



Adventures of the Average Joe

(or...the frustrations of deciphering manuals)

by Adrianna Greenwald

Technical communicators often develop software documentation and manuals before product completion. While financially sound, this practice produces frustration in the user and unusable manuals. Consider the following example and fill in the names, dates, and manual titles from your own bad experience.

You watch in awe as a coworker does an amazing trick with a popular word processing application. You know you could use this feature to impress your friends and

make your supervisor *ooh* and *ahh*. At home you try to use this spectacular new discovery. You follow each step precisely as you saw it done. But nothing happens. You repeat each step again and still nothing happens. As a user, you do what comes naturally—avoid looking at the documentation at all costs! You call the person who showed you the trick. No one answers the telephone. You then call the friend who knows more about computers than you ever want to know.

He tells you to look at the manual. You know that if he tells you to look at the manual, you must need serious help. As a last resort, you break down and look in the manual. You browse the table of contents and index, and then flip aimlessly through the pages as you silently curse. Frustrated, you decide to try online help. Again you search by subject, by word, and you even type your question as the program prompts you. Nothing. Nada. Zip.

Like most users, you believe the answer lies *out there* somewhere, so you search the documentation for hours. Finally, as exhaustion, frustration, and a mental break down threaten to overwhelm you, once again you call the guru who showed you the function five hours ago. As you share your story she laughs. “That’s not in the documentation,” she says. “The programmers didn’t design that function until after the manual was written.”

Imagine the rage you feel at that moment. Why does a manual, written as a tool for the user, make you feel capable of murder?

This situation occurs all the time. Can you remember the last time that you purchased anything that required assembly? I can. Not only did the box contain the wrong screws, but the manual, written in English, apparently came from a translation. Yes, the English language can read like a foreign language. Did you know that? Perhaps you did, especially if you ever bought anything that required a manual.

Herein lies a great mystery. All technical communicators use manuals at some point in time. However, when we write a manual, we tend to forget every horrible experience in our past. Our goal becomes pleasing the programmers, meeting the deadlines, making the boss happy, or leaving work before rush hour traffic takes over the roadways. These goals, while worthy, ignore the user. Let me say it another way—the user is the only reason our profession exists.

The next time you sit down to write a manual, forget all those terms like *task oriented* and *deliverables*. Just recall those feelings of rage and frustration you experienced as a user when the one thing you needed turned into the one thing the technical communicator neglected to include.

Then start typing. Your manual should turn out fine.❖❖

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From our Editors...

Several members of the Minnesota State University STC attended the Region 6 Conference held in Minneapolis on October 1 and 2. In one panel presentation, four veteran technical communicators spoke about our craft and one comment in particular, from Betsy McDowell, left an

impression. "There is no such thing as resting on your laurels. Every day offers countless opportunities on countless levels. Seize the day! People and human interaction lie at the center of business. Embrace and explore. Be open to the potential." Good advice. ❖❖



Sally Spawn, self-employed technical communicator; Betsy McDowell, editor, *Ashland Oil*; Bob Guienetti, owner, *Radcom*; Michelle Burkeu, web designer, *Northwest Mutual*.

We welcome letters from our readers. Send your comments, questions, or concerns to oldesthanson@hotmail.com.

Resume Tips

by Adrianna Greenwald

Do you think your resume can help land your dream job? Mary Heminover, who has taught employment search skills at South Central Technical College for 15 years, gives the following advice:

- *Go neutral.* Avoid bright colors when choosing resume paper. Textured, earth-tone paper looks best, but choose paper that reflects you.
- *Use moderation.* Never overload any area of your resume. Prospective employers do not need to see all your memberships or volunteer work.
- *Emphasize strengths.* The primary components of your resume include education and experience. Place your strengths first.
- *Be organized.* Organization serves as the key to successful employment searches. Your

resume should present you as an organized person.

- *Be consistent.* Use parallel constructions and consistent formatting such as bullets, columns, and margins.
- *Edit carefully.* Do not give perspective employers any reason to eliminate you.
- *Request help.* Ask a qualified individual to critique your resume before you submit it to a prospective employer.

Your resume represents an important part of the employment search process, but you must not neglect the other components of the process. Your resume may get you the interview, but your interview gets you the job. ❖❖

Mary Heminover can be reached by email for questions or comments. Her address is maryhe@sctc.mnscu.edu.

Contract Technical Communication: An independent point of view

by Bobby McFall

Ever dream of working at home? Barb Goodemann of Albert Lea, Minnesota did, and for the past four years has fulfilled her dream with a successful career as a technical communicator.

While attending college, Barb worked as an in-house technical writer for three years. She began working as a contract technical communicator when the company for whom she worked transferred out of Minnesota. Her clients hail from states as far away as Texas, but she usually works for Minnesota firms. Contract lengths and work assignments vary from one to eighteen months.

Barb's business and financial background as a CPA proves beneficial in her work as a *documentation specialist*. Additionally, Barb considers herself mechanically inclined, intuitive, and a quick learner—all valuable skills for her industry. As a sole proprietor, Barb carries her own liability insurance and worker's compensation. Her office contains two computers, a scanner, and a laser printer.

Barb offers the following information for those of us considering a career in contract technical communication.

Pros...

- Set your own schedule. (Independence!)
- Learn new applications and experience a wide variety of work.
- Avoid office politics.
- Save significant travel expense.
- Purchase of software is assumed by clients (but you often buy your own).

Tips

- Start in a permanent position to gain experience. Get mentored in a workplace.
- Affiliate yourself with a good contract house (Dashe & Thomson, Jill Krout, and TMP Worldwide, all located in the Twin Cities metro area).
- Post your resume on line, i.e. *monster.com* and *dice.com*. (Dice requires an agent.)
- Create a quality resume.
- Know Word and FrameMaker. (See the September-October issue of *Intercom*.)
- Network! (Join a local chapter of STC.)

Cons—you must...

- possess strong self-discipline.
- prepare emotionally and financially for breaks between contracts. Save at least three month's salary for living expenses.
- do your own bookkeeping or hire it done.
- pay your own health and retirement benefits (no paid vacations or sick days).

About the impact of our poor economy

- ↑ When the economy slows, full time technical communicators fare better than contractors. This year hourly rates dropped by half.
- ↑ When the economy improves, contract communicators become highly sought.
- ↑ Contractors in metro areas find jobs—albeit in house—more easily than those who work from their homes.❖❖

Tips, Trends, and Trivia: Savvy Web Development

by Steve Gage and Dave Pagel

Convincing audiences to return to a web site is a primary challenge for web designers. The following tips may help achieve that goal:

- ↑ *Wow* your audience. Use Macromedia's Flash interactive movie software. Flash web sites, when done effectively, impress readers and generate interest in web sites.
- ↑ Avoid animation. Animation can annoy and distract readers by creating unwelcome visual noise.
- ↑ Use high contrast between the text and background color.
- ↑ Make navigation simple. Create a navigation bar containing links to each second level page in the web site.
- ↑ Keep your site uncluttered. Massive amounts of information on web pages frustrates readers. Spread the information or create internal links.

If web designers follow these tips and provide useful content, the chances for return visitors increase exponentially.❖❖

Can a Listserv Serve Your Needs?

by Carrie Hendrickson

You cannot locate reference materials. You experience problems with your software, knowing the answers exist somewhere, but you cannot find them. You want to make a career change but you do not know where to look for jobs. Try solving these problems on one of the thousands of listservs (also known as mailing lists or discussion groups) on the Internet.

Email discussion groups or mailing lists that center on a particular topic are commonly known as listservs. As a subscriber you receive messages through your e-mail account. The messages posted come from other subscribers addressing new or existing topics. These may include technical questions, career opportunities, or helpful information. List contributors range from experienced professionals to students and amateurs.

As a listserv subscriber, you can choose from several options. You can remain silent and read the postings/discussions, or you can join the discussions by seeking and offering information pertinent to the postings. Additionally, you can get a listing of the subscribers and their e-mail addresses and correspond privately with someone.

Two types of listservs exist: moderated and unmoderated. Moderated by an individual who reads every message, moderated listservs filter out inappropriate messages. Moderated lists usually provide guidelines on topics they find appropriate for specific listservs. Unmoderated listservs sends all messages to their subscribers. Most people prefer moderated lists.

Thousands of listservs with hundreds of different topics exist on the Internet. Some of the popular topics for technical communicators include copyediting, writing, graphics, and software. Check these web sites to find the right listserv for you. You may make the right connection to find the answers you seek.

- *ListTool.com* finds and subscribes to over 871 mailing and discussion lists in categories such as art, music, humor, business, law, computers, etc.
- www.prc.dk/user-friendly-manuals/ufm/maillist.htm contains an international list of tech. comm. listservs.
- www/isoft.com/lists/listref.html browses any of the 17, 781 public listservs on the Internet.❖❖

Cookies: Not Just for Dunking in Milk

by Scott Federer

As Internet use increases, so do fears that someone may be looking over your shoulder retrieving personal information or spying on you. In recent years, Internet cookies have become the spotlight of many privacy discussions because of their ability to be placed on a web surfer's computer and then later retrieved without the user's knowledge. An Internet cookie is a text file placed on a computer by a web server hosting a web site viewed by a user. The server gathers data about the user and leaves that information on the user's computer for future visits to the web site.

Why would a web site want to drop a cookie? Cookies help web servers remember specific settings or preferences about a user's computer or information that the user may have given the web site. For example, when a

user logs on to MSNBC.com for the first time, the web site prompts the user to enter a zip code and stock tickers. The next time the user returns to the web site, the server can view the user's cookie file to find the information entered by the user on his or her first visit. Other web sites use cookies as a marketing strategy to post advertisements targeted specifically toward the user. (Did you ever wonder where SPAM comes from?) They do this by saving (as a cookie) the searches a user executes on a given web site.

What is bad about cookies? People don't like to be tracked. Anyone who sits down at your computer can go to the cookies folder and view web sites you have visited. Cookies also pose a security hazard if they're used to store usernames and passwords.

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Communication in Crisis Situations

by Alexia Jones

On September 11, 2001 the United States found itself transformed from a peaceful country to a country facing violence from a viscous terrorist attack. The crisis we survived illustrates a need to look at all sources of communication from phone systems to the black box that records information on airplanes.

When the towers of World Trade Center collapsed, many people along the east coast lost phone service. Reporters tried to call from phone booths to report on the tragedy while relatives tried to contact family members. All received busy signals. People resorted to using the Internet to inform friends and families that they survived. Internet service providers switched from multiple routers to other emergency connections. With emergency lines the calls roll over to the next available phone line making it possible for calls to get through as lines become available.

During the emergency, cellular phones provided vital communication for many people. Victims called their loved ones reassuring them they would be okay, or, in some cases to say their final good byes. When the towers fell, the main receiver that makes it possible for cellular

phones to work fell with it, severing cellular communication for thousands of people. However, one victim managed to use a cellular phone to call police from the rubble of the WTC and give specific directions to locations of trapped people.

Black boxes, located in the tail end of airplanes, collect two kinds of data: flight data and voice data. Microphones and sensors located throughout the plane collect and store this data. This information is stored on memory boards that can endure extreme heat and pressure. The black box enables investigators to piece together details of what transpired during the last thirty minutes of a flight. For example, this technology has confirmed what victims on flight 93 reported to loved ones from their cellular phones. Brave heroes did fight back, in what has been described by the media has a gruesome fight for control of the plane.

And now, as the world wages its war on terrorism, modern technology will enable us to receive and communicate information in ways not dreamed possible as few as ten short years ago.❖❖



Cookies (continued from page 4)

What should the average user do about cookies? Web browsers such as Microsoft Internet Explorer and Netscape have methods for users to stop accepting cookies. They do this by prompting the user before a cookie is allowed on the user's computer. Browser software can also allow only specific web sites to place cookies on a user's machine, or to check the web server's cookie security level. Another precaution users can take is to periodically delete the cookies on their computer. On PCs, a directory called c:\windows\cookies contains the cookie file.

Overall, the Internet is safe, but a slight chance exists that something undesirable or unethical can happen with cookies, and it is always better to be safe than sorry.❖❖

*Define meatloaf, cookies and spam.
say something about Internet food
groups...*

Thinking Outside the Box

by Marge Freking

Man's mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

Advertisers, graphic design artists, software developers, and entrepreneurs of all types think *outside the box*. Technical communicators must learn to use this strategy everyday.

At age three, my son became frightened to the point of terror, thinking giants occupied our land and that they might hurt us. What can a mother do? She can reverse the situation. I told him, "Since we've never seen giants or any evidence that they exist, *we* must be the giants. Therefore, we must be very careful not to hurt little people if we see them." That solved *that* dilemma.

The point of the story suggests that thinking outside the box presents little difficulty. Creative ability lies within each person. Writers, and especially technical communicators, must learn to tap into that expertise to excel in any enterprise they undertake. Advertisers need new and sometimes snappy promotions to encourage new generations to buy their products. They depend on their ad people to think in new and distinctive dimensions and to add new perspective to old campaigns. All communicators need that kind of expertise to make their points.

For job seekers, simply creating business cards or writing resumes requires imagination to spark an interest in them and/or their abilities. Nothing causes more yawns than seeing the same old thing day after day. Imagine the recruiter who sits in her office reading resumes. Seeing unique and new approaches to commonplace situations makes an individual stand out as a valuable, contributing, and thinking asset for any company. Why do you suppose so many resume-planning clinics exist on college campuses and in corporate America? People managing those clinics help attendees tap into their ingenuity, encouraging them to make their marks in commercial endeavors.

Sometimes defining ourselves and/or our unique abilities requires imagination. However, we can improve our presentation skills by using simple strategies. Great literature helps readers see new and

interesting ways to approach old ideas. Read mysteries to get new perspectives from the twists and turns of plots and thinking patterns. Humor provides a rich tapestry for creativity. Reading comedy helps students discern how the author turns something ordinary into something extraordinary, giving readers new ways to view everyday situations. Doodling with the non-dominant hand awakens the other side of the brain and starts thinking processes in new and amazing directions.

Become more aware of the world. Take time to walk through the leaves; watch squirrels gather nuts; share a sunset; examine the chain on a twenty-speed bicycle; watch a baker toss a pizza crust. Wonder exists everywhere. Allow yourself the luxury of awe and speculation. Ordinary things aid innovative growth in imaginative and exciting ways. Limiting yourself belittles your abilities. Use your eyes to see and your ears to hear in singular and eccentric ways.

Take a chance today, and try thinking outside the box! ❖❖

STC Scholarship Applications Available

Each year, STC offers scholarships to full-time graduate and undergraduate students pursuing careers in technical communication.

Fourteen awards of \$2,000 each will be granted for academic year 2002-2003.

Application deadline is February 15, 2002

Application forms and instructions are available from the STC office:

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 2203-1822
(703) 522-4114 • www.stc.org

Plagiarism in a Digital World

by Carrie Hendrickson

Can you name one of the most dreaded words in the English language that a writer or software programmer hates to see or hear about their work? PLAGIARISM! In today's world of easy access to the Internet, the rate of digital plagiarism continues to rise. Educators face this problem with students who plagiarize their sources. "Recent studies indicate that approximately thirty percent of all students may be plagiarizing on every written assignment they complete." Plagiarism.org Plagiarism in the academic world usually means an "F" on the paper but in the professional world the consequences can prove even more severe. The possibility of job termination, loss of credibility, or even lawsuits makes plagiarism a concern for writers.

Definitions for plagiarism include copying or using other peoples' words, ideas, visual concepts, logic, etc. without properly acknowledging the source. How do you give proper credit for information such as web design, information from a list serve, or software programs? In the digital world the writer must actively search for information and make ethical decisions when his or her search for the source fails.

Tips for finding source information include:

- Review the web page. If the credibility of the information should be questioned.
- Check all links. Links may lead back to the original source.

- Request information using an e-mail address listed on the web page.

To properly give credit when the search for the source proves unsuccessful, list the web address, the date you found the information, and any page numbers or links.

Information from sources such as list serves and program codes pose a difficult problem. The writer must adopt an ethical point of view and determine how to best give credit to the source.

Some writers find the following tips helpful in adopting an ethical point of view:

- Review the code of ethics for the professional field from which you obtain the source.
- Check your company's code of ethics and handbook for guidelines on citing sources.
- Use the STC code of ethics.
- Use reasonable criteria (e.g. obligation to yourself to act in your own best interest and according to good conscience, stand by the clients and customers to whom you are bound by contract, and obligation to your company to advance its goals, respect its policies, protect confidential information and expose conduct harmful to the organization.)

The commitment to avoid plagiarism will benefit you personally and professionally. A clear, crisp, and honest writer will make the extra effort to locate and cite sources. ❖❖

When
in doubt,
tell the
truth.



Mark
Twain

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MSU STC Chapter wants your input!
Email us your ideas, opinions, etc. on
topics and speakers for our meetings.

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STC Twin Cities Chapter Information
The Twin Cities STC meets monthly on the
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For additional information regarding the
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Meet Our Staff

Adrianna Greenwald and Alexia Jones



Adrianna Greenwald

Adrianna Greenwald plans to graduate with high honors in the summer of 2002 with a bachelor of science degree in technical communication and a minor in psychology. She sees her experience as a student at MSU as one of the happiest times in her life.

Adrianna contributes to *Techniques* and serves as a copy editor. She enjoys reading everything and anything. She visits her family in New Mexico whenever possible, and her ten younger siblings make each visit home unforgettable and precious. Married four years, Adrianna enjoys vacationing and exploring the great outdoors with her husband.

After graduation, Adrianna wants to pursue a masters degree in technical communication or a related field, with a focus on writing, editing, and designing documents. Adrianna appreciates the people and the scenery in Minnesota, but hopes to relocate to Colorado or New Mexico to be closer to the mountains and her family.❖❖



Alexia Jones

Alexia Jones graduates from MSU with a major in technical communications and a minor in psychology in about a year. She works part time helping people with mental disabilities while attending the university full time. Alexia, an Ameri-Corps alumna, still helps interview incoming AmeriCorps members. When Alexia served with AmeriCorps, she assisted people in hospice care as well as adults in the Living at Home Block Nurse Program.

Alexia spent last summer in Dorchester, Bath, Boscawen, and Penzance, England learning about British literature, especially the writings of authors Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy.

In her spare time, she relishes the opportunity to travel, mostly to the east coast where she visits friends and family. She also enjoys reading and hiking. Her plans include the purchase of a Harley with a side car for her cat, Bos.

Alexia serves as a copy editor for *Techniques* this semester and also assists with layout and graphics.❖❖

The mission of the Society for Technical Communications to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

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