

Where Do You Look for Inspiration?

by Rob Houser, Region 3 Director-Sponsor

Read any good technical manuals lately? What is your favorite online help system? Who is your favorite brochure designer? Have you ever started reading a proposal and just couldn't put it down until you finished it? When is the last time a newsletter made you cry tears of joy?

No, these are not nerdy pick-up lines for technical communicators. They may, in fact, be legitimate questions that we sometimes forget to ask ourselves as technical communicators. Okay, maybe not that last one.

When I was in high school, my favorite English teacher always said: "If you want to learn to write, you have to read, read, read." Of course, she was talking about writing and reading fiction, but shouldn't we approach technical information the same way?

How can we improve our ability to write and design if we don't seek out work by our peers and analyze it critically? I don't mean critically in the sense that we point out the shortcomings of a writer under real-world constraints (most of us instinctively do that). Rather, I mean that we should read, and re-read examples of technical communication and try to identify what makes them effective.

We should study the winners of our publications, art, and online competitions. We should dig out the manuals that came with the products we bought recently and look at the documentation more closely to see if we can learn anything new. We should grab those brochures about different illnesses and diseases on the wall at the doctor's office; however, make sure nobody's watching you get them all or nobody will want to sit next to you.

If you can't keep the helpful manual you're using, make a photocopy of a few representative pages. Make screen shots

(See Inspiration on Page 2)

"Washlines VII"

The 2001-2002 kick-off meeting for the Orlando Chapter of the STC features the long-standing tradition...**"Washlines"**.

What is "Washlines" you may ask? "Washlines" is a chance for members to learn about the 2001 International Conference in Chicago. Members who were fortunate enough to have attended the STC international conference this past spring will share some of what they learned at the technical sessions and working lunches with fellow STC members in a lively, informal panel discussion pattered in the format of the late Gordon McKenzie's memorable "interactive" keynote address to the 41st annual STC conference held in Minneapolis on May 16, 1994.

What we do is string a clothesline across the meeting room (thus the name "Washlines") and attach sheets of colored paper bearing graphic and/or verbal "teasers" identifying topics that each of the presenters are prepared to discuss. Discussions range from a 30-second anecdote or illustration to a 5-minute mini-presentation. Audience members select which topics they want to hear.

"Washlines VII" will be presented on Wednesday, August 29, 2001 at the Winter Park Civic Center on Morse Boulevard (one block off US 17/92) in Winter Park. We'll start with light refreshments and networking at 6:30 and proceed to the panel discussion around 7:00. See you there!!!



2001
International
Conference
in Chicago

of well-done help systems. View the source of that web-based training with the creative effects.

We need models of effective communication to study and even emulate to improve our skills and set professional standards. I recommend dedicating a box or drawer for storing these examples. Keep them close. Thumb through them when you're stuck or brainstorming to solve a new communication problem.

If you haven't read a good piece of technical information lately, let me encourage you to seek out some of those that I like so much.

User Manuals

- Getting Results with Microsoft Office 97 (<http://office.microsoft.com/downloads/9798/results.aspx>)
- Assembly instructions from Sauder office furniture (check out the supplemental tips at <http://www.sauder.com/Tips>)
- HP CD-Writer Plus User's Guide (delivered online with product)

Help

- Microsoft Works (for early, user-centered embedded help)
- TurboTax (for blending different levels of information/instruction)
- PowerPoint (for well-written field-level help)

Web Sites

- Immunization Information on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/nip/>)
- NASA for Kids (<http://kids.msfc.nasa.gov/>)

Training

- Epson Knoware University (<http://knoware.epson.com/>)
- Lotus SmartSuite Tutorials (on CD with product)

Upcoming Events

August 29	Chapter Meeting - Fall Kickoff at Winter Park Civic Center
September 25	Chapter Meeting - UCF Campus (look for details in the next issue)
October 23	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
November 20	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
December 18	Chapter Meeting - TBD
January 22	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
February 26	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
March 26	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
April 30	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
May 28	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center
June 25	Chapter Meeting - Winter Park Civic Center

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*Visit the Web Site at
<http://www.stc-southeast.org/orlando>*