

AuSTCom

Newsletter of the Society for Technical Communication, Australia Chapter

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www.stc-aus.org.au

Happy Xmas and a Prosperous New Year to all

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Thank you to members who offered support in our recent moment of need! We are back on track and have accounted for all of the committee responsibilities.

Some members indicated that the email was a much-needed 'sign of life' from the committee. Clearly, we need to improve our communication and involve members in a community. This is currently my highest priority and I am looking forward to the launch of our members-only bulletin board.

In fact we already have a very interesting topic for our first moderated discussion on the bulletin board...

I am thrilled to announce that we have been invited to host the 2007 Region 8 Conference. If this goes ahead, it will be by far the most important technical communication event held in anywhere in the Southern Hemisphere. It is likely that we will be seeking volunteers for an organizing committee early next year.

Ideally, the Chapter would be well-represented at the conference, so please start planning for your papers! The Chapter includes many highly-regarded professionals in its membership and this is your opportunity to be recognised.

A more immediate issue of concern to some members may be recent recruiting advertisements that specify technical writers with security clearance. I consider the closed-shop nature of the process unacceptable and have previously raised this with the Commonwealth Ombudsman. The outcome was acceptable in terms of direct hiring by the Department of Defence, but other Commonwealth departments and private employers continue to specify 'Must have Secret Clearance'. I have raised this as two additional complaints with the Ombudsman.

It may be that a finding against recruiters will result in a temporary crisis for employers in secure environments, but I believe this is the only way to force a review of the current lethargic and inefficient vetting process. This kind of discrimination cannot be allowed to continue unchallenged.

Enough of business! Please allow me to wish you the very best for the festive season. Have a happy and safe Christmas and an optimistic outlook for the New Year!

Colin Dawson

FROM THE EDITOR

Jill Nicholson (temporary)

Welcome to AuSTCom, the newsletter for the Australia Chapter of the STC.

Our lead article this week is by Greg Baker from Canberra and is about numerical tables. Because of the size of the illustrations this article starts on page 2.

Any goofs in this this newsletter are totally my responsibility.

STOP PRESS

Unfortunately Robin will no longer be able to do the newsletter and we need two new editors for 2004-2005. Think how good it will look on your resume. Think about it and nominate at election time.

See the *Editor's Notes* on page 12 for information about publication dates and deadlines.

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NUMERICAL TABLES

by Greg Baker

Greg Baker is a statistics research specialist in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library. He prepares statistical material and commentary for MPs and Senators. In addition he manages the editorial processes involved in publishing, for hard copy and for the web, around a hundred research papers a year on a range of specialist topics from a number of authors. He has published widely and is a member of a number of professional bodies.

One way to present numbers is in a tabular form. This, particularly accompanying text, is a concise and accurate way to present numerical information and is a way to be totally honest with your readers. While the description of numbers and the importance you place on them in text is essential, the reader is also owed the chance to see that the conclusions you draw are accurate and that other conclusions are not equally or more likely.

To be useful, of course, tables need to be well-constructed. While there are no rules as such, the following guidelines may be useful.

Table titles

All tables should have a descriptive title. This can be useful for readers particularly if you list tables in a separate part of the contents list. Having to give a title to a table should also help you focus precisely on what you are trying to show.

Row and column labels

It is conventional to place row labels to the left of each row. This means that the reader's gaze alights first on the row heading then on the numbers to which they refer. Column labels are placed, of course, above the column to which they refer. Often it is necessary to use several lines of text for a column heading simply to fit the text in. It is essential to make sure that the label wraps at sensible places and to do this without making the column widths too different to one another. Space concerns are usually less critical with row labels. However, if there are many columns, you may need to abbreviate or wrap them too.

Simple and complex tables

The aim of any table must be to bring together, to simplify and to allow comparisons—anything that detracts from that aim should be strenuously avoided. The simplest possible table is a column of numbers. One obvious, and common, example is a time series—the value of an economic statistic, for example, shown over several years. Table 1 is such a table.

Table 1. Motor Vehicle Sales

Month	Number
2002	
January	39 779
February	42 776
March	44 828
April	42 052
May	46 448
June	49 101
July	45 923
August	45 122
September	43 396
October	48 269
November	47 229
December	45 317
2003	
January	40 015
February	43 677
March	49 921
April	44 602

Source:

Sales of New Motor Vehicles
ABS 9314.0

A more complex table may be needed to show comparisons—for example Table 2 shows a time series for each of the Australian states. Another option could have a percentage change—annual or period percentage change—as a second column.

More dimensions are possible but you must exercise care not to push the limits of the tabular form too much. It is really very important to keep the amount of information at a reasonable minimum—that of course is a matter of judgement but if the table is meant to accompany text and simplify then it should not be overloaded. Table 3 is an example of a table that is useful and not too crowded with information.

**Table 2. Research and development expenditure
1996-97 to 2000-01
By state and territory government
\$ thousands**

State/territory	1996-97	1998-99	2000-01
New South Wales	234 914	245 832	272 252
Victoria	157 441	150 013	192 742
Queensland	203 671	235 016	238 287
South Australia	66 601	88 133	96 883
Western Australia	95 215	101 190	105 110
Tasmania	17 322	11 500	6 430
Northern Territory	18 778	27 599	28 759
Australian Capital Territory	3 762	3 545	3 111
Australia	797 703	862 829	943 572

Source:

Research and experimental development, Australia
ABS 8112.0

**Table 3. Sugar exports from the European Union and Thailand
1993-94 to 2000-01**

Year	European Union			Thailand		
	Production (megatonnes)	Exports (megatonnes)	Exports as a percentage of production	Production (megatonnes)	Exports (megatonnes)	Exports as a percentage of production
1993-94	17.40	7.35	42.2	4.01	3.04	75.8
1994-95	16.53	7.86	47.5	5.51	3.73	67.7
1995-96	16.97	6.52	38.4	6.32	4.85	76.7
1996-97	17.99	7.38	41.0	6.10	3.81	62.5
1997-98	19.03	8.85	46.5	4.33	2.62	60.5
1998-99	17.55	7.76	44.2	5.48	3.20	58.4
1999-00	19.18	8.58	44.7	5.83	3.90	66.9
2000-01	18.28	8.82	48.2	5.22	3.72	71.3

Source: ABARE, *Australian Commodity Statistics*

If a table gets too overloaded then it may be advisable to break it into several tables, each of which can look pretty much the same as the others.

Rules in tables

As we have seen in the examples above, rules can be used effectively to collect columns together with a common head and to neaten the bottom of a table and delineate it from notes, references and acknowledgements.

Justification

The first column in a table is usually left-justified; this column usually contains the row labels. Numbers should always be right justified. Never centre justify or left justify numbers because this makes comparison—the main point of a table—difficult.

In general it is best to right justify numbers, left justify text and left justify dates.

If adjacent columns foul one another, i.e. come too close, insert a blank column. And always align decimal places. This means that a column of numbers needs to have the same number of decimal places for every entry.

I have a personal aversion to centre justifying anything in any table but some people may feel that centre justifying a column heading is aesthetically more pleasing. Ultimately the choice is yours.

Footnotes

For space reasons—and aesthetics too—it is sometimes necessary to abbreviate row and column headings. On many occasions this will not cause confusion or

ambiguity especially when the table is read in conjunction with text. However, the compiler of a table should always be aware that the table may be used for other purposes and copied without the accompanying text or it may simply give a misleading impression even when explanatory text is present. In these situations the table should be footnoted.

Footnotes are typically labelled using the lower case alphabet; this reduces the possibility of confusing footnotes with the numerical information in the table—it makes them stand out more.

If there is more than one footnote the footnote labels should flow down the tables from top left to bottom right in the same way that text flows on a page. This makes it easier to find to what each footnote refers.

If several tables have common footnotes it is satisfactory to group all footnotes together and list them once rather than repeat them under each table. It is then a simple matter to refer to them from the bottom of each table.

Acknowledge source

If you have not compiled the table or the data from which the table has been derived you should acknowledge the source of the data.

Copyright material

If a table has been used in its entirety it may be necessary not only to acknowledge the source of the data table but also to credit copyright. In some cases it may be necessary to obtain copyright clearance from the owner of that copyright. It may also be that you want to copyright mark your own work. The foot of the table is the place to claim this copyright.

Ways to keep tables and diagrams uncluttered

It is my preference to remove from tables anything that is unnecessary to the clarity of the message. Thus, I would rarely use vertical rules within a table. Similarly, I rarely use shading or colour. Examine carefully all aspects of a table and within the bounds of house style and the design requirements prune away until the table is as bare as possible of extraneous material.

There is much much more to table design, layout and aesthetics than I have presented here. However, remembering that simplicity is always the best approach should lead you to clear and useful tables whenever you write numerical material.

YELLOW PAGES

In this directory—**Online Help Writers** now says **see Technical Publications, Writers, Consultants &/or Services**—thanks to Colin Dawson.

ORGANIZED CHAOS - A BOOK REVIEW BY PETER MERHOLZ, MARCH 2002

Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software

by Steven Johnson

An ant trail for transporting food is usually the shortest distance between the colony and source. In a lab situation, ants placed their cemeteries farthest from the colony, and their garbage piles at the point farthest from both the colony and cemetery. Amazingly, individual ants are unaware that this is going on—each just follows simple rules, which lead to outcomes that, in the aggregate, seem cleverly planned.

Such inadvertent order is the subject of Steven Johnson's book, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (2001, Scribner, \$25). This delightful book introduces readers to the subject of complex adaptive systems (such as ant colonies), and discusses how large-scale order emerges from a series of small-scale interactions. Johnson chronicles a shift in thinking about natural systems, where older notions of explicit design and control were superseded by new thoughts on bottom-up decentralized methods. Furthermore, Johnson discusses how software designers are incorporating the principles of these new methods into their work. These people are taking an evolutionary approach to software development that often performs better than the best top-down designs.

Web designers could benefit from such approaches. Typically, content is organized in a top-down hierarchical fashion. Think of Yahoo's directory, product marketing sites (with top-level categories such as products, solutions, support), e-tailers, and very likely, your company's intranet. As these bodies of content grow, standard organization and presentation schemes become cumbersome in two ways. For content creators, the task of slotting and tagging this content is time-consuming and difficult to manage, particularly if the content is developed in a distributed fashion—such as when everyone in the company can contribute to an intranet. For end-users, it becomes harder and harder to find the desired information because the sheer volume is difficult to navigate and pre-existing categorizations lose meaning over time.

This is where the principles of emergent systems come in. As centralized schemes grow unwieldy over time, it makes sense to create an alternative information environment where elements are organized according to a few simple rules about how users interact with that information. This leads to a fundamentally meaningful organization, because it's predicated on what people are actually doing.

continued on page 5

continued from page 4

Emergence chronicles Slashdot's (www.slashdot.org) development to demonstrate the power of decentralized, bottom-up systems. Its two founders originally edited the site for quality, but they soon became overwhelmed and appointed an elite cadre to help out. In short order, that too became taxed. Lacking the resources to hire more editors, the founders instead turned to the community for quality control, letting everyone rate every post. By shifting control from the center of the organization to the ends, and using the important emergent principle of feedback, the founders turned Slashdot into a self-maintained organism that promotes quality content and suppresses junk—no matter how much content people post.

Slashdot is a success, but Amazon.com takes self-organization further by using data that doesn't require extra user effort. For example, when people buy a particular product, what else do they buy? Take a favorite book of mine, *Understanding Comics*, by Scott McCloud. In a bookstore or library, this item is shelved in cartooning or comic strips. Amazon, however, discovered that people who bought it also bought books on art appreciation and video game design. By analyzing actual behavior, Amazon transcends the straightjacket of existing categories to develop a new, far more relevant organization. It's as if the system somehow understood that people who are interested in *Understanding Comics* aren't interested in comics per se, but in issues of formalism in art and narrative. Obviously, Amazon.com lacks such awareness, but that's precisely the point—by aggregating small, "stupid" interactions, Amazon has developed a larger "smart" system.

As we begin to tackle woollier projects like employee-contributed intranets or peer-to-peer systems, notions of control are pretty much thrown out the window. Books like *Emergence* and sites like Amazon.com demonstrate how we must think beyond older ideas of architecture. It's time to embrace the bottom-up, rules-based organizational methods that best fit user needs.

*Peter is a partner in **Adaptive Path**, a user experience consulting firm based in San Francisco. You can visit him at www.peterme.com.*

GO TO

Sick and tired of acronyms and trying to work out what they mean—or even trying to find someone who knows what they mean?

Go to

www.acronymfinder.com

An outsourcing allegory...

THE CASE OF THE WAYWARD CONTRACTORS

by Bill Hackos, Comtech Services Inc.

Jake Jones thought he had an outsourcing arrangement with X-Publishing.com. His company had decided to move all technical documentation for the new products outside the company. Purchasing had negotiated a contract with X-Publishing.com that gave them complete responsibility for the new product documentation and training. The contract amounted to over a million dollars for the first year and included built in extensions for subsequent years.

Problems began right from the first. When Jake met with Janie Moreta, the account manager assigned to his company, he learned that he would be working with eight technical communicators hired by X-Publishing.com. Janie explained that her role was to manage the relationship between the two companies and would work closely with Jake. To Jake's dismay, Janie had no background or experience in information development. Her role was to make sure that the tech communicators did their assigned work and that they were meeting Jake's expectations.

Jake visited with the purchasing agent who set up the outsourcing contract. He explained that he did not expect to have to manage eight technical communicators, in addition to his direct staff of five writers, an editor, an instructional designer, and four trainers. The purchasing agent explained that the contract had no requirement that X-Publishing.com provide project management. According to the contract, they could conduct the projects any way they wanted. They just billed the company for labor hours and expenses.

The contract gets started

The problems appeared insurmountable to Jake. Janie Moreta was pleasant enough but offered no skills that Jake needed. He found himself faced with eight communicators who worked at home, were completely unknown to him, and knew nothing about their telecommunications technology. Jake scheduled a meeting with the contract employees for the next week to assess their skills and get them started.

The meeting was something of a disaster. Three of the eight people had no previous experience in technical writing. Two of them were new college graduates from business communication and art history. The third had been a secretary in a software firm. The other five people had some experience in technical writing and instructional design. Two had been trainers on high-tech equipment and had backgrounds writing maintenance manuals. The other three were bonafide technical communicators with about 7 years of experience added together. They had been writing user manuals for software.

No one had any experience in telecommunications.

The only good news from the meeting is the group's enthusiasm. They are all ready to get started and want to contribute to the success of the projects. Unfortunately, they all look to Jake for direction. He is adding a substantial load to his management responsibility, one that includes a remote workforce. When all of his employees worked for him directly, he kept his team working collaboratively. They all needed to be in the office most of the time.

The problems expand

About a month into the new product documentation and training development, Jake was "pulling his hair out." Half of the contract writers were making regular visits to the office to meet with the technical experts. However, because of their lack of technical knowledge, Jake was getting complaints from the engineers. They had to spend considerable time explaining the technology. When Jake hired new writers himself, he put them through a technology training program for the first three months. This training was not included in the contract provisions.

The other half of the contractors had become a problem. They hardly ever appeared at the company unless Jake complained to Janie. They preferred to correspond with the engineers strictly through email. Unfortunately, they seemed to expect the engineers to write the documentation for them. They were supposed to be available for phone calls and emails during the regular business day. Half the time, when Jake or others on his team called, no one answered. Email returns often took more than 24 hours.

The problems with communication were only one part of the problem. Jake's editor, Margaret Wong, had started to review the drafts of the documentation. Margaret was appalled. The three writers with no technical communication background had no idea what documentation was supposed to look like. They wrote long, complex technical descriptions of functions, most likely based on information provided by the engineers. It was clear that they didn't know what they were writing. They also didn't know how to use FrameMaker or follow templates. Margaret had to correct the styles in every document she received. "Can't we ask them to take some FrameMaker training?" Margaret asked. "No," Jake replied. "That isn't in their contract. We can't even require that the writers have FrameMaker experience."

Margaret and Jake worked with the writers over the next month to teach them the templates and the corporate technical style. That action seemed at least to keep some of the problems at bay until the last month of the four-month project. Then the problems began to cascade.

The costs increase

During the past two months, Jake was getting concerned that the project was falling behind schedule. The writers were working regular 40-hour weeks but that wasn't enough to keep up with the product changes coming from

engineering. He needed more effort but overtime costs were included in the contract, which meant he had to pay time and a half during the week and double time for weekends. His management was baulking at the increases and wouldn't approve the overtime.

The contract writers were willing to work extra to catch up but no one would let them. Jake continued to receive quality complaints from Margaret and his other writers, who were having to conduct peer reviews to help Margaret with her workload.

Then, Jake received a visit from Janie Moreta. She was leaving X-publishing.com for a sales job in another state. That was her real calling. She apologized to Jake and introduced him to Karl Sajek, who was taking over her account management responsibilities. Karl was new to the company and once again, had no background in information development. As a recently arrived immigrant from eastern Europe, his English was really difficult to understand. Jake wasn't going to get any help from the supplier. Karl was willing to schedule extra work for a fee to accommodate the change in scope of the project. He was also willing to hire additional writers. Jake wondered what he would do with additional untrained individuals.

The deadline arrives

At the deadline, the roof fell in. Material that was supposed to be ready for final review was not complete. Major pieces of functionality that had been added late to the product were not in the final drafts. Some of the information in the drafts had not been edited and didn't follow the company template. The product manager was raving and ranting because the documentation was very long and complex. She was worried that the customers would have serious problems with quality and usability. The writers who worked primarily at home had not bothered to come in to test the documentation with the product. They didn't know how the product worked well enough to test the documentation.

Jake and the product manager escalated the problems to senior management, the same people who had decided that outsourcing information development was going to save the company money. The VP of development wanted to know why Jake didn't have more control over the contractors. Jake explained that they weren't contractors exactly. The contract, as written, had not provided for management by anyone. Someone apparently thought that information developers needed no management but worked alone.

Jake recommended that the company now contract with the writers who had been laid off to make room for the outsourcing. Some of them might be available to act as a SWAT team. He would see what he could find out.

With four senior writers to work part-time, Jake could turn the project around in a month, although the product introduction would still be delayed. Senior management agreed.

At the same time, they tried to fire X-Publishing.com for non-performance. The supplier argued successfully that there were no quality or performance requirements in the contract. They would be happy to have the staff correct the problems for an additional cost to cover the change in scope. They correctly blamed the scope change on a total lack of engineering discipline in the company. In most of their previous projects, engineering followed a careful planning and development process that allowed documentation to be completed on time. They accused the senior management of running an out-of-control operation at a very low level of process maturity.

When the case went to court sometime later, X-Publishing.com won. The company had to pay them the full amount of the contract for three years.

Developing an outsourcing strategy

From this brief case study, it should be obvious that you need to establish a sound strategy for outsourcing before writing contracts. In our research, we found what we believe are six distinct business strategies for outsourcing:

- Developers' assistant
- Legacy
- Telecommuter
- Second-class employee
- Relocation
- Off-site department

Each of the strategies may be useful in meeting the needs of some organization. But none of the strategies will be successful unless they are well understood and carefully selected. The problem with Jake's company is that no strategy informed their decision except getting rid of permanent employees.

What Jake expected was an off-site department model in which all responsibilities for the project would be handled by the outsource supplier, including training and management of the tasks. What he got were developers' assistants who expected to have their hands held throughout.

To outsource to an off-site department requires that the company develop a series of specific requests for proposal for projects they want to have done. If the goal of the host company is to maintain or increase the quality of the work produced, and not simply eliminate headcount, they should choose to outsource selected projects to highly experienced organizations.

An advantage of the off-site department strategy is that every project is sent out for bids. Managed information-development firms bid on the projects. The department can choose the most comprehensive and carefully framed proposal, not just the lowest bid. Different projects may be awarded to different firms. This strategy not only increases total capacity, it also introduces expertise and innovation into the mix.

Expert information-development vendors generally work for a large number of companies at the same time, so the host company is not obligated to keep feeding them work to support them. They have expertise in the field of information development, often maintaining a full-time staff on their own site and having a base of project management, quality assurance, technology support, and production and design capabilities. Often, such firms offer additional services such as usability testing, customer studies, and interface design.

Had Jake's company carefully analyzed their goals for outsourcing and their expectations for the results, they would have written a better contract and avoided many of the problems they experienced.

The details about the off-site department model are fully explained in the White Paper on Outsourcing, available to CIDM members and potential members on the CIDM website. Jo Ann Hackos is the founder-director of the Centre for Information Development Management (CIDM). Go to: www.infomanagementcenter.com

On the CIDM website you can read about the *Best Practices Newsletter*. The annual fee for this Newsletter is \$80.00Aus.

ADVERTISING RATES

STC Committee

We are happy to run advertisements for activities that are in line with the objectives of the STC.

While the STC does not give copies of our mailing list, we will deliver advertisements on your behalf.

Our fees for advertising in a single issue are:

Full page—\$75

1/2 page—\$35

1/3 page—\$25

1/4 page—\$15

The STC is a not-for-profit organisation and not registered for GST so we do not charge GST on advertising.

All copy for advertisements must be submitted as .tif files.

Deadlines for newsletters are the first Wednesday of August, November, February and May for inclusion in the next newsletter. We reserve the right to refuse to carry any advertisement.

ENGEL ON TUESDAY I DEMAND AN END TO THE APOSTROPHE

Then the maligned greengrocer will be as literate as you and I

Matthew Engel

Guardian

Tuesday June 6, 2000

The favourite for the Derby this Saturday is called King's Best. The 2,000 Guineas was won by Kings Best. This is the same animal. After much discussion, involving everyone except the horse, it was decided that the omission of the apostrophe was an error and that it should be inserted before the animal could be considered fit to grace the turf at Epsom.

This represents a rare triumph for the grammarians, going along with the decision of J Sainsbury to rebrand their stores as Sainsbury's rather than Sainsburys. And a fat lot of good that's done, judging by their current profits, which appear to be inferior to those of Barclays, Lloyds, Mothers Pride, Selfridges, Diners Club, Debenhams, Dixons and all other apostrophe-free zones.

On the other hand, my new personal organiser (this is a machine, not an employee) has instructions on how to record the date of Sarah's birthday, but no apostrophe at all. And usual big business policy is counter-balanced by the widespread use of the greengrocers' apostrophe, which sneaks into everything from apple's to yam's. One of our local pubs recently ran a pool tournament and invited "lad's and dad's, mum's and son's, uncle's and niece's, aunt's and nephew's" -which may be a record.

This is widely presumed to be the fault of modern education, which is far more concerned with genitals than genitives. Children are taught about the "comma in the air" (which I thought was a type of butterfly), but the correspondence I get suggests teachers are at least as confused as the greengrocers.

It is an ancient problem. "One not uncommonly sees outside an inn," complained the Dean of Canterbury in 1864, "that fly's and gig's are to be let. In a country town blessed with more than one railway, I have seen an omnibus with 'Railway Station's' painted in emblazonry on its side."

The dean assumed, like the modern pedants, that there is such a thing as correct usage, when what we have is usage. The apostrophe was introduced from France (like rabies), in the mid-16th century, and has caused nothing but trouble ever since. Its original function, according to a manuscript of 1551, was "taking away a voel sound at the end of a word, by the convenience of the following voel beginning another word". The example given was "writ th'articles plaine t'understand", which is what we always strive to do on the Guardian.

Shakespeare (or his printers) was all over the shop with his apostrophes, and the Authorised Version had "my mothers house". Swift and Addison hated the habit of using the apostrophe to shorten what Addison called the preterperfect tense: "drown'd, walk'd, arriv'd, for drowned, walked, arrived, which has very much disfigured the tongue and a tenth part of our smoothest words into so many clusters of consonants".

It was the late 17th century before any regularity came into the apostrophe's use in the genitive singular. Confusion reigned then as now about the genitive plural. And place names were and are shambolic: St Albans, St Neots and Golders Green, but St John's Wood, Pratt's Bottom and Land's End (further confused by the clothing company, Lands' End). Earl's Court is next to Barons Court. And what about singular names ending with an "s"? Do they take an extra "s" or not?

"Greek names with more than one syllable are always written with an apostrophe alone when they end with a s word: Socrates' teaching, Xerxes' expeditions," Sir Ernest Gowers ordained in 1946. Why? Was this a dying wish? "Crito, I owe a cock to Aesculapius. Get it sorted, and, by the way, make sure no one ever spells my name with an extra s after the apostrophe."

What's the point of it all? Literate people get offended when they see the apostrophe used in what they regard as an incorrect place. But it is simply being used in an unfamiliar place, which jars the sensibility of anyone accustomed to reading books and newspapers. The rules governing the apostrophe are incoherent, illogical and of dubious provenance. Why did whose replace who's? Why should one form of its take an apostrophe and not the other?

Bernard Shaw had the answer 100 years ago. Do away with the apostrophe. It serves no purpose. Someone will argue that it is necessary to distinguish between words that otherwise have the same spelling. But this is complete can't, and I won't have it. The sense of the sentence will always provide the necessary meaning.

Teachers and children would no longer have to worry about the wretched thing. Guardian sub-editors could coast through the day. Greengrocers, if they did dare use an apostrophe, would be prosecuted. This threat worked to force them away from pounds and ounces. Let's get through Ep'som next weekend, then ban it. The apo'strophes days done!

Go to

matthew.engel@guardian.co.uk

SURVEY OF AUSTRALIAN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS 2003

by Jean Hollis Weber

From 15 May through 20 July 2003, I conducted a survey of Australian technical communicators regarding current salaries (or hourly rates) in relation to experience, qualifications and other factors. The survey was open to technical communicators living in Australia. It was advertised on the Internet through the Technical Writers' List, the Australian Technical Writers' List, the STC Australia Chapter, the ASTC NSW, the ASTC Victoria, and various smaller mailing lists in Perth, Brisbane, Darwin and elsewhere. The survey was sponsored by the Society for Technical Communication (STC) Australia Chapter and was conducted using the online service SurveyKey.com.

This article summarises some of the key results. I have not attempted to draw conclusions or do any type of statistical analysis from the data presented. Complete results are posted on the STC Australia chapter's website, <http://www.stc-aus.org.au>.

Gender

101 women and 104 men; one person did not indicate gender.

Age groups

29 years or under	= 20	9.71%
30 to 39 years	= 64	31.07%
40 to 49 years	= 65	31.55%
50 years or over	= 55	26.70%
No Answer	= 2	0.97%

Experience in technical communication

Less than 2 years	= 15	7.28%
2-5 years	= 51	24.76%
6-10 years	= 61	29.61%
11 years or more	= 79	38.35%

Type of employment

Salaried	= 116	56.31%
Consultant	= 22	10.68%
Contract (includes freelance)	= 78	37.86%
Not currently in paid employment	= 10	4.85%

Formal education level

No tertiary qualification	= 21	10.19%
Diploma/certificate	= 44	21.36%
Bachelors degree	= 91	44.17%
Graduate diploma/certificate	= 67	32.52%
Masters degree	= 29	14.08%
Doctorate	= 11	5.34%

Tertiary qualifications

A technical field (e.g. engineering, programming)	= 65	31.55%
Technical communication, English or similar	= 65	31.55%
Other	= 78	37.86%

Salary, before tax

under \$30,000	= 1	0.49%
\$30,001-\$40,000	= 7	3.40%
\$40,001-\$50,000	= 12	5.83%
\$50,001-\$60,000	= 38	18.45%
\$60,001-\$70,000	= 28	13.59%
\$70,001-\$80,000	= 21	10.19%
\$80,001-\$90,000	= 9	4.37%
\$90,001-\$100,000	= 5	2.43%
\$100,001 or more	= 3	1.46%

continued on page 10

FINANCIAL STATE OF THE AUSTRALIA CHAPTER

We finished the financial year June 2002–June 2003 with a surplus of \$5,017.

Since then we have had:

- Expenses related to the once a year face-to-face committee meeting
- Expenses related to the renewal of the website, and other website expenses
- A fee for incorporation

This left us with \$4,241 before the first of the annual grants from the STC came through.

The STC sent us \$1,257Aus. We receive the same amount in March.

All this means is that we are in good shape financially although our grant from the STC is lower this year. This is because we have fewer members and the US dollar is worth less in terms of the Aus dollar..

Jill Nicholson, Treasurer

Salary by location

	< \$30K	\$30-40K	\$40-50K	\$50-60K	\$60-70K	\$70-80K	\$80-90K	\$90-100K	\$100K +	Total
Sydney area	0	2	0	5	8	4	3	1	2	25
ACT	0	0	1	6	1	5	1	0	0	14
Melbourne area	1	2	7	15	13	9	4	4	1	56
Adelaide area	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3
Perth area	0	0	3	3	3	2	1	0	0	12
Brisbane/ SE Qld	0	3	0	7	2	1	0	0	0	13
Total	1	7	11	37	28	22	9	5	3	123

Hourly rate

Less than \$30 =	5	2.43%
\$30-\$39 =	10	4.85%
\$40-\$49 =	19	9.22%
\$50-\$59 =	34	16.50%
\$60-\$69 =	15	7.28%
\$70-\$79 =	6	2.91%
\$80-\$89 =	2	0.97%
\$90-\$99 =	1	0.49%
\$100 or more =	4	1.94%

Hourly rate by location

	< \$30	\$30-\$39	\$40-\$49	\$50-\$59	\$60-\$69	\$70-\$79	\$80-\$89	\$90-\$99	\$100 or more	Total
Sydney area	1	4	5	15	1	1	0	0	1	28
ACT	0	0	2	4	1	1	0	0	1	9
Melbourne area	3	2	6	10	11	2	1	1	3	39
Adelaide area	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3
Perth area	1	2	6	3	1	2	0	0	0	15
Tasmania	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Northern Territory	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2
Brisbane/ SE Qld	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	4
Outside Australia	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	5
Total	5	11	23	38	15	6	3	1	5	107

Note: Some data has been omitted, to protect privacy when only one person in a location responded.

Jean Hollis Weber has over 25 years of experience as a writer and editor and is a Senior member of the STC. She is also a member of the ASTC(NSW) and the ASTC(Q). Jean self-publishes books on Microsoft Word, electronic editing, writing online help, and related topics and maintains the Technical Editors' Eyrie website at <http://www.jeanweber.com>.

TRANSFORMATION: WHYS AND WHEREFORES

from the STC executive

Technical communication is often defined as any effort that makes it possible for people to get the most from the technology in their lives. Under that broad umbrella come all the activities technical communicators have found themselves in: instructional design, information architecture, marketing communications, documentation development, usability, management, training, writing and editing--whatever is necessary to make our companies' and clients' products and services acceptable, understandable, and accessible to customers and users.

As technical communicators, we are all aware that change is a basic parameter of our profession. By definition, we try to make technical information understandable and accessible to audiences who are not knowledgeable about the related field. Therefore, because technical information is ever changing, we accept the fact that our work will be continually various, constantly in flux. It's just the nature of the beast.

So, it really should come as no surprise that as time goes on, different requirements are demanded of us. It seems that just as soon as we feel comfortable with a particular work flow, software package, or job description, it is "folded, spindled, and mutilated, i.e., transformed into something new that we must adapt to, learn, and use.

If we agree that change is a guaranteed, albeit sometimes unwelcome, component of our profession, then it follows that the associations, organizations, activities, and avocations that we turn to for support, assistance, relationships, and education--among other things--must also change so they can continue to meet our needs and the needs of the technical communicators who are currently in training.

This is the essence of the purpose of the STC transformation initiative: basically, it's to keep up with you. So with that in mind, the overall goals of the Transformation effort have been defined as follows:

- Increase the breadth, relevance and value of services delivered to members.
- Create a long term platform for financial stability
- Promote membership growth
- Enable STC to be a leader and advocate for the Technical Communication professions and their practitioners.

In defining the goals for transformation, it is equally important to be clear about what this transformation effort is NOT trying to do.

- It is not focused on solving our short term financial pain. (though that certainly is being addressed separately). It is about evolving to a more stable business model for the future.
- It is not about dismantling, strangling or in other ways undermining the Chapters.
- It is not a secret agenda to eliminate the publications

Obviously, this transformation effort is not something we have just suddenly undertaken. The board's work on governance in 2000-2001 first identified the need for the Society to change how it operated in order to assure its future. One major change that resulted from that governance work was an increased reliance on the professional staff in the STC office for our burgeoning operations, with the board moving toward a policy-setting orientation--although we're not completely there yet, we know this is the correct and inevitable path for an organization of our size and aspirations.

This transformation effort will not be completed by June of 2004; indeed, no recommendations have yet been made to the board. And while we anticipate quick adoption of some recommendations, implementation of some of the programs or operation changes may be several years away.

Transformation is a process and while change is rarely any fun, the STC as we currently know it, must change--because our membership is changing. So please remember that all this focus and effort is directed at one thing only... to make things better for you, the STC's members.

In the next communication, we will share with you the participants in the extended Transformation team, their roles and the thinking behind them. Following that, we will share the Transformation principles and methodology that we have adopted to guide the effort. And finally, with those foundations laid, we will share the results of the key milestones as they are reached. We are making great progress already, and are looking forward to sharing the results.

Transformation heralds a dramatically new face for the STC. It will affect how the Society and the members are organised and how the Society is run.

In future newsletters you will get all the transformation information as it is sent to us from the STC.

**ANNUAL AWARD FOR
TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
STUDENT**

Judy Gregory

This prize is intended for undergraduate students.

However this year, this was not made clear in the competition criteria and we received, and accepted, entries from postgraduate students.

The result of the competition will be announced in the next newsletter.

THANK YOU ROBIN

On behalf of the committee and members of the STC Australia Chapter, thank you Robin for producing our first newsletters. The quality was high and the job well done.



**PUBLICATION SCHEDULE FOR
2003–04**

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Target Publication Date</i>
Winter	June
Spring	September
Summer	December
Autumn	March

Disclaimer: This is a volunteer effort and publication dates may vary. We will make every effort to publish on or near the targeted date.

Copy Editors/Proofreaders:
Paul Nicholson and Michelle Hallett.

Michelle Hallett is guest editor for the March issue.

AuSTCom 

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