



AuSTCom

Newsletter of the Society for Technical Communication, Australia Chapter

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Marcia Bascombe

Hello to all our members in Australia and overseas. After being an STC Australia Chapter member for the last five or six years, it's now my honour to be the President for 2007–08. I've held the positions of Vice President, Treasurer and Competitions Manager at various stages but I started out as a 'lurker'. All groups have lurkers, the silent majority. Then one day when the plea went out for help I thought, "Maybe I could do that" and I haven't looked back. I have met some great people and learned a lot and even if it sounds gooey, I get to put back into the profession that has been good to me.

We have a new committee and some new faces: Ray Archee (Past President and Webmaster), April Weiss (Secretary), Myra Gurney (Treasurer), Allan Charlton (Newsletter Editor), Steve Salter (Membership), Monica Allen (Meetings) and Jill Nicholson (Competitions Coordinator). April and Steve are new members to the committee and I heartily welcome them.

I would like to thank Ray for his two years as President of the Chapter and to farewell Robin Swindell who has moved on to the challenges of parenthood. Well done both of you and thank you!

At our face-to-face meeting we voted to assist up to four members and/or students attend the 2007 ASTC NSW Conference in Sydney (26–27 October). We will provide approximately \$500 per person for registration and airfare if you are travelling from interstate. In return you will be requested to write a report about the conference for the STC newsletter – sounds fair!

The big news from headquarters is that dues will increase in 2008. We have no say in that although we have expressed some displeasure. However, for the money you get a top notch magazine and any SIG you join is good value too. So perhaps consider renewing your membership now to take advantage of the relatively good exchange rate at the moment.

If you can encourage a friend to join the Australia Chapter as well, you'll receive a copy of JoAnn Hackos's new book *Information Development: Managing Your Documentation Projects, Portfolio, and People* courtesy of the Committee.

... read more from Marcia on page 3

FROM THE EDITOR

Allan Charlton

In August last year, when I took up this role, I said, "I won't write about bizarre workplace crimes, although that would be fun. If you know of any, write them up for us in a suitable tabloid style. People being stapled to death, or paralysed by an excess of passive voice.

Exciting stuff like that. If there's a space to fill I'll editorialise a bit. I have opinions about our craft, and I tend to get a bit outspoken about it. If you don't want to hear my opinions, write yours and I'll happily publish them."

You didn't write, so I started to gather opinion about our profession, but things have been happening. So write to me for a future edition and give me your opinion. Do you have an opinion?

We always welcome your feedback and contributions to the newsletter. Contact me at newsletter@stc-aus.org.au.

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STC AND CHAPTER NEWS

REGION 8 WEB SITE

The Australia Chapter is part of the STC Region 8, which includes 19 chapters with more than 3,000 members in California, Nevada, Hawaii, and New Zealand. Region 8 has a web site at:

<http://stcregion.org/region8/index.htm>

Have you been there yet?

STC FORUMS

Have you visited the STC forums yet?

<http://stcforum.org/>

The Forum raises the awareness of technical communication by providing a hot topic of the day in a Web space that is indexed by search engines, thereby exposing STC to technical communicators who are not members of the Society. It also provides opportunities for members to join the Forum team as a developer or moderator/leader.

Conversations that might not have received adequate attention in the past now take place in an open environment where all members have an opportunity to contribute.

The forum is being moderated and managed by volunteers with knowledge in the areas they are overseeing. The role of the moderator/leader is to answer questions and ensure that the rules that each registered user has agreed to are followed.

NEWSLETTER PUBLICATION DATES

The Newsletter is published four times a year: July, October, January and April. We reserve the right to vary the dates or add extra editions as circumstances demand.

We will be happy to publish your article, rant, letter, cartoon, notice or advertisement. We'll even print humour, but not porn.

Write it now.

Send it immediately to newsletter@stc-aus.org.au.

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. For example, to reach the President, send a message to

president@stc-aus.org.au.

E-mail addresses for all committee members are also on the website:

http://www.stc-aus.org.au/chapter_committee.htm

STC PODCASTS

Do you own an iPod, an Ipaq or an MP3 player? With one of those, or a laptop or one of many other wondrous devices, you can download podcasts from the web and listen to them during your daily commute, at lunch time or during a boring meeting.

No, not in a meeting.

Anyway, STC posts podcasts of recent seminars on the web site. To download the latest podcasts, visit the STC web site:

<http://www.stc.org/stcmembers/podcasts01.asp>.

You must log in to access this page.

Among the podcasts now available you will find these:
Organising Profitable Chapter Events (39MB)
Chapter Public Relations Best Practices Forum (11MB).

NEW COMMITTEE

Our STC Chapter had its annual election, and we now have a new Committee. If you didn't nominate, you missed your chance to take an important role in the future of this great organisation

Make a note on your calendar and nominate next year. Some of the Committee (me, for example) will be unable to stand next year for various reasons, so we want you to put up your hand. It's something you will enjoy, you'll be working with professional colleagues, and it will have minimal effect on your family. Committee meetings are on line, so you don't get dragged off to some cold and uncomfortable room with no coffee. You don't even have to dress up!



FROM THE PRESIDENT (CONTINUED)

Now I get to sound the clarion call:

- The Committee is always looking for able volunteers to help on the newsletter. Please contact the Newsletter Editor, Allan Charlton (newsletter@stc-aus.org.au) if you think you can help for even part of the year or can contribute content.
- If you can design and produce award certificates for our competition winners, Jill Nicholson (competitions@stc-aus.org.au) would love to hear from you.

Finally, you'll have noticed our email invitation to attend our monthly online meetings. We meet on the first Wednesday of every month at 7.30 p.m. Eastern Time, so watch your email inbox for the reminder and the link. Even if you just log in and lurk...

Cheers
Marcia Bascombe
president@stc-aus.org.au

COME TO THE COMMITTEE MEETINGS!

As you know, you are welcome to attend Committee meetings. You don't have to dress up, and you don't have to fight the traffic. The expense is minimal; a phone call or less. This is what you do:

Start up your PC and connect to the internet. Log on to <http://www.stc-aus.org.au/cgi/bluechat.cgi>

You'll find logon instructions on the screen.

These are the meeting dates:

- 7 November 2007
- 5 December 2007
- 6 February 2008 (no meeting in January)
- 5 March 2008
- 2 April 2008
- 7 May 2008
- 4 June 2008

Meeting dates are always the first Wednesday of the month, at 7:30 PM Eastern Standard Time.

FROM THE AGM: TREASURER'S REPORT

Balance at June 30 2006:	8907.31
Expenditure:	
2006 AGM	756.23
Foreign Currency Exchange Fee	2.00
Web Hosting	339.60
International Competition fees forwarded	390.00
Competition Costs	450.09
Foreign Currency Exchange Fee	2.00
NetRegistry: Domain name registration	13.75
Student Competition costs	50.00
	Total 2003.67
Income	
Payment from STC	0.00
Competition entries	1380.00
	Total -1380.00
Operating profit	-623.67
Balance at 30 June 2007	8283.64

CONGRATULATIONS!

Congratulations to **Ivana Paluso** on attaining the rank of Senior Member. Thank you for your dedication to the Australian Chapter.

FROM THE AGM: MEMBERSHIP REPORT

We have 82 members on the list:

- 25 in NSW
- 2 in ACT
- 12 in Vic
- 3 in SA
- 9 in WA
- None in NT or Tas
- 10 in Qld
- 23 in other locations.

Of the 82 members, only 76 have valid email addresses. If you can help resolve a missing email address, please contact Steve Salter at membership@stc-au.org.au



OUR NEW COMMITTEE

The results from the July elections are as follows:

President – Marcia Bascombe
Past-President – Ray Archee
Vice-President – Vacant
Secretary – April Weiss
Treasurer – Myra Gurney
Newsletter Editor – Allan Charlton
Webmaster – Ray Archee
Membership – Steve Salter
Meetings – Monica Allen
Competitions – Jill Nicholson

Our thanks to Colin Dawson who supervised the elections.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT?

In the March edition of this newsletter I asked 'What are the important issues facing the STC?' and then I went on to say that in many organisations the receipt of hard copy and online communications seems to be the most important thing for members. Maybe they just want to have a feeling of belonging. Maybe they're a little busy right now, and will get involved next year, when the children are a little older.

In March I went on to make the observation that "when we go to a conference, the busiest times seem to be the informal milling about that goes on between sessions. Everywhere you look, people are in close conversations, earnestly discussing something or other."

That remark stirred a response from one reader, an ASTC Westies member. Actually the (Sydney) Western Suburbs group of ASTC, it has monthly meetings in the dining room of the Commercial Hotel in Parramatta. The meetings are quite unstructured, although at times themes will arise and be followed – sometimes for many months. The meetings are quite informal, conducted over a drink and an inexpensive meal, and there is *never* a shortage of conversation.

Westies caters specifically to members who don't particularly want to come out and sit around while someone formally addresses the group – Westies is for the social bunch who want to relax and talk shop in an unformatted way. Note the important bit in the middle of that sentence: Westies is for the social bunch who want to relax and talk *shop* in an unformatted way. It's rather like Austechwriter without the computer and the annoyances. It's a bunch of technical communicators

talking to each other about technical communication over a meal in a relaxing atmosphere. There can be as many topics as there are people; it really doesn't matter. There are no pretences to maintain, no politics, no *position* and no one-upmanship. Relax. Talk among your peers about the things that bother you, or that please you, or that you're proud of. Or talk about the things that bother other people. It might be therapeutic.

But for reasons I don't understand, attendances have remained small. Going home to care for children is something I can understand, but maybe the effort of going to the pub on the way home is too much for some people. (You can bring your spouse, and some of us have, from time to time.)

Anyway, my correspondent noted that he really enjoys Westies (and intends to continue doing so) precisely because it's a great opportunity to talk shop with other writers without having to squeeze that contact – that valuable communication – into little gaps in the formalities. He reminded me of the night we gathered around a Scrabble board. Can you imagine a bunch of technical communicators playing Scrabble? It was huge fun. Westies will continue, because there are sufficient professional communicators who enjoy talking shop together.

Maybe you are too busy, or too far away, to join in the Westies fun, but you **can** contribute to these pages! Write to newsletter@stc-aus.org.au.

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Ray Archee has recently done some interesting research about the origins of technical communication in this country.

Like many other people, I believed that technical writing in this country would have begun with the development of the automotive industry and the whitegoods industry during the early parts of the twentieth century.

How wrong I was!

Look for an announcement from Ray in the not-too-distant future.

Membership Drive

Get a friend to join the STC Australia Chapter and you'll receive a copy of JoAnn Hackos's new book *Information Development: Managing Your Documentation Projects, Portfolio, and People* courtesy of the Committee.

Contact Steve Salter (membership@stc-aus.org.au)

CONFERENCE NEWS

The ASTC (NSW) Annual Conference is on again: Friday 26 October and Saturday 27 October.

Why should you go? This is what Bede Sunter, the ASTC President had to say:

There are fourteen very good reasons why you mustn't miss Conference 2007 New Horizons (they're in the list of presentations on the program!).

This year we've made a huge effort to bring you the right mix of the things that matter to technical communicators: new technologies, new ways of working and new ways of thinking about where you're going as a technical communications professional.

Headlining each day will be respectively, David Sless (Communications Research Institute) and David Hall (Macquarie Uni). David Sless will put forward some challenges about the social responsibilities inherent in public communications while David Hall poses some equally challenging questions about contemporary trends in literacy.

There will be a number of thought-provoking case studies, notably from Lorna McKenzie (developer of the Office of Industrial Relations' highly successful Look and Listen website) on experimenting with podcasting and downloadable video; and TACTICS Consulting-a reveal-all report on their in-house project to develop a proposal tool using a DITA and XML solution.

Susan Harkus leads an interactive session that will send you home better equipped to argue the case for good design.

Ever struggled with how, when and where to use non-textual forms of information? Let Irene Wong share with you the outcomes of her journey into visual information.

Then again if you'll ever have to develop a form, a survey or a questionnaire (and you know you won't get the information you need if you don't ask the questions the right way) you mustn't miss Kim Saffron's form-design case study.

Howard Silcock and Michelle Hallett, both well-known practitioners (especially on the Austechwriter list), examine the technical communicator's skill-set and how Technical Communicators fit into their organisations.

In addition, Elizabeth Abbott shares some of Techwriter Placements' research on the technical communications job market; Rob Phillips imparts his wisdom on project managing technical writers; Robert Nichols has a stimulating and thought-provoking talk on editing and presenting museum-exhibit information and we'll finish up with Frank Munday's no-punches-pulled take on modern vocabulary.

What's more, there will be several opportunities to win some great prizes during the conference. Some of these will be conference-participation based.

Register through the ASTC website:
<http://www.astcnsw.org.au>

Can't afford to go to the ASTC Conference? STC can help!

Around \$500 per person is available for registration and airfare if you wish to attend the 2007 ASTC NSW Conference in Sydney (26–27 October). The offer is only available to non-NSW STC members/students. In return we ask that you write a report about the conference for the STC newsletter.

Apply now to president@stc-aus.org.au

BYLAWS REFERENDUM

Over the past eight months, the Bylaws Committee has been rewriting the Society Bylaws. The Bylaws needed to comply with New York state law (where STC headquarters is located), make the different sections and articles of the Bylaws consistent, and streamline the Bylaws so that they have only the necessary information.



The current Bylaws, the newest version of the proposed Bylaws, and a rationale document explaining the changes are all posted on the Society website at www.stc.org/stcmembers/bylaws01.asp so that you can familiarise yourself with the proposed new Bylaws.

You may cast your vote online at the election website <https://eballot3.votenet.com/stc/login.cfm>

Voting closes 31 October 2007.

MEMBERSHIP DUES INCREASE

The new rates take effect 01/01/2008 so consider renewing your membership now to take advantage of the improved exchange rate!

Don't forget that if 2007 was your first year as an STC member and you joined mid-year, you will receive credit toward your 2008 dues. Look for details when the STC office sends out renewal notices.

How much are my dues increasing?

Short answer:

It depends on where you're located and what membership category you choose. Most (about 75%) of STC members will see an increase of US\$25. Others will see more or less, depending on their circumstances.

Long answer:

The easiest way to compute your dues increase is to use the chart below to determine your 2008 dues, and subtract what you paid for 2007.

Australia is classed as a Tier 1* country. The STC's tiering of countries is based on the World Bank's economic ranking of countries. STC did the initial tiering in 2005 when the tiered dues structure was introduced. Australia was then and is now considered a tier 1 (high income) country.

* Tier 1 includes Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States.

Why are my dues increasing?

Two reasons: The rising costs of running a non-profit organisation, and the new services and benefits STC is creating for its members.

The costs of operating a non-profit organisation have gone up. The reasons include the effects of inflation, rising health care costs, rising costs of printing and

many other factors. Even if STC were standing still, doing the same thing year after year, the dues would have to increase just to continue operating.

Category	Includes these components	Rate (\$US)
Classic Membership	Printed publications Online publications Choice of - One Chapter + one SIG OR Up to 3 SIGs	\$175
E-Membership	Online publications Choice of - One Chapter + one SIG OR Up to 3 SIGs	\$165
Student or Retired Membership	Online publications One Student Chapter One Regular Chapter Up to 3 SIGs	\$75

STC AND LEADERSHIP

These three articles were in *Tieline*, the STC Leader's newsletter:

Leadership is a Relationship

Linda L. Oestreich, STC President

During Leadership Day at this year's Technical Communication Summit in Minneapolis, I gave a brief overview of some leadership tips. As a former director-sponsor for Region 5, I have grown accustomed to presenting leadership workshops for chapter leaders. This year, as STC president, I continue to receive requests to lead such workshops. I enjoy doing this because I believe we are all leaders. Some of us find leadership roles in our paying jobs, some in our church



or community groups, some in families or hobby activities, and some in STC.

You can read more of Linda's address at <http://www.stc-cdx.org/tieline/2007/10>

Invest in an STC Membership

Karen Mardahl, Comanager, AccessAbility SIG

As a member of STC and as one of its leaders, think about the benefits and value that you have received from your participation in the Society. First, as a member, where you soaked up information and slowly began to share your own insights. Then, as a leader, where you found opportunities to learn about mentoring and managing (which are powerful skills to add to a résumé).

You can read more of Karen's address at <http://www.stc-cdx.org/node/689>

Effective Delegating Achieves Results

Suzanna Laurent, Associate Fellow, Oklahoma Chapter

I recently presented a program on delegating more effectively. In it, I explained the benefits of delegation and gave tips on how to overcome common barriers. Because you can use these tips whether you are leading a community, committee, team, or department, I want to share them with you. If you are not delegating properly, you are making your own life more difficult. In turn, your subordinates suffer because their interests and talents are being overlooked, however unintentionally.

You can read more of Suzanna's address at <http://www.stc-cdx.org/node/690>

THE LOW-DEMAND PROFESSION

In at least one NSW government department, the notion of documentation has managed to get itself confused with project quality. The groups who were once staffed by writers, now only employ 'information quality analysts' – writers who have undergone a name change to protect their employment. At first I was amused, thinking this was a bit of a harmless fad – until I heard about a group being closed down. The People Who Make Decisions had decided that each branch of the department only needs one group of quality analysts, so they blindly retrenched a group of technical communicators without any real knowledge of what

they were doing. Now, many people are trying to remove the word 'quality' from job descriptions and the names of workgroups.

George Orwell, where are you now that we need you?

Would a head office reorganisation cut down the number of accountants, lawyers, medicos or engineers? Maybe, but not as harshly. How about trainers, or business analysts?

Who do you blame?

Us. You and me.

Why?

Because there is no essential mystique in being a writer.

There's a lot that the average person doesn't understand; stuff about how to analyse a tax situation, or how to diagnose a sick patient, a sick car, or a sick plant, for that matter. Many people have no idea how to replace a tap washer, much less a tap.

There is mystique in the way that a bricklayer gets his bricks stuck together in an even pattern, and how a carpenter fits windows that open and shut. Plumbers can make the dishwasher work, and electricians know how to fit light switches that dim the lights – and that fancy arrangement that lets you turn on the light on one side of the room, and turn it off at the other side. Locksmiths can get in past locks that are guaranteed to defeat the smartest burglars. Cooks blend ordinary foods and condiments into foods that we happily pay too much for. Winemakers do simple things with grapes but work magic at the table. Some people can even lay pavers in simple patters that look smooth and even, unlike mine. There is mystique in the way people do things.

But how about our profession? If we believe the offers from employment agents, we can be forgiven for accepting the common belief that everyone knows how to write. We learn how to write in primary school, so we know how to do it. It's simple; *anyone* can do it.

No, I don't believe that, and neither do you, but many people do. I have worked for some of them, and so have you.

But to many people there is no mystique to the way a writer's work is done, because everyone can do it. It therefore has no value – or relatively little.

When times get hard, programmers and business analysts can push themselves into technical communication roles, displacing some of our number. What do we do about it? We grumble on email lists. Some quit the profession altogether in frustration.



Everyone who knows me will have heard my frequent complaints about the variable-message signs on our roads. They are often bad to the point of being dangerous. Why are they not composed by professional communicators? On the two occasions I pursued the matter in NSW, each organisation had a well-defined process of drafting and editing that should produce well-crafted messages. And so they would, if anyone in the system had been a professional communicator.

But of course they are not alone. All around us are examples of bad writing. We all know that a well-known personality in the technical communication fraternity was responsible for drafting a standard for writing technical documents. What a shame he did not draft AS1742.3–2002, the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices.

Section 4.8.2 is *Work between gaps in traffic*. It seems to me that the *cars* are between the gaps, and people should be working *in* the gaps, not *between* them. For readers who are as unbelieving as I was, here is the evidence:

AS 1742.3—2002

74

4.8 VERY SHORT-TERM AND LOW IMPACT WORKS

4.8.1 General

The following treatments are permitted in recognition of the need to allow certain short-term and low impact works to be carried out without the use of fully protected static work sites or mobile works convoys which could otherwise lead to significant work inefficiencies. Since they could be seen as a partial relaxation of safety standards, it is vital that a risk assessment (see Clause 2.2.3) be made of the proposed adoption of these treatments in particular environments taking particular account of factors such as traffic volume and speed, road geometry and width, and the general behaviour of road users.

4.8.2 Work between gaps in traffic

Work which is of such short duration that it could be carried out within gaps in traffic may be done without signs or delineation provided that—

(a) a lookout person who can see approaching traffic for a distance of 2D (see

There is no mystique in writing like *that!* Standards are relied on and used in Courts. If the writing is sloppy, the reader quickly loses confidence in the rest of the document and the standard loses its value.

Folks, our profession is in dire need. Who of us is ready to step into the breach and do something about it?

CERTIFYING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

Many large organisations would get enormous benefit from an XML-powered environment, but who will convince them of it? And when they are finally convinced, who will they turn to? Contract business analysts and programmers, usually. What would a technical communicator know about information design?

Don't laugh; I once had a manager say that to me, and she was coldly serious. In her world, only programmers understood information design.

Why is there no single body that certifies applicants as professional communicators? Is it *really* too hard, or have we simply refused to accept the seriousness, the vital importance of doing it? Why have we refused to take on the challenge?

In 1972 a small group of men travelled to a remote bay in the south of Tasmania and located the rusting shell of a sailing ship. They patched its countless holes and towed it to Hobart, then to Sydney, and restored it to its former glory. It was an impossible task for a small group of enthusiasts with no money and no experience with square-rigged sailing ships. It took them 28 years and \$16 million, but they did it and now they take passengers to sea twice a month in that ship – the *James Craig*.

We need their passion and determination to respond to the challenge of establishing a certified, respected profession of technical communication.

In the words of the Nike advertisement, *Just do it*. One task at a time, one challenge at a time. Do it as well as you possibly can. A bit at a time, the recognition will come, but we *must* work at it. If the restorers of the *James Craig* had done what we are doing, that ship would have been broken up for scrap in 1975, as its previous owner planned.

ADVERTISING RATES

We are happy to run advertisements in this newsletter for organisations and activities that are in line with the objectives of the STC. We do not give anyone copies of our mailing list, but we will deliver advertisements on your behalf. We'll also put meeting notices on our web site. Contact the newsletter editor for more details.

Our fees for advertising in a single issue are:

- Full page—\$75
- 1/2 page—\$35
- 1/3 page—\$25
- 1/4 page—\$15

Send enquiries and copy to newsletter@stc-aus.org.au. Deadlines are the 15th of October, January, April, and July but earlier booking of space would be appreciated. We will invoice you for payment upon publication.

The STC is a not-for-profit organisation and does not charge GST on advertising.

We reserve the right to refuse to carry any advertisement.