3; U.K. edition, Dorling Kindersley, ISBN 0-7513-1112-X.

IMPROVING SOFTWARE DOCUMENTATION USING INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

BY PAWAN NAYAR

[Continued from the May/June *Newsletter*]

Instructional Design in the Development Phase

The development phase is when you design the technical writing material. This phase includes expanding the content outline to create the end product: book, manual, help file, tutorial, or multimedia presentation.

You begin by using the software. As you do so, make notes that are organized based on instructional design principles. You should:

- **Make notes on the user interface (UI):** Check whether there are extra tasks or incomplete tasks. Record whether it was easy for you to use the software. Verify that all words used for the UI are used correctly. If there are open issues, get back to the development team and see that they are suitably resolved.
- **Make notes on how you learn:** What's the natural way to perform a task? Are there other ways? Which is the easiest or most difficult way to complete the task? Which way is used in what situations?
- **Make notes on the flow:** Do you need any prerequisites to complete a task or understand a concept? Is the current task part of any flow or sequence of tasks? If so, how does the current task fit into the overall flow?
- **Establish context connections:** Why is the task being done? What will it help?

With these notes write the first draft. You may want to use John Keller's ARCS model* to retain user motivation. The ARCS model stands for adding *attention*, *relevance*, *confidence*, and *satisfaction* elements to any writing.

* Keller, John. "How to Integrate Learner Motivation Planning into Lesson Planning: The ARCS Model Approach." <http://www.netg.com/research/kellerwp.htm>; 2000.

Keller, J. M., and Suzuki, K. "Use of the ARCS Motivation Model in Courseware Design" in *Instructional Design for Microcomputer Courseware*, D. H. Jonassen ed. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1988.

Attention is required to retain user motivation. You can gain attention by leashing variety in instructional experience. You play on a user's perception by causing surprise or uncertainty, and you cause "inquiry arousal" by stimulating curiosity. Having gained attention, you need to retain it. This requires that you be **relevant**. You need to match users' expectations and build upon their background. By sharing familiar and specific examples you build on a user's comfort level, thereby causing **confidence**. Confidence requires that users be able to perform tasks and apply concepts in their background. You need to add practices and quizzes wherever possible. A confident user ends satisfied. To cause **satisfaction**, test the newly acquired skills and provide positive reinforcement at appropriate places.

While writing the first cut of the document, ensure that you are following the standards you defined in the envisioning and planning phases. You may also use checklists for these aspects:

- Do you have the right content (complete, accurate, and relevant)?
- Is the content clear? Are simple words used and cliches avoided?
- Does the content flow naturally? Are transitions smooth and clear?
- Do you need to divide a long topic into two or combine short topics into one?
- Are all technical terms explained clearly and accurately at first mention?
- Is the organization parallel?
- Are the style and presentation consistent?

Having written the content, complete the necessary processes for kitting the deliverables. These processes depend on the type of deliverable required and your organization-wide document delivery processes. It is important to check whether all files are in the right places for installation and testing.

ID involves asking precise questions that turn isolated sentences and paragraphs into objective and measurable instructions...

Now it is time to send these documents for review to people in the cross-function team and to beta users. Reviewers should provide specific feedback based on their domain. These roles and the nature of their feedback include:

Instructional Reviewer looks at the instructional appropriateness. The goal is to help users understand and use the information effectively. This review looks at usability, comprehension, and learning retention.

Content Editor checks the language. Basic editing rules are followed and complex presentations (long sentences) are broken into simple sentences. At places, the content editor and the instructional reviewer could be the same person.

Subject Matter Expert looks at technical accuracy, technical depth, and usability of the software. Members of the code development and review teams are the best SMEs.

Beta Users tell how your documents will be perceived (received), though these users may often have vague issues.

If there are conflicting reviews, the order of preference is typically SME, instructional, and editorial. Yet each of these reviewers has the right to put their foot down if there's an absolute violation that might impact users in either understanding the content or using it effectively.

Instructional Design in the Stabilizing Phase

Welcome to the last, though never the least, and often the messiest phase of the deliverable life cycle: the stabilizing phase. In this phase you ensure that all **media-related checks** are performed. These checks include whether your documents appear in the ultimate media (book, help, tutorial, etc.) in the desired format. For example, check whether all calls from software lead to the desired documentation.

The stabilizing phase is also the time to ensure that the documentation is usable. You can send the documents for a **usability review** to usability labs or to novice users. The idea is to see how effectively users can use the documents to perform required tasks. You can also schedule some

simple tests built around the concepts and procedures covered in the documentation. Any constructive feedback from these tests should serve for last-minute refinement of the documentation and for better planning of the next release.

Besides incorporating usability feedback, you can continue incorporating feedback from reviewers (covered in the development phase). However, the documents are now under **change control**; that is, you can't change the documents just for any value addition. You need a definite bug as the reason for any fix in documents at this stage.

The key issue in this stabilizing phase is to make a continual trade-off in terms of deciding whether fixing a bug, which costs time, causes a schedule overrun. Issues must be debated on their merit. The essential answer must be based on whether the user would suffer because of the trade-off and whether that cost is tolerable and justifiable when compared to the larger rewards of meeting schedules.

Another important activity in this phase is **feedback collection** on the processes used thus far. Even if you do not take action on the feedback for any reason, keep it in the cabinet and come to it in the envisioning or planning phase of the next release. Continual iterations are the fundamental principle of the deliverable life cycle. From an instructional point of view, it is imperative to keep questioning the relevance of everything: deliverable, processes, and philosophy of writing. The best practices that survive should be the processes you use in the next cycle. To some extent, that is the essence of instructional design.

The author is a specialist technical writer at Cadence Design Systems, Ltd., in New Delhi, India, where he develops user guides, reference books, tutorials, and help files for electronic design automation software. Previously, as an instructional designer, he created computer-based training packages for the National Education Training Group, Inc., in Naperville, Illinois. Nayar is a post-graduate diploma holder in journalism and mass communication. He likes poetry, trekking in the Himalayan ranges, and daydreaming. You can check his creative works at <http://www.jindagi.com> or contact him at pawan@cadence.com.

...that cause desirable learning and prevent any interpretation that may cause undesirable learning.

GOOD INTENT, POOR OUTCOME



JEAN-LUC DOUMONT

COLUMBO, NOT POIROT

Humans are storytelling creatures. Children all over the planet love to listen to tales of all kinds: real or fictitious sequences of events leading from a “Once upon a time” to a (we hope) “happily ever after.” Adults, too, spend a fair amount of their leisure time listening to or watching stories, and enjoy time after time being kept in suspense from the start to the (sad or happy) end.

Without surprise, then, storytelling serves as a mold for many acts of professional communication, whether oral or written. And yet, while there is nothing wrong with entertaining one’s audience along the way, keeping it in suspense usually backfires.

To illustrate the paradox, I often ask participants of my training programs which parts of a document readers are primarily interested in. “The conclusions,” most of them answer immediately. “And the introduction, too,” some of them add. I then ask which parts authors are usually most interested in. “Well...the body,” they admit, having suddenly become aware of the mismatch. Still, when I ask how this awareness might change their writing strategy, few venture to propose anything. My suggestion to place the conclusions immediately after the introduction—admittedly a devil’s advocate one at this point—is typically greeted with skepticism, if not outright disbelief: “You can’t do that,” many retort.

Many technical documents, in other words, are structured much like an Agatha Christie novel. Early in the document, readers learn about a “case” to be solved. Yet they have to wait until the very last page to be told the solution. Meanwhile, they follow the investigator through all the chronological details of his or her painstaking work, including all the false leads and dead ends. Scientists and engineers, it has been said, like to recreate for their audience all the pain and suffering they went through themselves, much like Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot likes to flaunt the workings of his “little grey cells.”

One scientific field that breaks the chronological reporting paradigm somewhat is mathematics. As a child I thought that mathematicians typically woke up in the morning with a new theorem in mind, then spent the day at the office trying to prove it. While this may hold for some theorems, like Fermat’s, I was to realize later that mathematicians proceeded just like everyone else: Hard work led to conclusions, not the other way around. When reporting their work, however, mathematicians present their conclusion first, calling it a theorem, then detail their hard work for those interested. In doing so they strive to limit the details to whatever is strictly necessary to prove the theorem, giving preference to the most elegant (that is, the simplest) proof of all.

Similarly, effective documents present conclusions up-front—though not without proper context first—and supporting information afterwards. In essence, they tell the beginning of the story, then the end, and finally the middle. Giving away the reason for the work and the outcome of it is the purpose of a well written *abstract* or *executive summary*, a stand-alone piece that tells readers all they need to remember. The remainder may then be a chronological story with its own start (*introduction*) and end (*conclusion*), or it may be limited to whatever discussion helps make the point. This discussion makes all the more sense since readers already know the conclusions.

Effective professional documents are thus closer to a Lieutenant Columbo episode than they are to a Hercule Poirot novel: Because we know the murderers early on, we enjoy all the more the battle of wits opposing them to the detective in the raincoat.

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

Effective documents tell the beginning of the story, then the end, and finally the middle.

DIGITAL DOMAIN: A BUNDLE OF JOY

BY RANDALL E. STROSS

How often do we pause to admire the rotund shape of the just-delivered Sunday newspaper? Or give thought to the economics that make its beautiful bulk possible? I, for one, have been blithely oblivious. When I do the rough reckoning, however, I can see that my local paper delivers an extraordinary bargain: about 10 000 words per penny. I bypass most of the pages—the classified ads, which account for most of the wordage—and still pay happily. The bundle is inexpensive, so I don't worry about the parts I leave unread.

Theoretically, the paper could be disaggregated into its constituent sections and each sold separately. But, practically speaking, it doesn't cost much more to print and deliver a thick sheaf than a thin one. So we are treated regularly to a Sunday feast.

With the advent of an electronic medium of distribution, publishers and entrepreneurs have been excited about marketing intellectual property unhindered by newspaper carriers or the postal service or any other physically constraining logistical considerations. They have come up with many solutions to a nonproblem. Carving up information into thin microslices, without providing micropricing, gives us the worst of all worlds.

Evil Geniuses

Should you wish to look up a subject in *The New York Times*, for example, any article that interests you that appeared more than two weeks previously will cost you \$2.50 to view. The *Times Café* is strictly ala carte; no volume discounts; no daily or monthly subscription options. Were you to attempt to reassemble all of the stories in a *Times* Sunday edition, it would cost more than \$500. Absurd? Not as much as you might guess.

Take a look at Forbes.com, where you can download a spreadsheet listing the 500 largest private companies in the United States. This one list—not a compilation of stories from the original issue, just the

list—will cost you four-ninety-five, as in \$495. By comparison, that \$2.50 an article charged by the *Times* is looking pretty good, isn't it?

To make these purchases, one must first register with Qpass, one of the second-generation promoters of E-cash systems. The first generation, led by DigiCash (born: 1989; died: 1998), perished waiting for customers to load up digital wallets and embrace micropayments, even though online publishers never got around to noticing the “micro” when pricing their wares.

Once you are registered with Qpass, your purchases will be placed on a credit card of your choosing and you're set—so long as you don't venture very far. Qpass works with only 22 sites at present. Should you wish to download a purchase at MP3.com, you'll be asked to use another company's currency, the E-charge system. Its Web page brightly promises “Everywhere Soon,” but its listing of participating vendors is not much longer than Qpass's. And these two have lots of competition: Trivnet. Ecount. IPin. OneClickCharge. Ecent. Webcredit. Net-Bill. (Let's not neglect the more colorfully named cousins that are also forms of currency: Beenz, earned by visiting sponsor sites; Flooz, given as a gift and spent at online stores; and Mojo, earned by sharing data in a peer-to-peer network and created by a group that owns my favorite name in the bunch, the Evil Geniuses for a Better Tomorrow.) No single denomination of E-cash seems anywhere close to reaching a tipping point that would permit it to quickly expand to a position of widely accepted standard.

Whether many currencies or one, the question remains: Why should we welcome disaggregated content, paid for on a per-sip or per-byte basis? Economists have been puzzling for years over why consumers in other contexts ignore what appears to be the rational choice of paying only for what they use and opt instead for bundles, such

Bundle pricing circumvents micro-decisions and may lead to serendipitous discoveries.

as a magazine subscription or flat-rate phone billing, when they do not use the product or service often. The most probable reason is one that eludes algebraic formulation but is quite simple: Call it, for want of a better term, “mental transaction costs,” the mildly irritating distraction that is caused whenever one must decide, Should I buy or not?

As long as we are asked to declare our intention to buy, we will reflexively pause and feel a twinge of anxiety, no matter how small the sum at stake. In preferring bundles, consumers make a perfectly rational choice that protects them from being continually interrupted with microdecisions. Why else would premium cable stations have settled upon flat-rate pricing instead of pay-per-view?

Instead of disaggregating content, E-publishers should take advantage of their ability on the Web to pack *more* items into an aggregated bundle at zero marginal cost, tempting customers with the equivalent of very fat Sunday newspapers.

For consumers, a bundle provides the added bonus of discoveries made serendipitously. This is the case whatever the medium. If, say, you are headed for News You Can Use [in *U.S. News & World Report*] and on your way your eye alights upon the musings of a columnist, a doorman won't appear and gruffly demand that you pay separately for admission. I say, Come in, come in! This is an all-you-can-eat buffet.

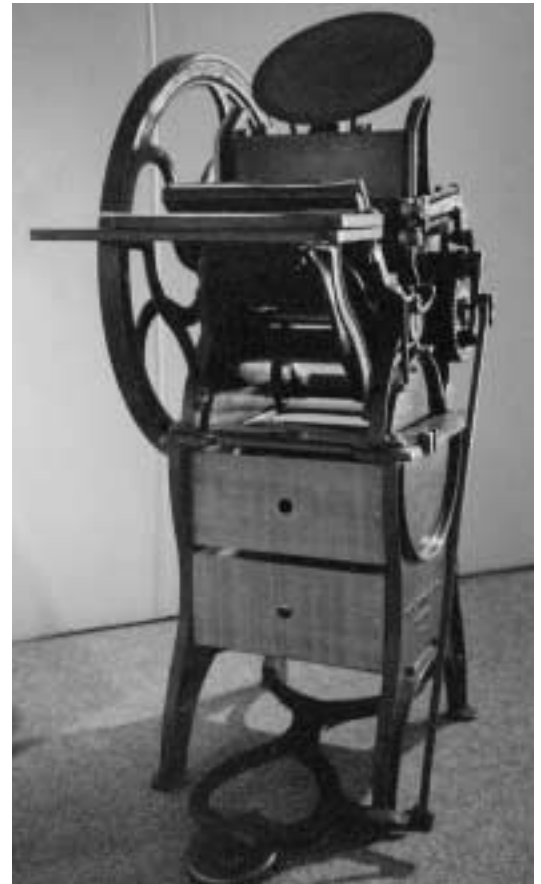
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SLUGS AND DINGBATS

If type is doing its job well, you don't notice it. Type is one of the invisible arts, staying in the background, lending a certain flavor to whatever message is being made. Being nice. Yet designers spent years, sometimes lifetimes, refining a single font; extending “x” heights, devising dingbats [*printing term for typographical ornaments not otherwise specified*], tweaking thicks and thins, adjusting descenders, and deleting ascenders. Patient as monks.

Times have changed. Nowadays some young hotshot can scribble an alphabet on the back of a phone book, digitize it, and produce a viable font. Binary meets Bodoni. These are interesting times for an art form that evokes traditions going back to the Gutenberg Bible and that also captures the mood of the latest 15-second trend. Revealing the pleasure in refinement and the excitement of experimental design, type deserves another look, a second glance.

From the Arvada [Colorado] Center Quarterly, Winter 2000/2001, this is the introduction to a display of typography by Brian Allen, Herbert Bayer, Chank Diesel, James Johnson, and Tom Parson.





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1998, 2000

DEVELOPER-SPEAK

Lately, Professor Grammar has been editing a number of articles written by our friends, the developers. This gold mine of technical information has also been, unfortunately, a prolific source of excess words, jargon, and down-right puffery. The Professor has been impressed by the way authors from different locations and even different companies repeat many of the same excess or awkward phrases, almost as if one of the requirements for a computer science degree were a course entitled “Standard puff phrases for technical articles.”

Below are a few examples of “developer-speak” that the Professor has found in her editing. These examples are real, so some of them contain more than one excess word or phrase.

considerations

This vague word is often used as a section heading when the author is not sure what the section is about:

No: Distributed Debugger *Considerations*

Yes: Three Distributed Debugging Scenarios

actual, actually

This word is rarely needed:

No: Selection of the bundle type does not *actually* matter at run time.

Yes: The bundle type does not matter at run time.

The Professor also deleted the unnecessary phrase *Selection of*.

as shown below

When used in call-outs to an adjacent graphic, this phrase can often be replaced by a simple colon:

No: The design is partitioned into model, view, and controller, *as shown below* in Figure 7.

Yes: The design is partitioned into model, view, and controller:

the following, as follows

Another case where the unneeded phrase can often be replaced by a simple colon:

No: To access the session data, *take the following steps*:

Yes: To access the session data:

cover the basics behind

The Professor was surprised to find this cute puff phrase on more than one occasion:

No: This paper will *cover the basics behind* the P3P Web privacy specification.

Yes: This paper describes the P3P Web privacy specification.

The Professor also changed future tense to present tense, which we should use in technical communication whenever possible.

current, currently

Using the present tense generally means you’re referring to the present, so the words *current* and *currently* are rarely needed:

No: The list of directories that you get when you click Browse is obtained from your current classpath environment variable.

Yes: The list of directories that you get when you click Browse comes from your classpath environment variable.

The Professor also replaced the passive verb *is obtained* from with an active verb.

environment

Although we sometimes need to use the word “environment” to make technical distinctions, more often it’s a favorite puff word:

No: If you make use of Enterprise Java beans within the VisualAge for Java *environment*...

Yes: If you use Enterprise Java beans in VisualAge for Java....

The Professor also changed the puff words *make use of* to *use* and *within* to *in*.

technology

The word technology is right up there with environment as a cherished puff word:

No: Our Web site uses DB2 *technology*....

Yes: Our Web site uses DB2....

fairly

This weaselly qualifying word usually improves a sentence by leaving it:

No: The first part of the tutorial is *fairly* straightforward and requires only basic JSP knowledge.

OK: The first part of the tutorial is straightforward and requires only basic JSP knowledge.

Yes: The first part of the tutorial requires only basic JSP knowledge.

You can usually delete similar qualifying words such as *quite* and *very*.

now we must

Now we must delete this phrase:

No: *Now we must* implement the doGet() method.

Yes: Implement the doGet() method.

note, note that

Without a doubt, *note* and *note that* are the most common excess words the Professor

comes across. The Professor is especially fond of the deluxe, formally dressed version of this phrase:

No: *Please note once again that* the files adhere to the JSP 1.0 spec.

Yes: The files adhere to the JSP 1.0 spec.

Often, simply deleting the words *note* or *note that* yields a perfectly good sentence. If the sentence does need special emphasis, use a boldface label such as **Important** or **Restriction** followed by a colon.

The Professor wishes you success in clearing puff words out of your information.

Copyright 2000 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.

Clear puff words out of your information.

THE PARETO PRINCIPLE AND TC

Wilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) was one of the great outside-the-box thinkers, not to mention an inspiration to anyone contemplating a career change. First trained as a physicist, then employed as an engineer on a train (and later manager of a railroad), he studied philosophy and politics and ended up an economist and sociologist. Today he is best remembered by the wider world for a principle known by his name and also as the “80:20 rule” or “the law of the trivial many and the critical few.” It postulates that in many endeavors, something like 80 percent of the benefit follows from 20 percent of the effort and, conversely, 80 percent of the effort yields only 20 percent of the results.

It is easy to see that this principle has validity, and just as easy to see that ham-handed application of it can cause havoc. We technical communicators are professionally compelled to do much of our work deep in the realm of the Pareto law. This is partly

due to a cultural tradition that harshly judges imperfection in the use of the language. Yet our part of the classical *trivium* is not trivial; both the content and the appearance are substantive, and both fall within our domain. Consider the alternative: Which 20 percent of the commands should the users misunderstand? Which 20 percent of the misspelled words wouldn't cause them to conclude that the company is a pack of clowns?

These concerns must be balanced against limitations of resources, including time. Quality, in one widely accepted philosophical view, is conformance to standards, so what standards must be met? When it comes time to extend Pareto's thinking, as some do, in the hope of finding small efficiencies without unacceptable sacrifice of quality from the user's perspective, it pays to understand one's business model. It also pays to know—not to guess at, not to accept hearsay about, but to find out firsthand—what users do and don't care about.

—Joe Chew

TRANSITIONING TO THE NEW BUSINESSPEAK

BY DAN DANBOM

Of the many striking differences between where you work and what is generally referred to as the real world, one of the biggest is the language we use. Business uses a vocabulary all its own. Familiar words take on unfamiliar meanings, and new words are developed faster than new software. As a person often charged with articulating the message of your organization, you should familiarize yourself with these terms and use them as a tool to lose any shred of self-respect.

Change Agent While this may sound like a job title for someone who has a job similar to a bank teller, it is really someone who, without even knowing you, knows that you need a mental makeover. Change agents are usually found in troubled companies and often nest in the human resources department.

World Class I'm pretty sure that there is not a single publicly traded company that has not announced that it is striving to become a world-class company. Even underachieving companies don't seek continent-class status. When I first heard the term *world class*, I thought of a place on an airplane two steps below coach, where poor people can travel with their chickens. I've yet to find exactly what world class means, though it is most often used in the context of "being a lot better than sane people have any reason to expect."

Paradigm This word is always joined at the vowel with *shift*, as in "we are implementing a paradigm shift." To put this on a personal level, if you used to treat your colds with leeches and large doses of rum and you now treat them with aspirin and injections of liquid detergent, you have made a paradigm shift.

Transitioning This has replaced the boring word *moving*. To expand on the preceding example, your cold treatment means you will be transitioning from a health-deficient state to one of wellness.

Benchmarking You think this is what graffiti creeps do, right? Benchmarking is a way companies measure their performance against others, so that they can implement paradigm shifts transitioning them to world-class status.

Deselection Companies have grown beyond the ugliness of firing large numbers of employees, choosing instead more humane actions such as downsizing, right-sizing, severing, reducing the inventory of human resources, and deselection. Firing has been relegated to the scrap heap of embarrassingly accurate terms.

Incent Having failed to motivate or encourage their human resources, some companies are now attempting to incent them or, better yet, incentivize them. Thus encouraged, employees implement workplace strategies designed to incent employers to offer early retirement plans.

Challenge Most often, challenge is used interchangeably with problem, as in "...litigation brought by tens of thousands of customers claiming hair loss from our new plaque-reducing toothpaste poses an insurmountable challenge to our company."

Office This is a word that has transitioned from noun to verb, as in "Ms. Dobbins will office in Timbuktu." Presumably, Ms. Dobbins will car to work and elevator to the seventh floor, where heavy workloads will require that she dinner at her desk.

Visioning I notice that many companies are doing this, and not just the ones involved with opticians. Visioning seems to have something to do with how these companies hope to transition to world-class status. At first, I thought it was a synonym for hallucinating, which in the case of many companies is probably true. It also sounds like something no amount of money could incent me to do.

Responsipowerment I believe responsipowerment came about from back-alley

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Allow language to change with the times but don't push it too hard or too far.

WHAT A TANGLED WEB WE WEAVE WHEN FIRST WE PRACTICE TO ABBREV.

BY WEN SMITH

O*h, to be in the UK
Now that Aprs there.*

Consider the wacky habit called abbreviation. Why do we put a period after *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, and *Dr.*? Why not just *Mr* Rogers' neighborhood, *Mrs* Murphy's chowder, *Dr* Johnson's dictionary, etc.?

And what good is the period after *etc*? Oh, what a lot of space we waste when we practice to save space!

Now, I'm not the first to campaign against the useless period. The movement began more than a century ago with George Bernard Shaw, who referred to Eliza's father as "*Mr* Doolittle," not "*Mr.* Doolittle." But the conventional period after an abbreviation has clung to life despite many such attempts at good riddance.

Subtle reforms have moved in the right direction. When most of us weren't looking, the U.N. became the *UN*, and the F.B.I. became the *FBI*. And nowadays we see no periods on *EFFutton* buildings or bills from *JCPennney*.

Back in the 1950s the US Postal Service entered the anti-period movement by adopting two-letter abbreviations for names of states. The system put zip into addresses by using *MA* for *Massachusetts*, *KS* for *Kansas*, and *ND* for *North Dakota*. The periods of *Mass.*, *Kan.*, and *No. Dak.* disappeared.

But it was a wasteful system, after all. The service had already given us zip codes, the five-number designations of virtually all spots on the map. Once you have 90210, you don't need either *B.H.* or *Calif.* Alas, to this day we cling to the redundancy: city, state, and zip.

Of course, zip isn't everything in life. If I were dictator of style, I'd decree that state names be spelled out. The romance of *Alaska* dies with *AK*. And, after all, brevity—not abbreviation—is the soul of wit.

Oddly, after knocking the periods from the states, the postal service pulled a wrong-way flip and put out a 20-cent stamp honoring "*Harry S. Truman.*" Harry actually had no middle name, so the *S* stood for nothing, and the style books tell us to write such an initial without a period: "*Harry S Truman.*" The postal service could have saved a lot of ink.

Speaking logically, we have to admit that *Mr.* and *Dr.* are not abbreviations at all. They are contractions and should follow the apostrophe convention: *M'r*, *D'r*. But the apostrophe is just as useless as the period, and *Mr* and *Dr* will do quite nicely.

As for the apostrophes in contractions like *isn't* and *they're*, they're conventional but useless.

Shaw saw the waste in apostrophes. He wrote *dont* for *don't* and *couldnt* for *couldn't*. But he struck a few snags when he came to *Ill* for *I'll* and *hell* for *he'll*, so his system was inconsistent. Shaw's plays have lines like, "*You'll* excuse me, *I'm* sure, sir," the one contraction apostrophized, the other not. (No doubt he thought *Im* would be hard to read, and today's readers might stumble over a line like "*Tammyd* look better if *shed* shed her mascara.")

In writing, if not in speech, it's often better to forgo contractions and spell things out. The invention of the *we'll* for *we shall* saved but little, and "*Who're* you?" without the apostrophe would not do.

English is just about the only language that uses the apostrophe in the possessive noun: "*Charlie's* angels," "the *cat's* whiskers." For "*my aunt's* pen" the French say "the pen *of my aunt*," and for "the *captain's* horse" the Spanish say "the horse *of the captain*." Anyway, "*Charlies* angels" and "the *cats* whiskers" are clear enough.

Fortunately the apostrophe is fading from the possessive. The *Veterans* Administration and the *Lions* Club dropped the

*In writing, if not in
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to forgo contractions
and spell things out.*

squiggles long ago. Possessive pronouns, of course, never had em: *yours, hers, its, ours, theirs*.

Someday both the periods of abbreviations and the apostrophes of contractions will end in the dustbin. But print fades slowly. That's probably why Shaw, who had to fight for every omission of period or apostrophe, had no luck getting the rest of the literary world to follow his lead.

Editors and printers are a conservative lot when it comes to style. Once a form has been adopted, none of them wants to take the first step to change it. They're like lawyers, to whom precedent is holy.

Besides, the pros know how hard it is to go against convention. If a writer leaves out a period or an apostrophe, the editor puts it in. If the editor leaves (or takes) it out, the typesetter puts it in. If the typesetter leaves it out, the proofreader puts it in. At the start of this paragraph, I wrote *pros*. If it has turned out as *pro's*, you'll know that some editor, typesetter, or proofreader was suffering from knee-jerk.

Shaw (let's call him GBS) was ahead of his time, virtually alone in omitting periods and apostrophes. He also tried, without

success, to simplify English spelling. Thinking the future might one day catch up with him, he left a big bundle of pounds to support spelling reform, all to no avail as yet. His moneys drawing interest, but his reform isn't.

Spelling, being on paper and not in the wind, hangs tight even while the spoken language hangs loose. You say "*po-TAY-toh*" and I say "*po-TAH-toh*," but we all spell it "*potato*." (Okay, with one exception.)

Lets hope for the demise of both the abbreviating period and the contracting apostrophe. Despite reluctance to change, the worlds clearly had enough of the worthless little dot and the niggling squiggle. Think of the space we've wasted on periods and apostrophes—space we could've used for great ideas.

Could've, that is, if we'd had any great ideas in the 1st place.

Wen Smith, a right-to-laugh activist, lives with his wife and the swallows in San Juan Capistrano. His new book of humor, Tip of My Tongue, has just been published by Authors Choice Press and is available by order online at <http://iUniverse.com>.

His moneys drawing interest, but his reform isn't.

NEW BUSINESSPEAK

(continued from page 24)

genetic experiments involving responsibility, power, and cement. In the context where I read the word, it seemed to have something to do with incentivizing human resources to undertake more work with

the understanding that failure could lead to deselection.

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T ravel term

Knowledgeable trip hosts
 No extra fees
 Nominal fee
 Standard
 Deluxe
 Superior

T ranslation

They've flown in an airplane before
 No extras
 Outrageous charge
 Sub-standard
 Standard
 One free shower cap

IPCC 01

TELLING A COLLEAGUE ABOUT IPCC 01?

Great idea! Here are the specifics. The society's conference in Santa Fe, New Mexico, begins Wednesday, 24 October, at a keynote luncheon (which also serves to wrap up the Association for Computing Machinery's SIGDOC conference) and runs through the entire day Friday, 26 October, with full-day postconference workshops on Saturday the 27th.

The Program

With more than 60 papers, we will present a mix of in-conference workshops, demonstrations, and sets of talks on a wide variety of topics. There will be three or four topics to choose from in most time slots (with a couple of special exceptions for which we will gather in plenary session). By the time you read this, the conference Web site will have more details, and a preliminary program will arrive in your mailbox in August.

Conference Registration

Registration will open Monday, 2 July. To take advantage of the advance registration discount, we must receive your registration form by Wednesday, 3 October, via the Web, fax, or mail. The fees are:

	ADVANCE	REGULAR
Member	\$380	\$455
Nonmember	\$505	\$580
Early bird special for students and retirees	\$175	(as above)

Postconference Workshops

On Saturday, 27 October, the day after the main conference, we offer full-day, in-depth explorations of specific topics for an additional fee. The selection is:

- Andrea Ames: *Whose UI Is It, Anyway? Designing Information as Software*
- Jonathan Price: *Web Writing ABCs*
- Marty Shelton: *Using New Media Effectively: Script Design for Informational Film, Video, and Multimedia*
- Rives Hassell-Corbiell: *Writing Effective Training—Instructional Design for Technical Communication*

The early-registration discount deadline for postconference workshops is the same as that

for the conference: Wednesday, 3 October. Many workshop instructors, however, insist on small classes, and some workshops fill up rapidly, so we suggest signing up early.

	ADVANCE	REGULAR
Member or affiliate of any IEEE society or SIGDOC	\$255	\$305
Nonmember	\$330	\$380

The student and retiree fee for postconference workshops is the same as the member fee.

Bring a Colleague

Discounts will be available at the conference to registered attendees who want to join PCS as affiliate members or IEEE as full members. Most of us know someone who would enjoy and benefit from an IPCC but hasn't been attending. So pass the word to:

- A scientist or engineer whose interests overlap with ours
- Someone whose *de facto* job is communication but who doesn't know about the resources available in this profession
- Even a self-identified technical writer who hasn't heard about IEEE and PCS

Be sure to let them know that special bargains on new membership will be available—but only at the conference.

Special Rates at a Special Hotel

IPCC 01 will be at La Fonda, a Santa Fe landmark that is the latest in a series of inns going back to the founding of the Santa Fe Trail. Recognized by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the Historic Hotels of America, discreetly renovated to modern standards, and centrally located on the Plaza, La Fonda will please your artistic as well as your intellectual side.

Your budgetary sensibilities will be equally pleased by the special conference rates: as low as \$159 per night (single room, double occupancy). To get the special rates, be sure to mention IPCC 01, and make your reservation early. You can reserve a room by telephone (+1 800 523 5002) or through the hotel's Web site (<http://www.lafondasantafe.com>).

To Learn More...

<http://www.ieeepcs.org/2001>



SUZDAL: THE LAST MINUTE DETAILS

By the time you receive this *Newsletter* we will be just days away from arriving in Moscow. From where I sit now, arrival is still three months away but our preparations are in full force. It's certainly different from attending a colloquium in one's own country.

We've gone through the exercise of audience analysis (at least on paper) and have directed our material to a technical group of professionals who need to write. Now we have to worry about getting the abstracts translated into Russian and preparing our slides and presentations so the timing works with concurrent translation. Although we each have 20 minutes to speak, the time goes by much faster when you have

to wait for the translator to repeat your words in Russian.

Another unusual aspect is that we have to obtain invitation letters and visas to enter Russia. We're in the middle of that now and I can only hope that all 11 of us successfully jump through the bureaucratic hoops without any mishaps. I can't imagine finally landing in Moscow and finding out the paperwork was not correct.

Our colleagues in Russia have made hotel arrangements for us in Moscow and most of our delegation will be arriving early and enjoying the sights of the big city before we head to the colloquium site in Suzdal. We'll have much more to tell in the November/December *Newsletter* but today we are still enjoying the anticipation and exhilaration that come with the unknown. For most of our group, it will be a first visit to Russia.

The International Colloquium on Professional Communication will be held 15-16 August in Suzdal, Russia (about 200 km northeast of Moscow). It is being co-organized by the IEEE Professional Communication Society and the Professional Communication Section of the Russian A. S. Popov Society. For more information visit our Web site at <http://www.ieeepcs.org/Suzdal/> or e-mail Lisa Moretto at RGI_Lisa@compuserve.com.

Photo below:
Holy Gates of the Monastery of the Deposition of the Robe (18th century)



Photo at right:
Overview of the village of Kideksha near Suzdal (12th century)

