



# AuSTCom

Newsletter of the Society for Technical Communication, Australia Chapter

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*Michelle Hallett, President, STC Australia Chapter, [president@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:president@stc-aus.org.au)*

This is my last message. Starting from 1 July 2005, Ray Archee takes over as your Chapter President and I'm sure he's looking forward to the challenge. No doubt he'd appreciate any suggestions you have for improving the Chapter and the services we provide to you. He'd also appreciate any help you could give us; we are still looking for a Treasurer and someone to help with the newsletter. Please email any suggestions or offers of help to [president@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:president@stc-aus.org.au).

This past year has been an eventful one for me as your President.

We held a very successful competition and sent six of our Distinguished and Best of Show entries to the International STC competitions. Of those entries, five achieved international awards: one Merit, two Excellence, and two Distinguished. We are very proud of all these awards and especially proud of our former president, Colin Dawson, who won Best of Show in the International Technical Art competition. His entry was a cleverly animated series of illustrations demonstrating the installation of sensor equipment. Our other international Distinguished award went to our local Best of Show Technical Publications entry, a booklet entitled "Your Money" produced by ASIC. Congratulations to all our award winners, local and international. (By the way, we'll be running our local Chapter competition again this year, starting on 1 September, 2005—see announcement in this newsletter.)

We held our first Chapter meeting on 28 April. As our members live and work all over Australia, we elected to hold an online meeting using chat software. Seven local members 'attended' and we held a lively discussion about our competition, our results in the international competition and how to publicise these results through the media.

We were joined by the STC Region 8 Director, Beau Cain, from California. Despite it being 4:00am in California, he answered all our questions and participated in the discussion. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank Beau for his support during my year as President and for his dedication. I do wonder when he sleeps.

Finally, I must thank the committee for the work they have done this year. In particular, we are sad to lose three of our committee. Colin Dawson, our former President and Secretary, is leaving after four years on the committee. He drafted many of our documents including the Chapter's constitution.

(continued on page 2)

## FROM THE EDITORS

*Jean Hollis Weber and Robin Swindell*

This issue is devoted mainly to competitions. Members of the chapter have done extremely well at both local and international levels. We've got reports on this year's winners and some hints to help you with your next entry, as well as articles on other topics, including conference reports.

This is the last newsletter I'm editing. I've taken on so many other projects that I no longer have time. Robin is remaining, but she needs assistance—please come forward and volunteer.

No time for editing? How about writing an article, or reporting on a conference you attended? We'd like to hear from you!

—Jean Hollis Weber

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## STC AND CHAPTER NEWS

### PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (CON'T)

Peta Moore has spent two years as Secretary and has done an excellent job organising meeting agendas and minutes. Jean Hollis Weber has done wonderful work in producing our newsletter this year. All three will be missed. Fortunately, our other newsletter editor, Robin Swindell, will be staying on; however, I know she could use some help.

Finally, I'd like to thank you all for the opportunity of being your Chapter President. The position can be quite demanding but it is always interesting and challenging, and I learned a great deal.

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### INAUGURAL CHAPTER MEETING

On April 28, 2005 at 8:00pm (AEST) interested members of the Australia Chapter held their first-ever Chapter Meeting. What made this meeting so different from any others you may have attended was that it was held entirely online. Australia's sheer size and scattered population meant that the 'tyranny of distance' precluded us from having a face-to-face meeting. With our 60+ members living all across this vast land, an online meeting was the only way we could do this without individuals or the Chapter incurring costs.

### The Meeting

Our meeting was 'attended' by most of the current committee members and a few others. Other commitments that evening prevented some from attending. However, Beau Cain, the Region 8 Director-Sponsor turned up – logging in from California at 4:00am his time. We're pretty sure he was still in his PJs!

Items on the agenda were covered, and, as we had a small group, open discussion was allowed. The main 'presentation' was from Michelle Hallett (Chapter President and Competition Organiser), on how to do well in the competitions. A copy of her presentation is on page 6 of this newsletter and is also available from the Chapter website,

[http://www.stc-aus.org.au/competition\\_talk.pdf](http://www.stc-aus.org.au/competition_talk.pdf).

Congratulations were extended to our members who did extremely well in the International Competitions this year (details on the website: [http://www.stc-aus.org.au/competitions\\_results2004-2005\\_international.htm](http://www.stc-aus.org.au/competitions_results2004-2005_international.htm)).

Beau Cain explained a little about his role as an STC Director-Sponsor.

The meeting lasted just over an hour.

### The Technology

We used BlueChat for the meeting. BlueChat is run entirely from a web browser, so it doesn't require any installation on your local machine. You just give yourself a login name and off you go. Nothing fancy, but it's effective and easy to use. For those concerned about privacy, the chat logs are under the Chapter's control. The committee members have been using BlueChat for a few years now for their monthly online meetings, and it works well. And there's no video or audio, so we can't see you sitting in your tracky dacks and ugg boots or hear you slurping on your wine!

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### INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION RESULTS: 2004-2005

This year we submitted the Distinguished and "Best of Show" entries from our local Chapter competition to the International Competition – and our members won some very prestigious awards, including "Best of Show" in the Technical Art category, awarded to our Past President, Colin Dawson. Our heartfelt congratulations to all Aussie members whose entries did so well this year! Here are the results. See also pages 4 and 5 for more about the two "distinguished" winners.

### Technical Art

Best of Show and Distinguished Technical Communication: Colin Dawson, Info Action P/L: "SoftNoze EMC Bracket"

### Technical Publications

Distinguished Technical Communication: Dr Michael Dunn, Meryl Potter, Dinh Tran, ASIC: "Your Money"

Excellence: Sandra Fitzpatrick, NEMMCO: "An Introduction to Australia's National Electricity Market"

Excellence: Judy Cecere, Amanda Ryder, KBR: "Adelaide - Darwin Railway Project"

### Online Communication

Merit: Ilana Cohny, KE Software: "KE EMu Help"

## STC AUSTRALIA CHAPTER 2005-2006 COMPETITIONS

2005-2006 competition entries accepted from July 2005.

STC Competitions recognise excellence in technical communication. Competitions are held nationally, and Distinguished entries are eligible for international judging.

As well as offering an opportunity for professional recognition and reward, these competitions provide valuable peer critiques.

Even though we are a very young chapter, Australian technical communicators have already received recognition in international competition.

### How to enter the STC Australia Chapter competition

Entries are eligible for awards and each entry will receive a peer critique whether it wins an award or not. The goal of the competition is to recognise and encourage excellence in technical communication.

### Competition categories

The STC Australia Chapter Competition includes three separate competitions:

- Online Communication (6 sub-categories)
- Technical Publications (18 sub-categories)
- Technical Art (17 sub-categories)

For details about these categories, download the STC Australia Chapter Competition Entry Form from the website.

### When do I have to submit my entry?

- Competition entries accepted from: September 1
- Closing date for 'early bird' entries: September 30
- Final date for all entries: October 15

Because of the time taken for judging and the deadlines of the international STC competition, we cannot accept late entries. If your work is not yet completed, but you expect it to be ready by October 15 submit an early bird entry letting us know that it is coming.

### Who can enter?

Anyone can enter. You do not have to be a member of STC to enter the competitions. You can enter work as an individual or team member, on behalf of a colleague, or on behalf of your company.

### What can be entered?

An entry is valid for competition as long as it is:

- **Technical.** The work must contain sufficient technical, scientific, medical, or similar content to qualify as technical communication.
- **Recent.** The work must have been produced or substantially revised in the 24 months before 1 September.
- **Original.** The work must have been originally prepared for and accepted for publication by a client, employer, or publisher.

For more details on eligibility, download the Call for Entries document from the website.

### Does it cost anything to enter?

Yes, there is a small fee required for EACH entry submitted. If you're an STC member, you get a discount! As a guide, the fees for the 2004/2005 competition were:

- Early bird entries and STC members: \$55.00 AUD
- Non-STC members and general entries: \$65.00 AUD

### Where do I send my entry and fee?

Send entries and fees to:

Michelle Hallett  
2 Baldwin Close  
Blackwall NSW 2256

For further enquiries, contact Michelle on 0404 892 369 or email her at [competitions@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:competitions@stc-aus.org.au)

Cheques should be made payable to "STC Australia Chapter". Electronic bank transfers can be accepted – contact [competitions@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:competitions@stc-aus.org.au) for details.

### More information

Contact the competition organiser or check out the Competitions area on the chapter's website, <http://www.stc-aus.org.au/competitions.htm>

### CHAPTER BULLETIN BOARD

For those who haven't already done so, do have a look at our bulletin board:

<http://www.stc-aus.org.au/bbs/>

## CREATING THE SOFTNOZE EMC BRACKET FLASH MOVIE

by Colin Dawson, Info Action P/L

*Editors' note: Colin's entry won "Best of Show" and "Distinguished Technical Communication" awards in the STC's International Competition in March 2005.*

I have not yet received comments from the international judging so I can't give any feedback on the judges' opinions. What I can do is explain my objectives with the project and the challenges that I faced.

Ordinarily I don't have difficulty working remotely – it doesn't take long to distil what is important in most projects. I already had plenty of experience writing manuals for materials handling systems and other factory equipment, so I expected the SoftNoze mounting brackets would be a snack.

As it turned out, the concept was elusive. There was no physical product for me to examine at the beginning of the project and the customer struggled to convey the description to me. We exchanged dozens of emails, some of them at the point of exasperation. Some sketches helped a lot and we had a few phone conversations, but understanding really only dawned after he sent an mpeg. This showed a prototype which had been cut by hand from a metal sheet and bent with a pair of pliers. If ever there was a need for a movie, this was it!

The customer requested a Flash movie from the outset, due to small bandwidth and ubiquity of the player. Although it may also have been possible to use a scaled-down mpeg, the file would have been thousands of time larger and the quality far lower. In any case, there was no physical artifact to film!

Flash does not actually have any concept of solidity: it is not a 3D medium. Macromedia's Director does have 3D capability, but the results depend greatly on the user's PC configuration. Mathematical data is converted to images ("rendered") on the fly, so a satisfying user experience requires a decent processor and premium video card. This is far too risky for an important product launch.

I considered using Lightwave, a 3D modelling package, along with a third-party converter to render Flash movies directly from the 3D files. While this would produce technically accurate images, the results are flat and lifeless. Surfaces do not have graduated colours and shading. Ironically, hand-drawn images look more "real" than modelled images that are converted to Flash.

Lightwave can produce photo-realistic renderings and is popular for cinema special effects, but those renderings are always made into bitmap formats with outrageous file sizes.

This left me no choice: to produce images with the quality I needed, I had to draw them by hand and fake the 3D element. This is not a trivial effort when one solid object moves through another hollow object. The technique is only viable for simple objects like the sensors and brackets in my movies. Image 1 shows some of the artifacts I used for an animation and image 2<sup>1</sup> shows part of the completed movie.

Initially I created a complete version of each object in CorelDraw. Other popular products are Freehand and Illustrator. Nobody who is serious about their artwork would try to draw it in Flash. Based on the complete objects, I set up the animations. This enabled me to establish position, size and speed of movement. Up to this stage the skills are all mainstream illustrating and Flash. This is where the hard work begins.

Each object had to be split up into many parts and distributed across layers in Flash. By synchronously animating all of these parts, the illusion of "moving through" is created, rather than the reality of one part simply moving behind another. This particular movie has over 500 frames and 30 layers, both of which are quite daunting for a hand-drawn movie.

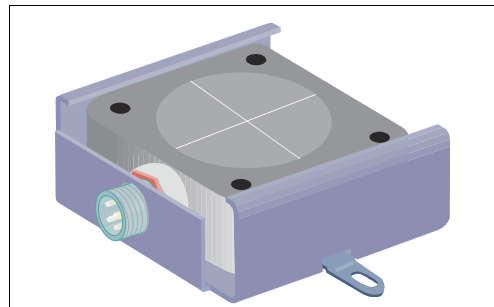


Image 1

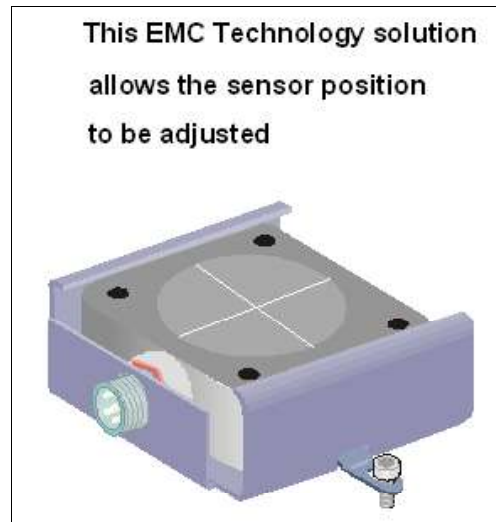


Image 2

<sup>1</sup> Image 2 was exported directly from Flash to a printable format and has lost some accuracy in the shading. There is no corresponding "assembled" image in the source CorelDraw files—only the components.

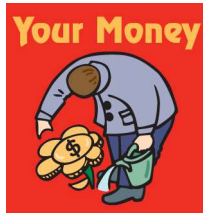
## THE “YOUR MONEY” BROCHURE

by Irene Wong, Australian Securities and Investments Commission

*Editors’ note: This entry won a “Distinguished Technical Communication” award in the STC’s International Competition in March 2005.*

### Purpose of Your Money

*Your Money* helps people manage their money and save for what they really want. It helps them with their everyday financial decisions about credit cards, loans, insurance, super-annuation and saving for retirement.



Research by the Australian Government's Financial Literacy Taskforce modelled the effects of bad financial decision making, and discovered that a person on a salary of \$36,000 per annum stands to lose \$790,000 over the course of their life. This brochure pinpoints how to avoid those bad decisions by discussing everyday financial decisions.

The two basic elements that distinguish good from bad financial decisions in the average person's life are managing loans, and early and regular saving. Many people struggle to get these simple basics of financial management right.

*Your Money* addresses these and other issues that consumers and investors face. It shows them how to take stock of their current financial situation. Case studies illustrate various choices and show practical worked examples. It is a do-it-yourself guide for people to plan their own financial goals with realistic suggestions they can use immediately.

There are also tips on starting to invest and on investment choices as well as on managing risks, borrowing to invest and recognising what are realistic returns. This is vital information because it helps people to recognise scams.

The back page of *Your Money* carries a full page advertisement for FIDO, our website for consumers and investors, and there are also links to FIDO calculators and other website information in the text. Therefore the brochure serves an additional purpose of advertising our FIDO website to people who are reading about managing their money and are therefore likely to be interested in more information.

The Australian Securities and Investments Commission enforces and regulates company and financial services to protect consumers, investors and creditors. Under the ASIC Act we are required to 'promote confident and informed participation by investors and consumers in

the financial system'. This brochure therefore directly relates to a requirement of the Australian Parliament.

### Audience

*Your Money* is aimed at people of working age, especially average income earners.

The brochure is for people who don't have any or much spare cash, are unlikely to visit a professional financial planner, and are not really in a financial position to borrow and invest in fancy real estate or complicated financial products that attract so much media attention.

It offers these people, in particular, hope that they can still set and meet their own financial goals. But as *The Australian Financial Review's* columnist Alison Kahler said of *Your Money*:

'Even educated people who lack financial knowledge struggle with basic investment concepts, so don't think the booklet is too downmarket for you'.

### Availability

*Your Money* was launched in October 2004. It is distributed free to anyone who phones our Infoline, 1300 300 630 or emails [infoline@asic.gov.au](mailto:infoline@asic.gov.au). Your Money is available as a pdf file on our FIDO website <http://www.fido.asic.gov.au/fido/fido.nsf/byheadline/Money+management?openDocument#booklet>

The text is published on the FIDO website but is not presented as a single identifiable online item. All content has been integrated into existing content and topics to avoid duplication and to expand existing information.

The editor of *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney was sufficiently impressed by *Your Money* to reproduce most of it as newspaper copy on the day it was launched.

Each topic in the brochure is self contained information that we can reuse. For example, ASIC has regular columns in commercial magazines, Centrelink publications and in rural and suburban newspapers. We will recycle *Your Money* articles in full or part for these magazine and articles.

### Research

ASIC conducts ongoing research and market research into consumer issues and attitudes. We also organise the Consumer Advisory Panel, a forum of consumer representatives. Feedback from the Panel and our research was used in choosing the topics and writing the content for *Your Money*.

We also considered information from our:

- investigators involved in surveillance and enforcement work;

- staff handling complaints;
- Infoline enquiries;
- analysts regulating the financial services sector.

## Production

The brochure was written by Dr Michael Dunn, Director of Consumer Communications and user tested by family members of ASIC staff not associated with producing the brochure. It was edited and designed in our Office of Public Affairs by Meryl Potter, who was working with us as a temporary editor at that time, and Dinh Tran respectively.

This is our fourth major brochure. Each brochure has its own layout, colours and style to suit the information. But all are pocket sized, multi coloured and on similar paper.

## Selected quotes from the international judges

‘When I focussed on your intended audience, I found the little booklet a marvellous piece. At first, it seemed elemental then I realized that’s what it was supposed to be.’

‘Once we focused on the intended audience... and looked at it from that perspective, we realized what a great job you had done.’

‘Cute! Inviting and nonthreatening, welcoming. Extremely effective in reaching your target audience... Commendable work.’

## Selected quotes from Australian judges

‘Excellent use of Plain English to explain information that can be complex.’

‘The document succeeds brilliantly at giving readers a foundation for understanding saving, investment and financial planning. It is clearly written, with no ‘fat’. It reflects well on ASIC as a provider of useful and unbiased information.’

‘*Your Money* is cleverly designed and beautifully written.’

## How to Contact Us

To contact a committee member, send e-mail to [position]@stc-aus.org.au and it will be forwarded to the appropriate person. (Exceptions: Use pastpres and vp instead of the full position titles.) For example, to reach the newsletter editor, send a message to [newsletter@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:newsletter@stc-aus.org.au)

## How To Do Well in the STC Australia Chapter Competition

*Michelle Hallett, President, STC Australia Chapter*

**Principle no. 1: State clearly what you controlled in the production of your entry. Make it no longer than two sentences and mark it clearly on your entry.**

In our advice to judges we suggest they adhere to the following two principles:

- Judge the work the contributors actually did.
- Judge how well the work does what it is intended to do.

We do try to do this but it is not always easy. We don’t always know what the contributors actually did and what they had control over. There is a space to submit this information on the entry form but we find often contributors fill this with lots of information which is hard to keep in mind while looking through the entry. In fact, judges have complained about the wealth of information attached to each entry. It’s much easier to keep in mind a few simple facts.

**Principle no 2: State in two sentences or less why you chose to produce your entry in its current form. Indicate that you did consider what effect the final form would have on readers/viewers of your entry.**

We tell our judges to grant awards of Distinguished, Excellence and Merit based on the following criteria:

Distinguished – no major flaws and few minor flaws, comments are confined to taste and style

Excellence – might contain a single major flaw or a few minor flaws, comments are confined to taste and style, and minor suggestions

Merit – contains a small number of major flaws (1-2) or several minor flaws

In practice, most people are used to starting with average and applauding anything that seems beyond average. I cannot speak for all the judges but in the groups in which I have judged, “standard” seems to approximate with Merit. We are reluctant to hand out Excellence and Distinguished awards without good reason and so judging often proceeds with either the award of Merit and then a search for reasons why an entry deserves better or a count of the number of flaws and then an evaluation as to whether they are major or minor.

In addition, though we try to consider the entry as a whole, it is hard not to be seduced by flashy graphics or beautiful design. If someone has gone to the effort of hiring graphic designers or top quality printers, then the impression is that the submitter believes in the quality of

their entry and therefore, so does the judge. This will always be a problem, especially for printed material and artwork. This seems especially unfair if you or your company do not have the resources to hire graphic designers or top quality printers or if the type of work does not justify their hire (for example an in-house training manual or a scholarly article in a university publication).

There is no real solution to this but you can assist the judges by stating on your application form why you used the tools you did and produced your entry in its presented form. This will inform the judges as to why you chose to produce your entry in the specific form in which it is presented and help us understand that you considered carefully your choice of presentation format. It will also remind us that flashy isn't always good.

**Principle no 3: Provide information on budget, time or resource restrictions.**

Again, this should be limited to a few sentences only. This type of information helps judges understand why you have chosen not to use expensive graphics or formats. In particular, an entry that meets requirements and uses technical writing principles well and has been produced in a limited time, will often be well perceived.

**Principle no 4: Take all aspects into account when creating your entry. Check your entry before submitting.**

Judges are asked to provide a critique of each competition entry. To do this we complete a form which is provided by the competition organisers in the US. The form assists us to evaluate each entry on the criteria considered most important for each category. These forms are constantly revised and are a useful starting point for assessing each entry. They are helpful in prompting the judges to consider all aspects of an entry. Important aspects considered are as follows:

Technical Publications – writing style, appropriate vocabulary for audience, organisation, handling of technical complexity, consistency, table of contents and index (if used), visual design and layout, suitability of graphics, appropriate presentation for audience

Online – definition of audience, appropriateness of presentation, writing style, consistency, organisation, navigational elements, effective use of graphics

Technical Art – purpose, content, visual appeal, presentation, use of media, technique, use of graphic elements and layout, quality of production

These then are the areas that you need to consider in preparing your entry for the competition. You could also indicate on your entry form what your principles were in

writing and designing your entry. But remember, if the judges have too much to read, we won't be able to keep it all in mind. Best to let your adherence to correct principles of design and writing show in your entry.

Note that entries are not compared to other entries in the same category but only assessed against the judging criteria.

**Principle no 5: Keep the descriptive portion of your entry form short and to the point.**

When preparing your application form, remember that a few well-chosen descriptive sentences will stay in the judges' minds longer than lots of explanation.

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**WRITERSUA 2005: SOME IMPRESSIONS**

*by Rhonda Bracey*

This year I was invited to speak at the WritersUA Conference (WritersUA was previously known as WinWriters and is associated with our own AODC). In addition to it being my first time speaking at this conference, it was also the first time I had attended one. My prior US conference experiences had been with the STC Annual conferences, both as a participant and speaker.

The focus of the two conferences is different. Yes, there's some overlap, but WritersUA is *only* about 'user assistance' and its technologies. 'User assistance' is the relatively new buzzword for what has previously been wrapped up in such terms as 'online help' and 'online content'. So most of the attendees work with Help technologies in one form or another. STC, on the other hand, has a broader focus on 'technical communication', which includes themes such as training and instructional design. As a result, STC draws a larger number of participants than WritersUA. Figures for attendees at the STC Conference over the past few years have hovered around the 1500 mark, while WritersUA pulls about 500 people.

Most attendees at both conferences are from the US and Canada, with a very small percentage from elsewhere. It was because of this difference in focus that I decided to give WritersUA a try. I had started to get a little jaded with what I perceived to be the repetitious content of the past few STC conferences, and with the disappointment that comes from reading a synopsis that says a session is for 'intermediate to advanced' practitioners only to find that the content was at a more basic level than I wanted. Also, with so many threads that weren't relevant to what I do on a day-to-day basis or that didn't hold any long-term professional or personal interest for me, I felt that I was recycling through the same old stuff. Obviously there were some exceptions, but as I said, I

was feeling a little jaded and felt that the STC Conference wasn't offering me as much as it did the first couple of years I attended.

So, how was my experience of WritersUA? Very good! I felt that I was in a team of peers and like-minded colleagues, as we all basically do the same stuff. The conference sessions were stimulating and on-topic. And the blurbs lived up to the actual sessions. The networking opportunities were great – and most were part of the registration fee (unlike STC where you pay separately for lunches and some functions). All sessions at WritersUA were 75 minutes; STC sessions vary between 60 and 90 minutes. In both conferences, people walk in and out of a session at will – for a speaker, this can be hard to accept unless you are aware that it will occur and that it's part of the 'culture' of both conferences.

While I knew many of the 'names' of the UA world from online lists, I only knew a few of them personally. Most of the Microsoft Help MVPS attend WritersUA, and names from lists such as HATT and Techwr-l were everywhere: Bill Swallow, Don Lammers, Char James-Tanny, Paul Nemashkin, Dave Gash, Dana Worley, our own Tony Self, Brenda Huettner, Sue Heim, David Locke, Scott De Loach, Scott Boggan, William Horton, and so on. Some spoke, others were just there to learn. And it's possible that some were just there to party! (more later...)

As part of the conference registration all attendees received a package of materials – including all slide presentations and handouts from the speakers, so if you couldn't attend a session you still got the materials. As a speaker, it was an interesting experience having to make sure every slide was final a month *prior* to the conference. Joe Welinske (the WritersUA Conference organiser) insists that no changes are to be made to slides after they go to him for publishing. And I believe that attendees are very scathing of speakers whose slides don't match the handouts.

The 2005 WritersUA Conference was held in March at the Tropicana Casino in Las Vegas. The social functions included a 'meet and greet' by the pool on Monday night, with food and drink provided, all breakfasts, lunch on Day 1, and best of all, the unofficial 'Australian Cultural Exchange' evening held on the Tuesday night. Tony Self has been involved in ACE for some years, and it has become quite an institution at WritersUA. This year he had moral support from two other Aussies – me and Jean Hollis Weber. Between us, we supplied all party animals with Aussie stickers, temporary Aussie tattoos (warning: temporary = 1 week at least, so be careful where you put it!), little packs of Vegemite, and we even had a big Aussie flag that Sue Heim wore as a

cape all night. Imagine 40+ Americans wandering around Las Vegas all trying to be Aussies... Lots of fun.

So, would I go again? Yes! Would I go to STC again? Yes, but perhaps every two or three years instead of every year. Why? I found the smaller size of WritersUA and the focus on stuff that I really need to know about suited me better. And the people I met were more fun!

The next WritersUA Conference will be held in Palm Springs, California, April 9-13, 2006. Details as they become available will be posted on the WritersUA website: <http://www.writersua.com>

## IMPRESSIONS OF WRITERSUA AND AODC

by Jean Hollis Weber

Like Rhonda, this was my first experience of a WritersUA conference, both as an attendee and as a speaker. My impressions and reactions were much the same as Rhonda's – I loved it! I learned a lot, met a lot of great people, had fun – and sold lots of copies of my *Is The Help Helpful?* book. What more could I want?

In May I attended the AODC (Australasian Online Documentation and Content) Conference in Melbourne, though I wasn't a speaker this year. Sue Woolley of Monarch Computing Services (and outgoing president of the ASTC Victoria) had organised a bookstall on the vendors' day, but as she was too busy to attend, my partner Eric and I ran the bookstall. Only fair, since I had 4 titles of my own there!

The main differences between WritersUA and AODC are the number of attendees and hence the number of concurrent sessions. Many of the speakers at AODC had also been at WritersUA, speaking on the same topics, so I was able to attend some talks that I had missed in Las Vegas. Other, local speakers were equally stimulating; not everyone was an overseas guest.

Other similarities included the thorough handouts, the great food, the networking opportunities, and the social events, including 'Uncle' Dave Gash's Trivia Night.

I think Joe Welinske, Tony Self, and the other organisers definitely have the right idea – conferences should be jolly good fun as well as informative. These two are well worth the price of admission to the 3-day events.

### NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION DATES 2005

February, June, September, November

Please have articles, notices, advertising, etc. to the editor by the 15th of January, May, August, or October. Send to [newsletter@stc-aus.org.au](mailto:newsletter@stc-aus.org.au)

## HOW TO PREPARE A WINNING BOOK PROPOSAL

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Preparing a winning book proposal is very similar to bidding on many other freelance documentation projects. This article will show you how to create a book proposal that will give you the best chance of selling your book idea to the publisher you want.

A book proposal is more than an outline and a schedule. A well-written proposal is a package of material that not only communicates how you intend to do the project, but also demonstrates your writing and organizational abilities. Moreover, a good proposal tells a prospective publisher that you have carefully planned all aspects of the book and that you're ready to hit the ground running as soon as the book's approved. And if you are one of several authors being considered for a specific project, presenting a solid, well-considered proposal can frequently be the deciding factor in getting the contract. (Note: Although this article is aimed largely at authors of computer books, you can use these techniques to pitch a book to any non-fiction publisher.)

There are four parts to a book proposal:

- A cover letter
- A resume
- Writing samples
- A documentation plan

### Cover Letter

In general, publishers prefer to work with people by mail when they first meet them, as it will probably save time in the long run for everybody. (By the way, unless you know an acquisitions editor from previous experience, just send your proposal to the Acquisitions department at the publisher. They'll make sure it gets routed to the appropriate editor.) Once you have a bibliography, you'll be able to approach publishers directly, but it's better to start by mail. As such, you'll need to start your book proposal with a cover letter that introduces you to the publisher, pitches a brief idea of the book you want to do, and sells the publisher on your ability to complete the project in a timely fashion.

The documentation plan (discussed later) will give a detailed explanation of the book, but you need to come up with a brief statement of what the book is about. For example, all of these are probably adequate to get the editor to read more of your proposal if they have a niche for your book:

- This book will introduce the reader to the undocumented features of Windows '95. It will have a conversational style aimed at the intermediate user, with graduated steps to increase their skill level so that they're able to take advantage of the more powerful undocumented features.
- This book will teach gardeners how to identify useful weeds and wild plants, and cultivate them as companion plants, or food and ornamentation crops. There will be a reference section in the latter half of the book with line drawings of many of the more common useful wild plants in North America.
- This book will be a tutorial on how to program using the new JAVA scripting language, with an emphasis on beginning programmers who are learning this as their first or second programming language. The book will contain extensive examples and exercises, and will have a diskette of sample code and JAVA development tools in the back of the book.
- This book will be aimed at college students who are setting up their first apartment and who don't know how to cook for themselves. The book will show how to purchase the cooking utensils they need, the 12 staple food items they should keep in the kitchen at all times, how to eat well on a typical student budget, and how to successfully cook for a date. There will also be a short reference section on required cleaning supplies.

Make sure that your idea is right for the publisher. You can't sell books on computers to a publisher specializing in books on sailing... but you might sell a book that tells how to use computers when building wooden boats. Having an angle like this is often the best way to bridge the gap into a field of writing in which you have no direct experience.

Radiate your enthusiasm for the project. Refer to the writing samples and the resume items that show your depth of knowledge for this particular topic. Mention anything you've written on this subject before (and include it in your samples if at all possible). It's not enough to show the publisher that you have a good idea; you need them to know that you are the most qualified person to write this book.

Most importantly, you need to sell the publisher on your ability to meet your deadlines. Because of the topical nature of book publishing these days, it is extremely important for computer book publishers to get books out quickly. The time between getting an idea approved and seeing the book on the streets should be no more than 6 to 7 months. Allowing 2 to 3 months for final editing, indexing, production, and printing, you'll need to write the book in 3 to 4 months. Fast work is 4 months

from idea to street; really fast work is 3 months. Conversely, a slow book is one that takes 9 months or more. Large reference works may take this long, but the amount of time should be carefully documented and justified in the schedule.

It's worth noting that publishers of other types of non-fiction books—cooking, travel, do-it-yourself, and so on—will have differing and probably more generous schedules than the computer book industry, but all publishers are speeding up their publishing cycles to be the first on the market. Any publisher will be impressed by your ability to turn out a book quickly. Nobody ever seems to complain about work done ahead of schedule.

## Resume

Include a copy of your resume. You may want to tailor the resume to underscore skills and accomplishments relating to the book. For example, if you are pitching a book on using a particular graphics package and have a background or education in design, make sure that this is featured prominently in your resume. Also make sure that relevant skills and experience are mentioned on the first page of the cover letter.

## Writing Samples

Your writing samples should demonstrate your abilities as a technical writer in general, and, if possible, your ability to write on the subject you're proposing. It's not necessary to send a copy of a complete manual to a publisher (they're probably prefer that you don't, as a matter of fact). As with a job interview, give them photocopies of a chapter or relevant section and offer to send them the entire manual if they want to take a more detailed look.

One of the most obvious writing samples to include may be a sample chapter from the book you want to publish. Although it's usually a bad idea to write the entire book before you have a contract (particularly in the computer book field), a sample chapter will give the publisher an exact gauge of your ability to write well on your chosen topic. Include sample screen shots, rough drafts of conceptual artwork, and appropriate references to other chapters in the book. (Be sure to put your copyright notice clearly on the bottom of each page. Accidents do happen occasionally.)

Finally, don't make the publisher return copies of anything to you! Publishers are up to their collective eyebrows in submitted material of various kinds (this bunch of stuff is known affectionately in the industry as "the slushpile") and they don't need the hassle of returning anything. Assume that anything you send to them will not be returned; marking copies in red ink on

the front page with "May be discarded after review" or some such will make it even easier.

## Documentation Plan

A documentation plan is a useful and necessary project management tool before, during, and after a project. It presents information about the book's scope, purpose, target audience, and goals, the book's market niche, the standards and styles the book should adhere to, staffing requirements, the delivery schedule, and a detailed outline.

At the beginning, the documentation plan gives detailed information about the project to the publisher so they can make an informed choice about whether or not they want to publish the book. Once your idea has been approved, the plan serves to further clarify your and the publisher's concept of the project. By writing down and agreeing to the scope and purpose, the goals for the book, and the schedule, you eliminate most of the causes of friction between you and the project editor.

During a project, a documentation plan is an effective scheduling and tracking tool. With each of the sections identified, you can gauge your progress compared to your original estimates. This information is helpful for avoiding writing crunches near the end of a project. With the schedule and outline information, you can also use the documentation plan as a tool for delegating sections of a project to subcontractors or other authors on the book.

Finally, the plan serves as a reminder of the scope, purpose, and goals of a book, a standard against which you can check your work. A documentation plan is essential for a post mortem analysis of the project. You can check your original assumptions and statements of the project against the finished product. By comparing your actual schedule against your estimates, you can pinpoint problems to avoid or plan for in the next project. This information is extremely valuable, as over the course of several books, you will learn how to estimate your time in each phase of a project very accurately. This can result in tighter bids and schedules, which in turn can help you get more contracts.

There are six basic sections of a typical documentation plan:

- overview
- marketing
- production information
- staffing requirements
- schedule
- outline

Each of these sections addresses a specific topic:

The **overview** section states the scope and purpose of the project, defines the audience, gives the relationship to any other projects, and identifies the responsibilities of you and the publisher. It also identifies the general details for the handoff of the finished product (how many copies and in what general form). What you put in the overview is not a binding legal description unless the information is included by reference in the actual publisher's contract (some publishers may want to do this), but it will serve to spell out a lot of details that might otherwise get lost or misinterpreted.

The **marketing** section identifies ways in which the book can be marketed. (Most publishers don't expect authors to lift a finger to help them market, so showing that you're able and willing to supply marketing opportunities may impress them.) Be sure that you can also point to the competition in the field—no publisher wants to walk into a heavily populated field without warning—and how and why this book will beat all of them. Also mention if there are opportunities for co-marketing or bundling with the product. Dan Gookin's classic book DOS for Dummies was already a bestseller even before Microsoft bundled it with their MS-DOS 6.2 release; there are now millions of copies in print. Riding on a product's coattails will help you, and can frequently help the product, too. Don't be afraid to aim high with your marketing ideas.

The **production** information section discusses what the finished product will look like, and how you intend to get there. What style will be used for the book? What format and page size? Art requirements? Some of this will be dictated by the publisher, but you should be able to estimate the number of pages and the type and approximate quantity of illustrations your book will have. You'll probably also have an idea of what the book should look like overall, so mention this in the proposal.

The **staffing** section discusses who will be doing the reviews and which kind. It also identifies the technical editor (usually a reviewer with background in the field you're writing about), illustrator, proofreader, indexer, and other related personnel. At the beginning of a project, most of these are likely to be unknown.

The **schedule** section lists the proposed schedule along with any assumptions about the schedule. Be as specific as possible. Budget for vacations, holidays, and life requirements (such as doing taxes, birthdays, and so on). Leave yourself as much room as you can near the end of the book to make up time—there's never enough.

Finally, the **outline** section presents an in-depth outline of the book. A detailed outline is a requirement for a good book proposal! The editor will be able to clearly identify the focus of your book and offer specific suggestions before you begin writing on how to change or improve the book to better fit the publisher's marketing plans.

By the way, a documentation plan is best when it's a living document. As a project progresses, you should make changes to the plan to reflect changes in staffing, schedule, or (most importantly) the outline. Whenever you make a material change, you should also send a copy of the revised documentation plan to your editor so they're up to date as well.

## Summary

You can occasionally get a contract by coming up with a killer idea, phoning a publisher, pitching the idea over the phone, and hitting the jackpot... but you'll stand a much better chance of getting the contract you want with the right publisher by making a planned presentation.

Remember that you're selling your idea and your abilities as an author to the publisher, so it's important for your proposal to shine. Publishers respond best to an idea if they can see that you're excited about it, there's a marketing niche, and that you know what to do to bring the book to fruition. If you think of your complete book proposal as a job interview by mail, you won't be far wrong. Make sure the proposal is dressed well and looks good when it first meets the publisher.

## About the Author

John Hedtke is the award-winning author of 24 books, including "Firefox and Thunderbird Garage" (with Chris Hofmann and Marcia Knous, Prentice-Hall, 2005) and "RoboHelp for the Web" (with Brenda Huettner, Wordware Press, 2002). He is a Fellow of the Society and the Region 7 Director. John lives in Eugene, OR, and is a member of the Mid-Valley STC chapter. He can be reached through his website [www.hedtke.com](http://www.hedtke.com).

He requests that anyone who gets a book contract because of this article remember him in the acknowledgments.

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## JUST IN TIME DOCUMENTATION MANAGEMENT

*Humour, by Barry Schoenborn*

Granted, Dr. JoAnn T. Hackos (STC Hall of Famer) and others have made an honest dollar describing the details of managing a documentation project for quality. At \$55.00 retail (\$34.65 Amazon) you can be darned sure there are some wise tips in books on the subject.

However, reality tells us that the techniques described in such books rarely, if ever, work. But don't worry! You don't need that sort of study and planning anymore, thanks to the miracle of Just in Time Documentation Management.

### The roots of JITDM

Just in Time (JIT) was first adopted by Toyota Motor Corporation of Japan as part of its Toyota Production System (TPS). JIT is a set of techniques to improve the return on investment of a business by reducing in-process inventory and its associated costs.

As with any manufacturing process, a documentation project has an in-process inventory. By reducing in-process inventory (the books we're working on and how much time we spend on them), we reduce waste.

JIT is driven by a series of signals, or Kanban, that tell production processes to make the next part. Kanban are usually simple visual signals, such as the presence or absence of a part on a shelf. In the case of a document, it's a missing chapter. This is followed by the signal of the manager running around, hair afire, waving his/her arms.

### Fundamentals of JITDM

1. No plan survives the vagaries of product development. It's a waste of time to make plans and change them constantly. Do not plan anything until you must, and even then make only the simplest plan.
2. Appearance is primary, content secondary. The end user needs something that looks like a book at delivery time. Keep a supply of empty book "frameworks" or "skeletons." As long as you deliver a product that resembles a useful book, no one will complain. If the end user complains, no one will listen.
3. Rigid uniformity pays. You can produce multiple books faster if they all have the same chapters. Adopt a book structure that never requires thinking about.
4. Use common content. Whenever possible, use the same content. People will marvel, commending you on how the books speak with "one voice" (as if your

end users every laid two of your books side-by-side for comparison. XML and content management systems will really help this in the future.

5. Do not worry about SMEs. Information from subject matter experts will always come later than expected. Don't let a lack of information affect your delivery plans. When information does come, you can insert it at the last minute ("just in time") – if you're in the mood.
6. Keep planning foremost in your mind. That is, never start a book before you have to. Never write a word you don't have to. Never deliver a book before you have to.
7. Remember: A book is "done when it's delivered" NOT "delivered when it's done."

### Benefits

Your management will marvel at your efficiency. Unfortunately, you will be told "We're having a bad year, and can't give you a salary increase. In fact, we're going to ask you to do more with less." So you can't necessarily expect to see financial rewards. You will, however, be allowed to keep your job.

You will be the personal beneficiary of having more time, less to worry about, and a certain confidence in the uniformity of your output. Also, you'll get personal satisfaction in knowing that you're doing more (for yourself) with less (for the company.)

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