SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
STC Orlando Chapter
April 2008

Memo to Members

"Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication."

Spring Tidings

by Erika Higgins, Orlando Chapter President

Our chapter year is slowly winding down, but there is still much to do and take part in, especially if you are a few points shy of active membership. Our exciting annual High School Writing awards and Melissa Pellegrin Scholarship ceremony takes place on April 19th and is an excellent opportunity to meet some up-and-coming young people, while imparting some of your professional expertise or inspiration. We will be serving a full dinner and dessert in the Winter Park Civic Center's ballroom. Additionally, this will be your opportunity as a member to vote in our Chapter elections, which will take place at the April meeting. Our slate of upcoming officers is very illustrious, including current VP, Kelli Pharo running for Chapter President and current MIM editor, Dalton Hooper vying for the Vice-President position. Come to the April meeting and exercise your right to vote while helping to groom the future careers of high-school students.

Up next, we have our May meeting, which will feature published author and accomplished speaker, Dalton Hooper from *Words and Wit*. Dalton has been on the road at numerous other chapters presenting his words of wisdom, and is bringing his show home for this special engagement at the Orlando Chapter May meeting. Dalton recently hosted a webinar and will be signing copies of his book, *Irony Is A Microprocessor in Like a Breath Mint? and Nine Other Riddles To Make You A Better Public Speaker*". You won't want to miss this meeting!

If You Missed Our Last Meeting…

by Cindy Skowinski, Orlando Chapter Secretary

… then you missed hearing some great advice about the job search and hiring processes for technical communicators!

Our guest panelists were Anne Jacobson, a freelance writer that specializes in medical writing, Susan Howells, who works for the recruiting company, Tews Company Technology Solutions, and STC Orlando's very own Dalton Hooper, who has more than twenty years experience as a hiring manager for AT&T and Walt Disney World.

Conducted mainly as a question-and-answer session, the March employment meeting covered a wide range of topics, including how to find a job, what to charge as a freelance writer, and how to create an effective resume. Here is a sampling of tips that the panel posited:

- On resumes, Dalton emphasized that a resume is only a tool to get you an interview. Your skills and experience on paper will inevitably be overshadowed by your presence and interpersonal skills demonstrated in the interview.
- Susan recommended that, when submitting a resume and cover letter via e-mail, the cover letter should actually be the body of the e-mail so that the resume should be the only attachment.
- As a freelance writer, Anne explained that charging a fee for the entire project, rather than an hourly fee, is generally more lucrative as long as you monitor the scope of the project.
- The panelists, as well as some of the attendant STC members, suggested several websites on which to post your resume if you are looking for a job. The sites included careerbuilder.com, monster.com, dice.com, and employfloridia.com.

Although there was only time to cover a fraction of the questions STC members had, the employment meeting was both encouraging and

Anne Jacobson

Susan Howells

Anne, Susan, and Dalton answer employment questions

Patent Careers for Technical Writers and Scientific, Engineering, and Medical Specialties: What Is A Patent Agent?

by Steven C. Oppenheimer, Licensed U.S. Patent Agent And STC Senior Member, DC Chapter

Note: This is the second in a six-part series by Steven C. Oppenheimer.

How To Become A Patent Agent

Drafting and prosecuting patent applications is not exactly the same as technical writing, but there is significant overlap in the skills involved. Certainly, you need to be able to work with subject matter experts (like engineers or biologists) to gather technical information, and further to be able to write up the information in clear language. Drafting the patent claims involves additional legal skills that would be new to technical writers, but it certainly can be learned.

In the U.S., however, there are strict limits on who can become a patent agent. On the one hand, a law degree is not required. On the other hand, there is a licensing exam which is administered by the USPTO. In order to qualify for the exam, you must have significant technical training in a field such as electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, chemistry, biology, physics, or medicine. (Studies in math are not considered acceptable, but computer science is. Also, please note this is not a full list of the allowed technical backgrounds; you can obtain that from the USPTO Web site, as described further below.)

As such, the patent agent field is wide open both to technical writers with the necessary academic training, and also to engineers, scientists and medical professionals who want to make a switch, and who enjoy working with the written word.

Typically, you must have at least an undergraduate degree in one of the appropriate fields, or the equivalent. In my own case, my college degree was for a kind of independent major, self-designed program of study; however, I was able to provide the USPTO with documentation showing that I had essentially completed all the coursework that one would normally take for a physics major. That was enough to qualify to take the test. The exact requirements for being able to take the test can be found at: http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/dcom/olia/oed/examqinst.htm (Click on the link for "General Requirements Bulletin" for a .pdf file that lists the exact requirements.)

Once you apply and qualify for the test, you must take the test, which consists of 100 multiple choice questions! (90 of the questions are actually graded, the other 10 will be "questions under development" by the USPTO.) Studying for the test is an entire art in itself, and perhaps I'll write a separate article on that at some point. In essence, however, the licensing test is not a technical test—if you qualified to take the test, it's assumed you know something about technology or science already—instead, it's a test on law and administrative procedure related to patents. It's a very detailed test, and the pass rate is not all that high. In other words, you really need to study for it.

Everything you need to know about patent law and regulations can be found in a book called the MPEP, or Manual Of Patent Examining Procedure, which can be downloaded from the USPTO web site. Unfortunately, it's about 3000 pages long (really), and it's fairly dry reading. What to study from that book? When I took the test, I was able to study off of old tests, which can also be downloaded from the USPTO web site. (http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/dcom/olia/oed/grp.htm)

However, in 2005 the USPTO switched from paper tests to an electronic testing system. They no longer publish recent test questions, and the existing old tests (from the period before) become progressively more out of date as the patent law and regulations evolve over time. However, I would not completely ignore these old tests. While the specific questions and answers may become dated over time, the types of questions on the old tests still reflect, at least in a broad sense, the kinds of issues likely to be raised in the future.

There are patent prep courses which you can take, and others which can be obtained via mail-order. They are not cheap (expect to spend anywhere from $1000 to $5000), but if you are determined to make a career transition the prep courses may help you pass the test. For what it's worth, however, I managed to pass the test my first time, simply by working off of some books I found on patent law at a legal bookstore, plus studying off the old tests.

Here is a link to a site where you can get more advice on studying for the patent agent/attorney licensing exam. (Agents and attorneys both take the same exam.)

http://www.intelproplaw.com/ (Go to the "forums", and find the discussions on patent careers.)

There are also discussion groups on Usenet related to patent law, where you can get advice. (See the newsgroup misc.int-prop) Here is one site (among dozens that you will find, if you search the Web) for course materials you can find for the patent bar: http://www.patentpublishing.com/index.html

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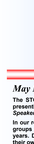
Sponsor A Meeting!

Your company name and logo can appear here. Just sponsor one of our upcoming chapter meetings. Sponsorships start as low as $125 and include such benefits as, free admission for up to 10 employees, expo space during our meeting networking hour, and a click-through on our chapter website. For more information, contact Kelli Pharo at vicepresident@stc-orlando.org

WinMerge

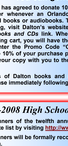
by David Coverston, Orlando Chapter Membership Manager



What's the easiest way to compare two text files? You know, like batch files, ini files, or html files. After all, they are all text files. But when one of these files does what it is supposed to do (meaning what you want it to do), and another doesn't, you really want to know where the difference lies. There are several tools available to do this, but the easiest I have found is WinMerge. Not only is it easy to use, but the price will fit within your budget as well. It's Open Source, which means it's free to use.

The setup on WinMerge is well-behaved, except for having to reboot your computer. But it does ask if you want to add an icon to the desktop, integrate it into explorer, or create a Quick Launch icon. The latest version is 2.8. WinMerge found that I had a previous version and asked to install it in that folder.

WinMerge has a couple of features that I just love. When you click Open, the interface is intuitive. If you are comparing files, you can include subfolders. And you can add a filter to only compare certain types.



The comparison feature is fast and easy to use. The toolbar has tools that let you navigate to the line with the next difference, then go to the difference in that line. You can back up to the previous difference, and copy lines from one file to the other. Lines with differences are highlighted so you can easily see them, and there is a unique navigational bar on the left side with a birds-eye view of the location of all the differences between the files.

Another feature of WinMerge is the folder comparison tool. When you have two folders with a number of duplicate files, you can easily spot the duplicates. One unusual use I have found for this is to find missing files. Sometimes when I am copying a large number of files from a LAN location to a hard drive or to another LAN location I get an error message that says the file could not be copied. So some of the files are copied and some aren't—the question is which ones. I don't want to start over because it is a waste of time and I will probably get the same error again anyway. So I use WinMerge to find the missing files and start copying files again from there.

WinMerge, http://winmerge.org/. Try it!

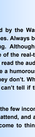
May Meeting to be Followed by Book Signing

The STC Orlando Chapter's May meeting will feature humorist and author, Dalton Hooper. Dalton will be presenting, "*Why Is A Microphone Like A Breath Mint? and Nine Other Riddles To Make You A Better Public Speaker*", which is also the title of his new book.

In our roles as technical communicators, we are often called upon to make various presentations in front of groups of colleagues, clients, or other gatherings. Dalton has been speaking to audiences for over thirty years. During that time he has accumulated a list of ten simple rules that anyone can leverage to improve their own public speaking skills.

You can generate revenue for your Orlando STC Chapter!

Dalton has agreed to donate 10% of all gross sales to the Orlando STC Chapter whenever an Orlando STC member purchases one of his printed books or audiobooks. To purchase your copy prior to the May meeting, visit Dalton's website at www.WordsAndWit.com and go to the *Books and CDs* link. When adding the purchase to your online shopping cart, you will have the opportunity to enter a Promo Code. If you enter the Promo Code "ORL," (without the quotes), Dalton will donate 10% of your purchase price to the Orlando Chapter! Be sure to bring your copy with you to the May meeting so Dalton can sign it for you!



Copies of Dalton books and audiobooks will also be available for purchase immediately following his presentation.

2007-2008 High School Writing Competition Winners Announced

The winners of the twelfth annual High School Writing Competition have been announced. You can find a complete list by visiting http://www.stc-orlando.org/competitions/high_school/winners.php.

The winners will be formally recognized and receive their awards during the April STC Orlando Chapter monthly meeting.

Date: Tuesday, April 15
Time: 6:30-8:30 p.m.
Location: Winter Park Civic Center ballroom
Cost: $10 for members and students, $15 for non-members

RSVP to vicepresident@stc-orlando.org

Because this will be a catered meal, we ask that all attendees please RSVP as early as possible. Thank you!

Early Bird Conference Registration Deadline is April 15

The last day to register for the 2008 Technical Communication Summit at the early bird rates is April 15. Online registration is available on the STC Web site.

Full Conference Rates (Sunday–Wednesday, June 1–4)

Early Bird Registration (by April 15)

Member: $695

Nonmember: $995

Student member: $175

Student nonmember or retired memberinonmember: $255

Advance Registration (by May 23)

Member: $995

Nonmember: $1,195

Student member: $250

Student nonmember or retired memberinonmember: $255

Walk-in Registration (after May 23)

Member: $995

Nonmember: $1,195

Student member: $250

Student nonmember or retired memberinonmember: $255

The certificate program will take place on Saturday and Sunday, May 31–June 1. The registration rate of $1,295 for this offering includes admittance to the full conference. The rate for taking courses in the certificate program without obtaining a certificate is $600.

From The Editor's Desk…

by Dalton Hooper, Orlando Chapter Newsletter Editor

I hosted my first webinar last Saturday. It was sponsored by the Washington, DC Chapter of STC. It was on a topic I have presented many times. Always before though, I was standing before a live audience as I was speaking. Although the webinar seemed to have went over very well, I personally was not prepared for the absence of the real-time audience interaction. I had not realized how much I depended and thrived upon the ability to read the audience's facial expressions and other non-verbal cues to guide me. When I tell what I believe to be a humorous story, when standing in front of a live audience, I get instant feedback—they either laugh or they don't. When they do, it bolsters my confidence for whatever I had planned to say next. With a webinar, I can't tell if the humorous story was a hit or not. It's a bit unnerving.

All in all, the benefits of webinar technology to the audience seems to far outweigh the few inconveniences to the presenter. Webinars are generally less expensive to set up, less expensive to attend, and are a lot more convenient. The audience doesn't have to get dressed up to attend a webinar (come to think of it, I was presenting while in my pajamas!).

In this time of $3—$4 per gallon gasoline, I predict webinars will be used more and more frequently. That's a good thing.

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