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STC

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016

# intercom

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

A large, light blue silhouette of a human head and shoulders, facing forward. Inside the head, the title "LEGENDS OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION" is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

## LEGENDS OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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## intercom

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# A Note from the Editor



NICKY BLEIEL is the guest editor of the final issue of *Intercom* for 2016, and she has become quite the expert at the art of the interview. In this issue themed "Legends of Technical Communication," she has put together a collection of interviews with industry legends and tech comm gurus.

Nicky has over 20 years of experience in technical communication; writing and developing information for software products in the cognitive computing,

technical publication, media sales, industrial automation, simulation, and pharmaceutical industries. In her work, she focuses on providing content that improves the user experience, and she has developed and delivered training classes, created videos and blogs, delivered webinars, and hosted a podcast series. With STC, she is an Associate Fellow and Past President. She is a frequent contributor to *Intercom*, as well as *tcworld magazine*, *ISTC Communicator*, and other publications. She is also a popular speaker at technical communication conferences.

My deepest appreciation to Nicky, who is a legend herself, and all the contributors—both interviewers and interviewees—who took part in this effort. What a fantastic issue this is.

—LIZ POHLAND  
[liz.pohland@stc.org](mailto:liz.pohland@stc.org)

# A Note from the Guest Editor

THIS ISSUE OF *INTERCOM* is the technical communication version of the fantasy dinner party game. It brings together a group of industry legends whose “dinner conversation” is a crash course in the field’s history, significance, and future—and whose amazing careers are inspiring us.

The invited legends work in both industry and academia, and span many subject areas; including usability, plain language, information design, elearning, marketing communications, instructional design, structured content, experiential learning, and document design. They are the authors of popular technical communication books, and are frequently cited in the literature. Some are journal editors, bloggers, and TED speakers. A few have worked for U.S. Presidents. They have been awarded everything from fellowships to lifetime achievement awards to Emmys. Across the board, they are influential, prolific, visionary, and delightful.

Our guests are David Pogue, Saul Carliner, Ginny Redish, Karen Schriver, JoAnn Hackos, and “Madame Documentation” Suzanne Briet (Mme. Briet is no longer with us; her interview is an “imagined” one). We also invited past STC Summit keynotes to answer a few questions about the field—and Vinton Cerf, Jonathon Colman, Scott Berkun, Erin McKean, Nancy Duarte, Denise Jacobs, Felice Frankel, Simon Singh, and David Rose share their thoughts. My sincere thanks to all of them for their time, wisdom, and contributions.

Each living legend is interviewed by someone who has crossed paths with them professionally, personally, academically; sometimes all three. The interviewers themselves are a stellar group who have made their own contributions to the field as authors, speakers, consultants, academics, and STC leaders. My thanks to Phylise Banner, Hillary Hart, Alan Houser, Paul Mueller, and Tony Self for arranging and conducting these interviews. I’d also like to thank STC *Intercom* Editor Liz Pohland, who provided guidance and support every step of the way.

Enjoy the party!

  
—NICKY BLEIEL

PS. I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that it was difficult to choose the first round of legends for this issue; which admittedly is a great problem to have. Hopefully “Legends of Technical Communication” can become a biennial *Intercom* event.



If you’d like to read a few earlier interviews with Legends, see the interviews with John Carroll and Kathy Sierra.

(<http://www.stc.org/intercom/2013/03/minimalism-revisited-an-interview-with-john-carroll/> and <https://www.stc.org/notebook/2015/06/17/badass-an-interview-with-kathy-sierra/>).



# Introducing Madame Documentation: An Imagined Interview with the Late Suzanne Briet

BY TONY SELF

SHE WAS A VERY INFLUENTIAL FIGURE in the field of documentation, yet most of today's information and content professionals have never heard of her. She strongly and successfully argued for specialized education for documentation professionals, and earned the nickname "Madame Documentation." This illusive figure in the history of documentation has been "hiding in plain sight" for over half a century. Her name was Suzanne Briet.

Why haven't we heard of her? Or, more precisely, why isn't the name Briet familiar to today's technical communicators and "documentalists" in the English-speaking world? Most likely for two reasons: she was French, and she lived from 1894 to 1989.

Suzanne Briet's most famous contribution to information science was the efficient slim book, *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* (*What Is Documentation?*), published in 1951. In the 48 pages of the book, she set about defining and re-defining the nature of documents and documentation. The record of events and opinions and discoveries, and life, were no longer books and albums, but snapshots and pages and sounds and images. To catalogue and organize and understand and manage this information, the specialization of documentation was needed, building upon and extending the skills of librarians and bibliographers. "What words fail to communicate, image and sound try

Documentation ... is a powerful means for the collectivization of knowledge and ideas.

to deliver to all. Documentation, thus understood, is a powerful means for the collectivization of knowledge and ideas," she wrote. She predicted in the 1950s that libraries would be replaced by "documentation centers," and that such centers in business organizations would produce documents on demand, spontaneously delivered, and personalized.

Born in 1894, Suzanne Briet grew up in Paris at a time of unrest and upheaval in Europe, and was 20 when World War I broke out. The War interrupted her career as a history teacher, and after four years in Algeria, she decided on a career change to librarianship. Her talent was noticed during her librarianship studies, and she became a rising star in the field, and found herself one of the first women appointed to the Bibliothèque Nationale (National Library) in 1924. She became an influential



*Madame Documentation in her element*

figure in the modernization of library institutions, and even during the German occupation of France in World War 2, stayed at her post at the BN. In 1950 Suzanne Briet was awarded the Légion d'honneur for her work in librarianship education, and in 1951, founded Institut National de Techniques de la Documentation (National Institute for Documentation Techniques), and later became Director of Studies of the International Federation for Documentation. Her passion for documentation was remarkable throughout her long career; she retired (to write history books) in 1954.

Mme Briet passed away at the impressive age of 95 in 1989 and is not available to interview. However, we can perhaps imagine what an interview with her might have been by drawing on her own words from "What Is Documentation?"

**Tony:** Good evening, Mme Briet. Can we start by asking about the term "documentalist" which you coined. What is a documentalist?

**Mme Briet:** The documentalist is a person who performs the craft of documentation. He must possess the techniques, methods, and tools of documentation.

**Tony:** What skills does a documentalist need?

**Mme Briet:**

1. a specialist of the matter concerned, that is to say, that he possesses a cultural specialization related to that of the institution where he is employed;
2. understands the techniques of the form of documents and their treatment (choice, conservation, selection, reproduction);
3. respects the documents in their physical and intellectual integrity;
4. is capable of proceeding to a valuable interpretation and selection of the documents which he is responsible for, in view of their distribution or documentary synthesis.

**Tony:** And what is documentation?

**Mme Briet:** What words fail to communicate, image and sound try to deliver to all. Documentation, thus understood, is a powerful means for the collectivization of knowledge and ideas.

**Tony:** You use the discovery of an antelope as a way of defining documents, and that very much broke away from the previous idea of documentation being something that had to be contained in a book or folder. Can you explain "Briet's Antelope" for us?

**Mme Briet:** An antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer who has succeeded in capturing an individual that is then brought back to Europe for our Botanical Garden. A press release makes the event known by newspaper, by radio, and by newsreels. The discovery becomes the topic of an announcement at the Academy of Sciences. A professor of the Museum discusses it in his courses. The living animal is placed in a cage and cataloged. Once it is dead, it will be stuffed and preserved (in the Museum). It is loaned to an Exposition. It is played on a soundtrack at the cinema. Its voice is recorded on a disk. The first monograph serves to establish part of a treatise with plates, then a special encyclopedia (zoological), then a general encyclopedia. The works are cataloged in a library, after having been announced at publication. The documents are recopied (drawings, watercolors, paintings, statues, photos, films, microfilms), then selected, analyzed, described, translated (documentary productions). The documents that relate to this event are the object of a scientific classifying (fauna) and of an ideological classification. Their ultimate conservation and utilization are determined by some general techniques and by methods that apply to all documents. The cataloged antelope is an initial document and the other documents are secondary or derived.

**Tony:** In your time "technology" looked a lot different, but would you say that a documentalist required a lot of technical knowledge?

**Mme Briet:** The documentalist is a specialized technician, whose professional knowledge will be increasingly technical in the future. The documentalist will be more and more dependent upon tools whose technicality increases with great rapidity.

**Tony:** You have said that one of the problems of documentation is the book-centric mindset. We people of the 21st century think this is a new phenomenon, brought about by online documents, topic-based Web sites, social media, and search engines. Why was this book-centered approach a problem in your century?

The documentalist is a specialized technician, whose professional knowledge will be increasingly technical in the future. The documentalist will be more and more dependent upon tools whose technicality increases with great rapidity.

Documentation-technique, the documentation-profession, and the documentation-institution are not enough to address all the needs of the growing society. They are, nonetheless, essential mechanisms that must, henceforth, be reckoned with.

**Mme Briet:** For the past few centuries, the book has remained the bibliographic entity. Autographs were grouped within books. Engravings were preserved within albums. Periodicals were bound in volumes. Today, books have a tendency to become scattered in loose leaves. The book accompanies the scholar's notepad. The publishing business reconsiders its methods for best responding to the demand of the century. For some decades, the fact, information, the periodical text, the illustration have been isolated from their contexts: pulled from the book, the daily paper, the periodical, the official newspaper, and given a place in binders. By an inverse evolution of the card catalog, which schematizes and brings together descriptions of documents, the construction of such binders tends to present the documents themselves, assembling them for ease of consultation. This happens in the majority of cases with graphic documents. It is nevertheless possible to find in binders an example, a specimen, of a given matter.

**Tony:** What qualifications and skills do you think documentalists should have?

**Mme Briet:**

- ▶ Higher education and cultural or professional specialization
- ▶ Technique of document use and production
- ▶ Technique of document handling

**Tony:** Translation and localization is a big part of the documentation business. Some say this is brought about by globalization, better and cheaper trade, and multinational corporations. As a Francophone, and someone living in 1950s post-war Europe, what are your views on translation and localization?

**Mme Briet:** The principal obstacle to unification lies in the multiplicity of languages, in the babelism that stands in opposition to both understanding and cooperation. One almost no longer seeks to substitute an artificial language for natural ones. Esperanto isn't progressing. On the contrary, the major languages, that is to say, English, French, and Spanish, tend to spread so as to become the indispensable interpreters of civilized people. German has retreated. Russian is not yet in the forefront. The Orientals always speak their language and another language. The world divides itself into linguistic areas. The organization of documentary work must,

take account of this reality. In regard to the creation of cataloging rules, book selection, translations, and analyses, the distribution of documents on the planet will adapt to this necessity. The recording of linguistic phenomena is not of any less importance than the recording of illiteracy statistics

We must distinguish two tendencies at play today. On the one hand, knowledge of foreign languages allows a much larger diffusion of written works than previously, and gives to worldwide readership an audience that can only increase. One thinks of the innumerable translations of the Bible, Victor Hugo, Marx, and Duhamel. On the other hand, the scientific work of documentation tends to content itself with a few base languages for reasons of economy. The scientific translation ought to be organized with as much care as the literary translation. While individually, one seeks direct contact with, or multiple translations of, literary monuments of every country and of all times, collectively, the technique of document distribution will be content with three or four languages, maximum.

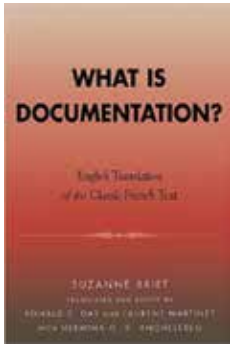
**Tony:** Social media is making inroads into the modern documentation profession, and ideas such as collaborative authoring and peer-generated content are being used. Is technological progression in documentation a new thing?

**Mme Briet:** The time is past—it was 1931—when an English librarian said at an international conference that if he would mention documentation in his country he would be asked what this new disease might be. The words, doctrines, techniques, and tools have forged a path. Theory and practice have kept pace. The new profession has become more and more technical: learned on the one hand, manual on the other. “What a manual century!” Rimbaud said, speaking of his own, nineteenth, century. While culture was being democratized, technology was making gigantic progress. The means of expression multiplied while expanding their range in space and time. Expositions and congresses thwarted the tendency of all specializations, just as all frontiers, to withdraw within themselves. The appreciation of human unity has been growing on cultural, political, social, and religious fronts. Documentation-technique, the documentation-profession, and the documentation-institution are not enough to



address all the needs of the growing society. They are, nonetheless, essential mechanisms that must, henceforth, be reckoned with.

**Tony:** Thank you for your time and your contributions to the profession.



Renée-Marie-Hélène-Suzanne Briet retired from the profession in 1954, not long after *Qu'est-ce que la documentation?* was published. She spent her retirement writing essays and books about a number of subjects, including the history of her birthplace (the Ardennes region of France), and its other famous citizen, the Symbolist poet Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud. She died in Paris in 1989 with over 100 books, essays, and other publications to her name.

All the “imagined interview” answers are directly from Madame Briet’s book *What is Documentation?: English Translation of the Classic French Text* by Suzanne Briet, translated by Ronald E. Day, Laurent Martinet, and Hermina G. B. Angheliescu. **1**



TONY SELF has worked as a technical communicator in Australia and New Zealand for over 30 years, specializing in online help systems, computer-based training, and hypertext documents. In 1993, Tony founded HyperWrite, which offers consultancy services in online and Internet strategy, innovative solutions and specialized training. In addition to his consulting work, Tony is an Adjunct Teaching Fellow at Swinburne University of Technology. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communication and holds a PhD in semantic mark-up languages, a Graduate Diploma in Technical Communication, and a Graduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. He is the author of “The DITA Style Guide.”

## REQUIRED READING

BRIET, SUZANNE. 2006. *What is Documentation? English Translation of the Classic French Text* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press), translated by Ronald E. Day, Laurent Martinet, and Hermina G. B. Angheliescu.

MAACK, MARY NILES. “The Lady and the Antelope: Suzanne Briet’s Contribution to the French documentation Movement, Accessed 24 Aug 2016 from <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/maack/BrietPrePress.htm>.

## “I GOT A PROJECT THAT TURNED INTO A \$25,000-A-YEAR GIG THANKS TO THE STC SUMMIT!”

“I spoke up in a session at a past Summit and was approached afterward by a man who was scouting for editors. He lived only about 50 miles from me, but I probably would never have met him otherwise. This encounter evolved into a \$25,000-a-year gig of interesting editing with a small firm that pays well and on time, and even holds dinners for its contractors twice a year. I always knew that I had to show up to make connections and attending the Summit proved it!”

*Bette Frick*

MY NAME IS BETTE FRICK AND

**I’M AN STC MEMBER**

<http://summit.stc.org>

# A Renaissance Technical Communicator: A Conversation with David Pogue

BY NICKY BLEIEL | *Associate Fellow*

DAVID POGUE IS a technical communicator with an unconventional career. He has been incredibly successful at the traditional—he is the author of over 50 technical books, with 3 million copies in print—as well as an award-winning blogger. But he didn't stop at the conventional; David's talent and humor led him to success in other outlets. In newspapers, he was the technology columnist at the *New York Times* for 13 years. On TV, he is the Emmy award-winning tech correspondent for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, the host of three PBS science shows and *It's All Geek to Me* on the Science Channel. On the Web, he is the founder and editor of *Yahoo! Tech*. In magazines, he is a monthly columnist for *Scientific American*. David has given three TED Talks, one of which inspired a new series of books, *Pogue's Basics*. A popular conference speaker, he has keynoted the STC Summit twice, and has been named an Honorary Fellow of STC. I was in the audience for both of David's Summit keynotes and had the pleasure of meeting him; in fact, after his second keynote, I escorted him out of the venue so he wouldn't miss the plane to his wedding. He took the time to talk to every attendee who wanted to chat, posed for selfies, and signed books and magazines. He undoubtedly would have made it to the church on time without me, but it was a treat to watch him earnestly greet his fellow technical communicators with such charm and grace. David's famous cat, Wilbur, joined us during our Skype video chat for this interview.

**Nicky Bleiel:** David, you graduated from Yale with a Bachelor's in Music, and you actually spent 10 years in the world of Broadway musicals. You were a conductor and an arranger. You were on the business side in music licensing. How did studying music and your time in that industry prepare you for the career you have right now?

**David Pogue:** It doesn't seem like a very logical connection, does it? Well, there's two things. First of all, there's the fairly well-established connection between music and technical subjects. Many doctors are also musicians, for example,



many mathematicians. Something about these pursuits both being rule-based and yet creative within those rules.

The more practical answer is that, in about 1987, I really wanted this piece of software called *Finale* that had come out. It was sheet music software, and they were charging \$1,000 for the floppy disk. Of course, I couldn't afford that much money for a piece of software, but at the time I was a member of the New York Mac Users Group. The editor for our little eight-page newsletter said, "Why don't you tell the company you're a reviewer, and they'll have to send you a free copy?"

I did, and they did, and I got a free copy of *Finale* and reviewed it, and I kept doing that. I just couldn't believe it was that easy. After a year or so, that same newsletter editor, to whom I think I owe my entire career, said, "You know, you could actually be making money out of this, if you sent your sample writings to the glossy computer magazines and proposed reviewing for them."

That's what I did. "Macworld" magazine hired me, and I wrote for them for 13 years.

**Nicky:** Did that lead you into the idea of creating the "Missing Manual" series? That was one of your first big successes.

**David:** Before that, I started writing the *Dummies* books. There was at the time only one *Dummies* book. It was *DOS for Dummies*, this completely brilliant book by Dan Gookin.

The independent book stores sold millions of those *DOS for Dummies* books. My book, *Macs for Dummies*, was the second book in the *Dummies* series, and now there's four or five hundred different titles.

I wound up doing seven of the *Dummies* books in my time. The question came up, "Well, maybe I should start my own series, do it the way I would do it, have complete control, and pick the topics I want." That's how the Missing Manual series was born in 1999.

**Nicky:** There are over a hundred titles in that series right now. You wrote 30 or so, as far as I could tell.

**David:** By the end there were 120 different titles. They just recently discontinued printing the Missing Manuals, except for the ones that I write. There's a topic for the STC to discuss, if they haven't already. People are, by and large, not buying printed computer books anymore. A number of the smaller presses have actually closed their doors.

O'Reilly, my press, hasn't shut down. They've had a lot of other businesses, but they have decided to stop doing the paper Missing Manuals, except for Mac, Windows, iPhone, the ones that I do. I think it's because—I've seen it in my own children—when they want to learn how to use a piece of software or learn something technical, they go to YouTube and type in "setting up a printer," or "downloading a YouTube video," or whatever it is they need to know.

Technical documentation has, by and large, moved online and gone to free, like everything else. It's an interesting shift. Fortunately, it doesn't cripple me because I have a number of other things going on, but it is interesting, and a little bit bittersweet for me to see the computer book industry that served me so well fizzling down.

**Nicky:** Around the same time that you started the Missing Manual series, and you had already written all these *Dummies* books, you ended up becoming a columnist at *The New York Times*. How did you end up there?

**David:** That was a little more straightforward. Peter Lewis, the guy who was writing the "Consumer Tech" column, left *The Times*. He took a job elsewhere, so they were looking for somebody new.

It had been my observation for decades that people don't know how to use even the most important features of the tech they have.



*David Pogue bringing down the house as STC Summit keynote*

When they put out feelers, my name came up a few times. It was a long process. I wrote four sample columns, I had interviews with every editor, all the way up to the editor-in-chief, and then it was the most anticlimactic thing you can imagine. One day, the tech editor said, "Hey David, we're going to print one of those sample columns that you wrote for us, and, you know, if it's OK with you, we'll just keep going like that." "You mean I got to the job?" That's how it happened. I wrote that column for 13 years.

**Nicky:** One of the other things you've done—not a lot of people know this—is you've been an advocate for tech consumers. What's your favorite triumph on behalf of consumers?

**David:** I think my favorite one involved Verizon Wireless. An employee within the corporation actually leaked to me something very underhanded that the company was doing. In the days before smartphones, as we know them today, every flip phone had that four-way controller—up, down, left, right—and if you wanted to use the Internet, you were to press the up button, and they would charge you two dollars for going onto the Internet.

Verizon said you weren't actually billed until you hit "OK" in a confirmation screen, but this person was telling me that, in fact, "No, anyone who hit the Up button, out of the 10s of millions of Verizon customers, was instantly billed two dollars every time they hit that button, even by accident."

If you complained to the company, they would've cheerfully refunded the two dollars, but of course, the huge majority did not notice and didn't bother. I wrote about this, and I tried it on my own phone, and confirmed it. Verizon said publicly, "Now, wait a minute, wait a minute, that's not true. You have to then approve a confirmation screen," and that turned out not to be true.

By this time the FCC was involved. They did an investigation, and wound up concluding that, in fact, Verizon was defrauding its customers, and knew about this, and levied what was then the highest fine ever levied by the FCC.



It was something like \$90 million, plus millions more in refunds to Verizon's customers.

Verizon was, of course, hopping mad at me and *The New York Times*, just absolutely livid. I believe they pulled their advertising from *The New York Times* for a year or more out of retaliation. They were just furious, but to me, it felt good. It felt like, "Just 'cause you're big and confusing doesn't mean that the little guy has to lose."

Again, I really owe it to the mole who leaked this information to me, but I was the platform that amplified it.

**Nicky:** That's really cool. That story has everything. It has federal agencies, it has the leak. Wow, all you had to do was add a parking garage. That's a reference only certain people would get.

Among other successes you've had, you've done three TED Talks. I think most people would say just getting asked to do one TED Talk is the pinnacle of your career. How did you get the first one?

**David:** The very first one was, I think, 2007. [Editor's note: The first Ted Talks were in 2006 ([https://www.ted.com/playlists/168/the\\_first\\_6\\_ted\\_talks\\_ever](https://www.ted.com/playlists/168/the_first_6_ted_talks_ever)).] I lucked into that, because the number two guy at TED at the time was my Yale dorm mate. He lived down the hall, and we had been buddies in college. He somehow thought I would be a good speaker. I had never heard of TED at the time. Not many people have heard of TED in 2007.

What's really interesting is that that was the year that TED first experimented with putting videos of the talks online. They started with a set of six. One of them was Al Gore, and one of them was mine, which is a complete lucky karma chunk falling into my lap.

From that first video being on the Web for free sprang this entire speaking career.

**Nicky:** Something else came from one of your TED talks. Your third one inspired your latest set of best-selling books. So far you have two—*Pogue's Basics: Tech* and *Pogue's Basics: Life*. I read that in the Fall there's going to be *Pogue's Basics: Money*.

**David:** The *Pogue's Basics* book was many years in coming. It had been my observation for decades that people don't know how to use even the most important features of the tech they have. It started when I was watching some 23-year-old receptionist in an office one day in the 90s trying to select a word in Microsoft Word by dragging across it with the mouse.

She would go a little bit too high and highlight the whole line above it, say "Darn it!", try again, and she'd highlight the whole line below. I finally jumped up and said, "Don't you know you can double-click on the word?", and she was, "Oh my God!"

No one had ever taught her, and who would? There's no driver's ed for tech. There's no minimum boot camp.

There's no government pamphlet. There's no core curriculum in the world, so how are you supposed to know that kind of stuff?

You pick it up, you watch other people doing it, you stumble onto it. I thought that somebody should go through the thousands of features and pluck out the hundred that you really should know about your phone, your computer, email, and the Web, and so on.

That was the objective of the TED Talk. It was "10 Tips in Seven Minutes that You Really Should Know About Your Phone." Every time I described one, like "Hitting the on-screen space bar twice at the end of a sentence, to get a period, a space, and an automatically capitalized next word," things like that. Every time I went through this, the whole audience would go, "Oh!"

I could see them all writing stuff down, and so I thought, all right, this needs to be a book. It was never meant to be a series. It was just a one-off thing. It hit *The New York Times* Best Seller list, which I had never done after all those books, and then the conversation went, "Well, maybe there should be a sequel."

That's what the second book is, *Pogue's Basics: Life*, which expands the scope a bit to life in general—food, home, travel, cars, clothing, and people. It's life hacks, but it's really clever ones. The third one, *Pogue's Basics: Money*, which I think may, to my great surprise, be the book I was born to write, more than any of those others. We are leaving money on the table, everywhere we look, there's not a single area of life where you're not probably overpaying.

**Nicky:** I think everyone would like to hear an overview of your writing process. How do you start a new book? How do you work out the structure? How do you research it?"

**David:** It's not especially fancy. I'm a very fast writer, and I write like I talk. For years, I dictated. I actually had a wrist problem and wound up dictating everything I wrote. It starts with an outline, and the outline covers the chapter breakdowns, and then the main topics. The tertiary heads I come up with as I'm writing.

For computer software or phones, it's actually not so difficult. It's not like writing a novel where there is no prescribed structure. There's definitely a structure if you want to cover the entirety of an operating system. You have to fit everything into that outline somewhere, and you know if you're missing a piece, and you know if you've added too many pieces.

It's a combination of pounding away, holding down keys, and testing things myself. Frequently, I resort to emailing the PR people for help. They cheerfully go to the engineers and get the answers for me, which is a huge blessing for tech writers writing books.

**Nicky:** You've done all this TV work. You're a tech correspondent for *CBS News Sunday Morning*, you've hosted three PBS shows—*NOVA ScienceNOW*, *Making Stuff* specials,

*Hunting the Elements*. You've also done *It's All Geek to Me* for the Science channel. How does your experience as a technology writer come in to play when you work in front of the camera?

**David:** I guess everything that I'm doing on TV is in the same vein. It's documentation. It's taking that which is technical and abstruse and trying to explain it for a layman. That's all I do, in many different forms.

The *Sunday Morning* stuff and the *NOVA* stuff is explaining tech and science. So was the *Discovery* series. It's tremendously fun. It makes a great, great partner with the very solitary act of writing. TV is extremely collaborative. You hug and cry when the series is over. It makes a very good combo.

**Nicky:** You've won three Emmy Awards, two Webby Awards, and a Loeb Award for journalism. Which one are you proudest of?

**David:** I think it's probably that first Emmy, for a story that I did and wrote. It involved sitting in Google's atrium at their headquarters and playing a song parody on the grand piano they had there. I like to think that no other correspondent could have presented their story in quite that way, so that one was a big occasion for me, and it sits proudly on the piano in the living room.

**Nicky:** In 2013, you left the *New York Times*, and in 2014, there was a big splashy new entrance for you. You became the editor of the website, Yahoo! Tech.

**David:** Yahoo! had been approaching me all that summer of 2013, and I had been doing a weekly *Times* column for a very long time, 50 columns a year for 13 years. It's a lot, and Yahoo! was saying, "We want you to be a black box. We will give you money, manpower, resources, design help, and engineers. You make us something cool."

That was, of course, appealing to my creative side and to my ego, and it meant, for starters, that my columns could be much more fanciful in their presentation, with audio, video, and color pictures, and dozens of them. There's just no limit to the way I could present tech stories when I had multimedia and the Web at my command.

They told me that I could hire anyone I wanted, the best writers in the country, to be my colleagues, which I did. Yahoo! Tech became the first of Yahoo!'s digital magazines, as they called them.

Right now, my columns are appearing on both Yahoo! Tech and Yahoo! Finance. It's kind of a riot. You can tell from the numbers and the number of comments, that these are getting just colossal readership. If it's true that a writer wants to be read, then this is the ultimate.

**Nicky:** You've had a really interesting career path, and you are obviously respected in a lot of different fields.

Writing about technology started all of it, more or less, and explaining technology started all of it. In my opinion, being a technical communicator is your core.

**David:** That's right.

**Nicky:** How much satisfaction do you take in making users of all kinds—not just tech users—successful, and in basically being a teacher?

**David:** That is it. That is the core, and that is the ultimate payoff. More than any award or gig, the thing that makes me jump out of bed in the morning are those days when I get some email—and it happens maybe once a year—where somebody will say, "I got out of college, and I didn't know what I was doing. I was troubled, and I got one of your books, and I got so into this operating system that I became a Microsoft Certified 'whatever,'" or "I now am a Genius at the Apple Store, and I'm 22 and proud," stories like that.

Children—if I'm recognized on the street or in airports, by in large, it's because of the *NOVA* specials. I've now done 18 hours of *NOVA* specials. They were never intended to be children's shows, and yet somehow, I guess because I have a very juvenile sense of humor on these shows and in real life, kids, all the time on airplanes are like, "Mom, it's the *NOVA* guy."

It's just the most incredible, incredible feeling to know that maybe, just maybe, I've made a dent in this larger problem of kids losing interest in science.

**Nicky:** It's just been a pleasure talking to you, David, about your path and your career. I look forward to seeing you in your next TED Talk, or reading your next book, or whatever comes down the pike.

**David:** Well, thank you. I give a lot of talks, about 50 a year, but nothing, nowhere, have I ever felt so among my peeps as those two STC Conferences. We spoke the same language, faced the same concerns, deal with the public, think about the public the same way. It was an amazing experience, twice. So, thank you for that. ■



**NICKY BLEIEL** is a Watson Information Developer at IBM. She is an STC Past President and has 20 years of experience writing and designing information for software products in a variety of industries. She is a popular speaker at many conferences, including the STC Summit, WritersUA, tcworld, ProComm, CIDM (Content Management Strategies/DITA North America), and LavaCon; and has been published in STC's Intercom, tcworld magazine, ISTC Communicator, and more. She has interviewed a number of experts in technical communication, including Kathy Sierra, John Carroll, and Nancy Duarte, as well as Owner's Manual cohost Marcus Hunt. See [nickybleiel.com](http://nickybleiel.com) for a list of her talks and articles.

# A “Double-Double” Career: A Conversation with Saul Carliner

BY PHYLISE BANNER | *Fellow*

OVER THE PAST 35 years, Saul Carliner has contributed in a variety of ways to the field of technical communication, including co-editing a popular textbook in the field (*Techniques for Technical Communicators*, edited with Carol Barnum), editing the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*—one of the major journals in the field—designing STC international and regional conferences, serving as STC President, regularly publishing in *Technical Communication* (where he has received a record six awards in the Frank R. Smith Outstanding Article Competition) and *Intercom*, and receiving all of the top career achievement awards from the STC, including Fellow, the President’s Award, two Distinguished Chapter Service Awards, the Kenneth Rainey Award for Excellence in Research, and the Jay R Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Saul describes his career as a double-double career: with stints in industry and academia each in technical communication and instructional design (educational technology). He is currently a Professor of Educational Technology at Concordia University, where he served as Provost’s Fellow for e-Learning for four years, is a member of the Faculty Senate, and has received the Alumni Award for Teaching and been inducted into Provost’s Circle of Distinction. Also an industry consultant, he has provided strategic advice and workshops to organizations throughout the world like Alltel Wireless, Bronx Zoo, Chubb Insurance, IBM, Lowe’s, PwC, Turkish Management Centre and several U.S. and Canadian government agencies.

He has published 10 books, 50 peer-reviewed articles, and over 200 professional articles. He is a Fellow and Chair of the Certification and Education Advisory Committees for the Canadian-based Institute for Performance and Learning and a past Research Fellow of the Association for Talent Development.



I do not recall when or how Saul and I met, but I can tell you that he once saved my life. He was at the wheel of my car driving home from a friend’s wedding talking vehemently about what we can learn from TV, when a car skidded in front of us, spun 180 degrees, and ended up facing us. Saul swerved around the car effortlessly, and never stopped talking. If you know Saul, you know exactly what I mean.

It was an honor to interview my favorite STC rock star, Summit mentor, and life saver, Saul Carliner.

**Phylise Banner:** Tell us about your education, and let’s start with an overall picture of where you went to school and what you studied.

**Saul Carliner:** As an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon University, I majored in practically everything. Seriously.

When I wasn’t trying to drop out of school between my freshman year and the end of my junior year, I changed majors. Then I started adding them. During those years, academics weren’t particularly important to me. Student activities were, and I served as managing editor of the school paper, editor-in-chief of the yearbook, class representative on the College Council, and as a member



of a number of other groups. At first, they were just fun but eventually they influenced my choice of majors and careers. By my senior year, I officially had three majors—Economics, Professional Writing, and Public Policy and Management—as well as a minor in Administration and Management Science. (I was one course shy of a major.)

But when I graduated with my degree, I never intended to return to school and distinctly remember taking one last look at the library and saying, “I never have to set foot inside a classroom again.”

“Never” happened four years later, when I took my first graduate course. By then, I was working as a technical writer for IBM in Rochester, Minnesota, working on computer documentation and began my first stint with volunteering with STC. I delivered my first conference presentation that term, at the STC conference in Seattle. I was now taking my career as seriously as I had not taken my education, and wanted to earn a master’s degree. Rochester did not have a university; Winona State was the nearest school and I expected to get a master’s degree in English. The term I took that course, I transferred into manufacturing training and began developing training programs. That’s when I first learned about instructional design and also learned that the University of Minnesota had a degree program in technical communication. I transferred to that program the following fall and completed a master of agriculture (you read that correctly) in technical communication. For the first half of the program, I commuted from Rochester to St. Paul once a week—about two hours each way. I took an educational leave to complete the degree as a full-time student. While studying, I integrated work and STC projects into class assignments, like a study of participants in the STC Annual Conference and guest editing an issue of *Technical Communication* (my first).

As I was completing the degree, I decided that I wanted to continue my education. But I also realized I was not the type of person who could be a full-time PhD student, so I returned to IBM, but transferred to Atlanta where I first worked as an instructional designer on the elearning programs for the original IBM PC and its replacement, the PS/2. About a year and a half later, I started a part-time PhD in instructional technology—the academic field underlying instructional design—at Georgia State University. My classmates were primarily academics seeking a credential to further their careers; I was the only practicing professional. As with my master’s studies, I integrated work and STC projects into my studies. Perhaps the most significant was an article in *Technical Communication* about what students should expect from a professionally oriented master’s degree, which was a class project for a curriculum design course.

Two terms after I started my PhD studies, I changed jobs again; as a marketing programs administrator with a newly formed business unit whose mission was to sell IBM’s customer education programs. Although my responsibilities evolved over the first year of the job, I eventually

received responsibility for all marketing communications in the business unit, which gave me another perspective on communication. In addition, I had employee communication responsibilities in all of my jobs, too, producing newsletters, speech writing, and writing policies and procedures guides, depending on the need.

Also central to my education were some of the education courses I took on the job. While I was working in the product development lab at IBM, I took several courses on computer science that were equivalent to masters’ level courses, and took additional ones when I was working in Atlanta. I also took some of IBM’s famous sales school (just part, not the entire program) and completed a couple of MBA courses that the company offered through its training.

Although I have been fortunate to complete two graduate degrees, I am also fortunate to have had so many opportunities to learn through formal training and on-the-job; and all have contributed to my career and influenced my interests.

**Phylise:** You’ve worn quite a few hats over the years. Looking back, can you share how your vocation has evolved to where you are now?

**Saul:** Although I did not originally design my early career the way it unfolded, I did have an explicit goal of trying to spend my first 10 years experiencing all parts of the corporation—product development, manufacturing, operations, and marketing—which I pretty much did, but did so while working in some sort of communications capacity. Even when I worked as an instructional designer, I saw myself more as a writer rather than an educator, even though instructional design is a sub-discipline of education. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to remain at a large company for the rest of my career.

One of my original thoughts was that I would launch a consulting practice when I finished my PhD. But IBM was downsizing and offering a generous severance package to volunteers, so I decided to move up the schedule a few years.

But my first assignment was teaching a master’s course on online information at Southern Tech (now Kennesaw State). And I really liked teaching. But I also liked industry, and spent the next decade going back and forth between academe and industry, between technical communication and instructional design, and literally bouncing all over the place: moving back to Minnesota (where I worked for a consulting firm then the University of Minnesota in the department where I earned my master’s degree), then to Massachusetts (for another academic position in technical communication) to Hong Kong (where I taught and helped set up a research unit in technical communication) and eventually Montreal (for my current position). In between bouncing back and forth and moving all around, I figured out a lot about myself.

Helping with this discovery were a few pivotal consulting assignments. One was a partnership with what is now

Lakewood Media. I was asked to help with the planning of their first Online Learning Conference and write a white paper about online learning that would support the event. The 20-page white paper grew to about 120 but rather than being angry with me, the client loved it, posted it on their site, and it became their top visited item in the early years of online learning. They also invited me to develop a number of workshops for their conferences, and provided me with the opportunity to host their conferences in Singapore and their Training Director's Forum. A third involved developing an elearning strategy for medical device manufacturer, which taught me about working with stakeholders as well as how to clearly structure and promote a plan.

Also helping with this discovery, were a few pivotal volunteer assignments. One was serving as a volunteer administrator with the Pan African Institute for Development in Buea, Cameroon, where I spent the summer of 1996 while Olympic visitors had rented my home. Another was participating in several community leadership development programs, including one in Atlanta and another in the Twin Cities. But the most significant was my term as STC President, an experience that my predecessor Liz Babcock and I labeled as equivalent to an MBA. I learned about nonprofit management and governance, two areas in which I continue to work to this day.

What I learned through this is that I wanted to work on some long-term projects that might not have commercial potential, a goal that's better suited to an academic career than an industry one. Those projects straddle the line between corporate communications and corporate training, so I didn't really have to make a choice between them. But I would have to find a department that would support this dual set of interests, and I found that at my present university, which I joined in 2003. And after 10 years of changing jobs and states or countries about every 18 to 24 months, I've had a remarkably stable life for the past decade and a half. The only move I've made is to a new office, when my entire department moved last summer.

**Phylise:** Which projects were your favorites, and why?

**Saul:** Before I left industry for academe, I worked on a variety of projects: user guides, elearning courses, and marketing communication programs. Many were memorable but three stand out.

We battled for a year over the presentation strategy, ultimately challenging one another to a usability test. Theirs failed completely while ours generally worked.

One was my first major projects: a troubleshooting guide for a mid-range computer (one in which a central processor would run between 10 and 300 workstations). It was a classic technical communication conundrum: the engineers developed the most complex computer on the market at the time and, between releases 2 and 3, decided that system operators should diagnose problems on their own before calling for service. Unfortunately, the system wasn't designed to support that. We battled for a year over the presentation strategy, ultimately challenging one another to a usability test. Theirs failed completely while ours generally worked. An article on the resulting product was my first in *Technical Communication*.

A second was a marketing communications program for IBM Education, which had just been established as a separate business unit. I developed and implemented a corporate identity program, and oversaw all placement regarding advertising and promotion. For the business unit, the effort contributed to our doubling our revenue in the time I worked there. For my career, the project provided a learning experience on whose lessons I continue to draw to this day. I learned about measuring the impact of communications (my first lesson was when I told my boss it wasn't feasible and he explained how it was—I stood corrected), business strategy, the limits and challenges of complex content management systems (long before others were working with them), and the beauty of the Helvetica and Bodoni fonts (to this day, I think those two are among the classiest looking typefaces out there), among other topics.

In addition to traditional communication and training assignments, I've also worked on a variety of memorable projects through my roles in professional associations and as a faculty member. One of the things that I appreciate most about these projects is that some have a significant impact on people's work and lives.

One such project has been my work on STC conferences. I served as program manager of the 1989 conference in Chicago and introduced a number of programming changes that STC continued to use, including progressions and post-session evaluations. Soon after, I became general manager of the 1992 conference for Atlanta (where I lived at the time). The then-STC President asked me to draft a broader plan for STC education that included both the conference and a broader education effort. Leveraging what I knew about the conferences and educational programs offered by other associations, I proposed a renamed and reworked STC Conference—the STC Summit (the first of which you and I worked on together)—as well as the certificate programs we offer online and at the conference.

A third project of which I am proud is my term as Editor-in-Chief of the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*. It was a terrific experience and I had the great opportunity to work with Helen Grady, who's one of the most low-key and supportive people I've met, and receive advice from, among others, George Hayhoe, who

Take the initiative in networking and furthering your career. Go by yourself to an STC meeting or similar professional meet-up and introduce yourself to the people there. They might be strangers now, they could end up being your closest colleagues in the future.

previously served as Editor-in-Chief of *Technical Communication* and succeeded me on the *Transactions*. As *Transactions* editor, I was able to do two things that were important to me. One was establishing a format for reporting research. It was a response to a theme that emerged in all of the peer reviews I received: every review asked authors to share one or another piece of technical information about their research. In most cases, authors had actually neglected to share the information because they didn't realize it was necessary. In others, the authors actually had reported it but not where reviewers were looking for it. Ultimately, reporting research is a rhetorical genre with specific expectations—and our reporting format merely made those expectations explicit and ensured that like information was consistently reported in the same part of an article, regardless of the type of research. This, in turn, would address concerns that one research camp had with another, because it would make all research more transparent and the researcher's choices clearer. Most significantly, this would facilitate the learning of researcher, because readers who became familiar with the format would be able to read across articles and observe how researchers working in different research traditions—critical, qualitative or quantitative—handled the same types of research choices.

This format also helped me to advise authors by providing them with more pointed advice rather than just saying “Hey, here are the reviews. Now go figure it out,” which is the typical response of editors. I always found that frustrating as an author. And, for the most part, the authors appreciated the extra step.

**Phylise:** What advice would you give to someone just starting out in the industry?

**Saul:** I've got two pieces of advice.

First, take the plunge, especially when opportunity knocks. It may be a new project, it may be a new job, or a volunteer opportunity. One of the best jobs I ever had I earned because of my volunteer experience. As I noted to the hiring manager, if he looked at the “experience” section of my resume, I didn't have much that was relevant to the job. But if he looked at the “volunteer experiences” section, he'd find all of the relevant experience he sought, as well as the results to demonstrate that I had performed effectively in these positions.

But also take the plunge when it comes to advocating for yourself and taking initiative. In terms of advocating for yourself, don't be afraid to politely address issues like

promotions, raises, and performance appraisals. After all, it's your career—and who else cares about it as much as you do. In terms of taking initiative, take initiative on projects. Don't wait for technical experts to provide material for you—dig it up yourself and you'll probably get more material from a greater variety of perspectives, which will allow you to prepare stronger content.

Similarly, take the initiative in networking and furthering your career. Go by yourself to an STC meeting or similar professional meet-up and introduce yourself to the people there. They might be strangers now, they could end up being your closest colleagues in the future.

The second piece of advice is to think about your whole life, not just a single career or life event. Most people starting their careers in their early to mid-twenties will be in the workforce for a minimum of 40 years and probably 50. Most career development books focus on the fact that you'll be switching careers at least once and switching jobs even more than that.

With that in mind, look at people who are older than you; who are 40, 50, 60, and even 70. Who has a career that you admire? What do you admire about that? Could you integrate that characteristic into your career?

Just as importantly, think about people who have careers that you don't admire. What is it that you don't like about their careers? How did they end up there (to the best of your ability to figure that out)? How can you avoid this pit fall?

Also think about what you'd like to accomplish outside of your career, because life is about much more than work. Most of us want some sort of family and social life, some of us want to have an impact on the community, and some of us harbor “novelistic ambitions” (a term a co-worker of mine coined years ago). In fact, when I'm in a bookstore and going through the authors who contributed to a short story collection, I frequently find that some of the contributors work as technical writers. **■**



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# Technical Communication Pioneer: A Conversation with Ginny Redish

BY HILLARY HART | *Fellow*



GINNY REDISH IS a seminal figure in the development of technical communication as a mature, if ever-changing, field of endeavor. She pioneered document design, usability as a design technique, and much more. From her leadership of the Document Design Center in Washington,

DC, beginning in the late 1970s, to her projects championing “plain language,” to her foundational work on user-experience research and design, Ginny has been a generous thought-leader. She has shared her work and her research results with academic and industry practitioners through seminars, training, consultation, and decades-long participation in professional societies such as STC. Her latest book, *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works* (2d ed., 2012) has been described by Jared Spool as “the most important book on the shelves of anyone who creates websites that have words on them.”

I’m sure I first met Ginny at one of the many STC conferences at which she presented—through the years, she has been a mentor and friend, always encouraging and celebrating my interest in bringing the work and culture of academia closer to the work of industry and government practitioners. Ginny sees herself as part of a community and a continuum within technical communication. One of the things you will notice in this interview is the generosity with which she mentions and praises the work of others.

**Hillary Hart:** I’m on the line with Ginny Redish, one of the founders of the field of usability, which is now usually called “user experience.” Ginny, of course, has been a thought-leader in many areas of technical communication, this

multifaceted field that we are in. And we’re going to hear today some of these thoughts. Ginny, it’s great to see you.

**Ginny Redish:** It’s great to see you, Hillary. Thank you for asking me to do this.

**Hillary:** Well, thank you for doing it. I’m so pleased, really, to be able to talk with you about your life and career in technical communication. We’ve actually known each other for some years. And at some point, I discovered that we both had (different) degrees from Bryn Mawr College, and you did your bachelor’s work in Russian!

Would you talk about your early formal schooling and how it set up or didn’t set you up for a career in technical communication/usability?

**Ginny:** Well, I think it’s very interesting because many people of my generation came into technical communication and then into usability fairly late because we didn’t even know about it as a potential career. As an undergraduate, I didn’t know that that was a possible job. I was very interested in language. I’ve always been fascinated by language, and I was interested in Russian for two reasons: one, I really wanted to read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in the original, which I think is what makes many English majors into English majors because they want to get into that literature. But also for the young people who may not remember, this was the 1960s and Russian was the language that did have potential jobs. I think today it would probably be Chinese you would study. So it was something that I thought of having a job in, although in fact that isn’t what actually happened. But it was fascinating to do.

**Hillary:** So, what you are saying brings up that metaphor a lot of technical communicators are familiar with: the multiple paths that somehow converge in a career in technical communication. So let’s keep following the paths in your career. Would you talk about other early experiences in your professional life and how they led, or

didn't quite lead, to the American Institutes for Research in Washington, DC, in the late 1970s?

**Ginny:** So, after my undergraduate degree, I got to spend a year in Europe, which was really great. I had a Fulbright to study Russian in the Netherlands, which was a much nicer place to do it than Moscow was at the time. Again, in the 1960s.

And then I went to graduate school in linguistics. My love of languages and what I did as a graduate student have nothing to do with my career, except for the fact that it was really about analyzing and synthesizing data—which is what we do all the time—and then communicating it clearly. I discovered that I happened to be a good plain language writer and I ended up in Washington D.C. because I married a fellow graduate student, actually an MIT student—I was at Harvard, he was at MIT. Cambridge people think that's a mixed marriage.

**Hillary:** [laughter] I know.

**Ginny:** He finished a year before I did and got a job at the University of Maryland. I needed a career when I finished graduate school; and, in Washington, DC, there are a lot of think tanks, like the American Institutes for Research. I was actually hired there—after I stayed home with a couple of babies for several years—as a research associate to work on language policy.

Then, in 1977, Jimmy Carter (and, again, this may be ancient history for some of our young technical communicators...) put forth an executive order. Carter was very interested in having people be able to participate in government. He believed that government should be transparent, very much like the Clinton administration and the Obama administration. The order said that everything coming out of the government should be in clear writing. And I guess I was at the right place at the right time. AIR—the American Institutes for Research—which is a not-for-profit think tank very interested in social issues, decided that it was appropriate for us to bid on a project in which the government wanted someone to worry about why government documents are so difficult for people. It was the beginning of another round of the plain language movement. I still didn't know about technical communication, but I knew about clear writing. We got the project, with Carnegie Mellon University and a private plain language firm in New York, Siegel and Gale. And we set about answering that question: why are government documents so difficult for people and what can be done about them?

We did that for three years. We made a lot of progress at the time. And then the government changed in the early 1980s, but it was also the moment of the personal computer, right? Remember? The personal computer. And that's when I discovered technical communication and STC.

**Hillary:** The story of your founding the Document Design Center in DC within AIR is really a compelling piece of technical communication history, along with the subsequent breakthroughs and projects that you managed. Would you talk more about those?

**Ginny:** The project I mentioned that I got to lead in the late '70s and early '80s was called the Document Design Project, funded by the Department of Education. And that was an interesting group because there were linguists; there were reading specialists; there were psychologists involved in it. They wanted a team with linguists and writing specialists and reading specialists and psychologists, and that's the team we put together. That team came from AIR and the group at Carnegie Mellon University, including Karen Schriver, who was then a graduate student—now another active STC Fellow, from Pittsburgh—and Professor John Richard Hayes, who was studying writing at the time. I also hired English majors, English PhDs, anthropologists, philosophy majors, and psychologists to be part of this team.

I think one of the reasons that we were the successful bidders on this project was that we promised that we wouldn't just do the three years of the government funding. We would make it into an ongoing center. And that's what we named the Document Design Center. We got to do research. We got to disseminate research. We wrote three books. One is called *Guidelines for Document Designers*, which I think has spread quite widely.

**Hillary:** Yes.

**Ginny:** Karen Schriver and other people at Carnegie Mellon started a comparable center. They called it the Communication Design Center. I think the two centers together had a big influence on the plain language movement.

**Hillary:** Yes, indeed. Big, big, impact. I'm curious about your subsequent projects because these are reforms that have stuck, you know? And I wonder which success is sort of your fondest.

**Ginny:** Well, I think two. There's the work that came into STC in the early '80s. Again, young people probably don't remember what computer documentation looked like in the '60s and '70s when it was very much system oriented. You had to know what commands you needed to look up to know how to use a program.

Documentation wasn't in user language, it was in system language. It was organized in system terminology, not in users' words and what users want to do. Then in the early '80s, when the personal computer came out, the computer companies became much more interested in communicating not only with system administrators in the back room, but with ordinary people. And we were among the first to create user-oriented, task-oriented documentation.

So instead of having to know the word “grep” and look up how to command the computer to “grep,” the manuals we wrote said “printing your file,” which is what the command “grep” in UNIX, actually, I believe, does. [...] It was that sort of change that we made. And in our earliest example of a computer manual for IBM, we created icons and put them on the tabs in the paper manual. It was user oriented. We took our manuals to usability testing and were humiliated with some of the things we had done that confused people, but we learned the technique of actually trying it out before it got released.

**Hillary:** What a concept.

**Ginny:** Yes, yes. And today that’s a fairly common thing to do, and people realize that people don’t actually read these manuals from cover to cover, they jump into them. In fact, today, the manual probably is online and you’re just searching for a little piece of it. So I think one of our successes that I’m very proud of is our contribution to what you might call modern technical documentation. Other people were doing the same things at the same time. JoAnn Hackos, another former—like yourself—former President of STC, and her group out in Denver were doing similar work. And we were doing research of the sort that Jack Carroll, who is now a professor at Penn State, but who was at IBM at the time, was doing: research on how people actually use manuals. So that’s another contribution, I think ... to say you can’t just take information and write it, you have to figure out what people do, and make things that work for them.

On the government side, I think the success I’m most proud of is being part of what happened in Washington State, which has now spread to many other states.

**Hillary:** Tell us about that.

**Ginny:** As a physics professor, my husband has a sabbatical every seven years. In the early ‘90s, he took his sabbatical at the University of Washington, where there is a wonderful technical communication group that included Judy Ramey, who, again, is an STC Fellow, now retired from the university. I got to work with Judy that year. I also got invited by an STC member who worked for the state government to address a group of government writers who had a monthly brown-bag lunch meeting with a speaker. I talked about what plain language in government would look like. And from there, lots of wonderful things have happened.

**Hillary:** Such as, the state government’s adoption of plain language for regulations and policy statements. I just want to say, for those of you who don’t know, a lot of Ginny’s knowledge about and efforts with plain language ended up in articles and research behind the compilation of guidelines at *usability.gov*. I think a lot of people don’t know

I think one of our successes that I’m very proud of is our contribution to what you might call modern technical documentation.

about this site. I looked at it the other day, and it’s still fabulously useful and well designed. So for those of you who may not know about usability.gov, check it out.

Ginny, let me just switch gears a bit here. You and I have both talked on many occasions about the apparent disjunction between academic researchers and technical communication practitioners. For many reasons, academics seem to find it hard to do and publish, in your words, “ecological research that asks the questions practitioners actually have.” Could you talk more about how a more fruitful academe-industry relationship and research program could work?

**Ginny:** You know I think that is changing slightly over the last few years, Hillary. I think there have always been a few people: yourself, Judy Ramey, and other folks at the University of Washington who have seen the need to do more ecological research. I think there are more practitioner-academic collaborations happening, in which there is a real project. A lot of technical communication classes involve people doing actual project work—having a real experience—and writing it up. Other classes are doing more of that. I think all through academia there’s more interest in preparing people for work.

**Hillary:** We call that now “experiential learning.”

**Ginny:** “Experiential learning”—that’s a great term. And that is what I mean. So I’m hopeful that more and more of that will happen.

**Hillary:** In your latest book, *Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, you suggest thinking of content as “conversation.” For anybody not familiar with the book, can you talk about what you mean by that?

**Ginny:** Yes. When I do workshops, I always start with having people think about when they recently went to a typical website (not games or entertainment or even news sites, but a more typical website). When you think about why you went, what you were trying to find out, you realize that you went because you had a question in mind. You went because you wanted to know a particular something. And that question is a conversation—it’s the start of a conversation. You want the website to act as a conversational



partner to talk back to you. And then you want to ask the next question and have the website talk back to you again. I find it very interesting to think about websites that way. Many people are now going to websites entirely on their phones. Right? So we have a device that was meant to be for the kind of conversation you and I are having, although we're having it over a computer and not in between two telephones.

**Hillary:** But it's synchronous.

**Ginny:** It's synchronous. It is a conversation. And yet they're using that device not to talk, but to have a written conversation. On a website, the conversation is not synchronous. It's asynchronous. It's not in exactly the same time, but it still is a conversation. And, therefore, web content works best when it's written as if it were a conversation, with personal pronouns, with short sentences, with active voice, with thinking about the person you are having that conversation with, what they want to know, and what information they need. So "conversation" works very well as a metaphor.

**Hillary:** In 2013, you received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the User Experience Professionals Association. Congratulations.

**Ginny:** Thank you.

**Hillary:** Of course, you're still an active consultant and trainer. At this stage in your career, how do you choose the projects that you will work on?

**Ginny:** Well, I have the luxury of choosing at this stage. I've been my own little consulting company for the last 20 some years, and I've done a variety of projects, a lot of them in usability or usability testing, that is, helping people get people to try out what they are developing or to do early research. Given the fact that I can pick and choose, I think it's interesting that I've come back to my love of technical communication. The projects I'm mostly doing now are helping people write plain language web content. And I really enjoy being a technical writer.

**Hillary:** Well, I gotta ask the big "where are we headed" question. As a thought-leader, Ginny, where do you think the technical communication field is headed? How can practitioners and academics prepare themselves?

**Ginny:** The first thing to say from my long career and your somewhat shorter but also active career is that we have to always be in learning mode. We don't know what the next device will be. We don't know what the next technology will be. But we do know that when it comes out, we will have to learn it well enough to be able to explain it to

people and help them use it. And so being open minded and always out there finding out how people are actually living their life and doing things I think is going to be even more critical.

If I can say anything to you folks in the university, it's to get out and see the world and make sure that at least some of the classes that your students take help them get out and see the world.

Where are we heading? I think the other place that we've been heading for the last couple of decades is away from big, honking paper. And that's something that I think a number of the people in STC had to work their way into: to realize that it is all online now and that it's all in small chunks now. We know nobody ever really read the great big clunky manual cover to cover. So we tried to write paper books in which people could jump in and get what they needed and jump back out again. And now all that stuff is online and it's got to be in small pieces. We have to break up great piles of information into structured pieces that can then be combined and recombined and put out in any medium.

You'll notice I didn't talk about tools. I know that a lot of technical communicators focus on tools or are forced to focus on tools, because jobs often say you need to know this tool or the other. But it isn't about the tools. The tools will change. It's about understanding users and what makes good writing. And also this new idea—well, new as in the last few decades—that it's about chunks of information. It's not about long-winded paper.

**Hillary:** Well, Ginny, this has been such a pleasure. A great pleasure for me.

**Ginny:** Thank you very much for doing this, and I really appreciate STC doing this series of interviews. I look forward to listening to and reading those with other people, and I hope that this interests people not only because of the history that perhaps I bring by having been in the field for so long, but thinking about now and the future. **i**



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# Researcher, Teacher, Consultant: A Conversation with Karen Schriver

BY ALAN HOUSER | *Fellow*

I FIRST MET Dr. Karen Schriver in Pittsburgh, PA, where she was a professor of English at Carnegie Mellon University. I had the privilege of taking one of Karen's classes, "Integrating Visual and Verbal Text," while a student at Carnegie Mellon University in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program.

Karen taught me the importance of document design, readability, legibility, audience analysis, and user testing. Karen's influence continues to inform my career. More importantly, Karen has helped hundreds of organizations improve their documents, and millions of people have benefited from her work.

Karen is a researcher and consultant in information design and clear communication, and the author of hundreds of research articles and book contributions. She may be best known for her book, *Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Text for Readers*. Published in 1997, *Dynamics in Document Design* is in its 9th printing, and has earned its place in the technical communication canon. Karen is president of KSA Communication Design and Research, and continues to be one of the most influential members of our profession. Recently, Karen and I met at her home near Pittsburgh for an engaging discussion about her work and her career. What follows is an excerpt from that conversation.

**Alan Houser:** I'm Alan Houser and I'm sitting here with Karen Schriver, and am thrilled to have her as one of the featured people in this edition of *STC Intercom*.

So, Karen, one of the fascinating things about you is your work, and especially *Dynamics in Document Design*. I continue to see references to *Dynamics in Document Design* in the *STC* journal and *Intercom*. So I've been very impressed by its longevity.

Typing "Karen Schriver" into Google Scholar yields 8,000 results. Do you track your citations?

**Karen Schriver:** I look at them every so often, in Google Scholar and ResearchGate. It's really just been recently, though, because I didn't even know that they were tracking them and sometimes will have many more hits than another, and you wonder ... Were they recent? When did



they happen? But interestingly Google Scholar will let you dig down into the details and tell you who cited you, where they cited you, even what page and what the context is.

ResearchGate is a more recent website that a lot of academic researchers are on. What's nice about it, unlike Google Scholar, is that it allows

the researcher to put up full papers on their website and allows people to download them straight from the site. And so you can track not only who is seeing you? What country are they from? What else are they looking at? What do they seem to be attracted to? And it allows you to promote certain articles or books that you might have ... You're allowed to pick your top five ... And it shows those as a kind of advertisement for your work. And then have keywords.

It's fun to change it up to see what people are attracted to.

For example: I wrote an article about a year or so ago for a new book about information design. It's called *Information Design as Principled Practice*, edited by Jorge Frascara. He's an Argentinian, a famous graphic designer, information designer. He brought together a bunch of people to write articles in English, that he then translated to Spanish and then wrote the book entirely in Spanish for the Spanish and South American markets. And then the publisher turned out to be not very supportive of promoting the book.

So he then took the book and moved it to the U.S. and had everybody do some minor revisions and then put it out again as an English book. And now it seems to be really taking off.

He let the authors keep their own copyright to their articles, so I had mine and I put it up on ResearchGate, and it was very strange, because the first month I had it up, I only had about 30 hits on it, but as time went on, I was getting more and more. Within another month I had a thousand, then I had two thousand, and I was like, "Where are all these people coming from and why would they be interested in this article?"

It was called "The Rhetoric of Redesign in Bureaucratic Settings." And it turns out that a lot of people want to know about that. In it, I recounted a project I had done for the



the Department of Transportation of a major U.S. city, redesigning a bunch of forms for them and the struggles that I went through in trying to get the revisions published.

In the end, it turned out that the legal team at this department said that they didn't want a plain language version. That they thought they could do a better job at it.

**Alan:** Even in publicly facing information?

**Karen:** Yes, it was horrifying. Because I had all of the people within the organization be very supportive. They had given me feedback. We had no money to test [with external subjects], so we tested it out on everybody within the organization.

Everyone was on board, and I got people saying, "Wow, is this really something that was designed by the Department of Transportation? We can't even believe it." And then the legal team put a big kabosh on it, and said, No, we're not putting that out because we didn't do it. Our fingerprints aren't on it. And "We don't like all of this plain-ness." And so unfortunately they still have the same lousy documents.

But the moral of the story is that ResearchGate allowed this article that would have been buried, because it's in an edited collection. Many edited collections never see the light of day in terms of big readership. So it was an opportunity for me to get it out. I get lots of feedback on it, I get lots of people saying, "Oh, those people, they really should have taken your advice." Because it was good work, and how could they act like that?

**Alan:** Why isn't plain language something that everybody just gets behind? I see a lot of organizational resistance to it. You mentioned the anecdote earlier that demonstrates this. What are your thoughts?

**Karen:** In 2010, President Barack Obama signed the Plain Writing Act. When he did that, he basically set a mandate, an unfunded mandate as they like to say in Washington, that all agencies and federal government bureaus and departments must comply with the Plain Writing Act.

Those of us who tried to get that legislation passed were part of this group called the Center for Plain Language, a non-profit located in Washington, DC, and we've been working on these issues for over 15 years.

We were trying to get President Obama to sign it. We wanted it to say "Plain Language Act." When we say "plain language," we mean writing and visual design. But the [U.S. Federal Government] thought it would be much too hard to get design in the mix, because they thought that design was fuzzy and vague, and that language couldn't mean everything. So they reduced it to writing. Then they reduced it further to a set of quick guidelines. Use active voice. Don't have too many words. User personal pronouns. And there's nothing wrong with this advice. It's fine, it's just that it doesn't go far enough.

And it makes it seem as though that's all there is to taking a plain language approach.

The big problem has been that government agencies are really vested in maintaining things as they've been. They don't want changes. They don't want to revise. And they sometimes need to be dragged kicking and screaming to make any changes.

But fortunately, there have been a core group of plain language advocates who are within government. They're another group that calls themselves PLAIN ([www.plainlanguage.gov](http://www.plainlanguage.gov)). Many of its members are the actual Federal Government employees who work in the Federal Aviation Administration or the Department of Defense or Homeland Security or the Department of Justice. And they are very serious about implementing plain language.

**Alan:** So how can we motivate otherwise reticent organizations to embrace plain language?

**Karen:** The way we have gotten this unfunded mandate to work is by humiliation.

And it actually has been quite successful. One of the things the Center for Plain Language has done is to create something called the Federal Plain Language Report Card. And so we grade the different agencies on how well they have been implementing the plain language legislation.

We grade them just like you would in grade school, on a scale of A to F. We have given Fs. And as you can imagine, nobody likes to get an F. And when we do this, the Washington Post snaps it up and runs with the story and puts up a picture of our report card and suddenly people are making calls. "Well, what about this plain language? Maybe we'll reconsider. It could be a good thing. Why don't you send somebody over here and give us some training?"

And then one thing leads to another. Some of the organizations like the [U.S. Department of Justice] have turned this ship around. The [U.S. Veterans Administration] has been working hard to create their documents in ways that the veterans can understand. Compliance rates are going up. They've got people who have the proof that shows that Veterans seem to be more pleased with the stuff they are getting.

**Alan:** What do you see next for the Plain Language movement?

**Karen:** Our next attack is plain language regulations. Whether you're a small business or a large business, you have to deal with regulations. Our position is much like Al Gore's, who said that Plain Language is a civil right. By that, he meant that we have a right to understand things that are obligated to us; that the government is asking us to do.

So if the government is asking me to provide workers' compensation insurance for my employees, for example, I need to understand what that law is. I shouldn't have to hire a lawyer to understand what the workers' compensa-

tion regulation is. Similarly, if you're a big company, you shouldn't have to hire a team of lawyers to understand what the regulations are. And there's a whole cadre of lawyers who of course don't want plain language legislation, because that's how they make their money.

So, it's a nested problem, but I think that the peel of the orange is coming off. And I think that more and more people are recognizing that plain language is good business. It's been primarily practitioners and government who are interested in plain language.

**Alan:** What about the private sector? Is there any hope? I'll often encounter a credit card contract or a mortgage agreement, and have the realization that they don't want me to understand [this document]. They have a business interest in making those contracts opaque. Is there any hope in changing those organizations?

**Karen:** The only way those organizations will change is if the competition changes. Fortunately, the competition is changing.

In the financial services industry, for example, a number of prominent information designers have been teaming up with some of the big firms. And they have been trying to persuade these folks that if you write a proxy statement that your shareholders can understand, that's a win. It's not being negative, it's not something you should be embarrassed about. And guess what? You can advertise that.

I have found that, sometimes, that competition is the best way to get change to occur.

**Alan:** I'm struck by how timeless the book (*Dynamics in Document Design*) is. The principles of document design, the principles of typography, importance of and techniques for usability testing, all still relevant. I'm amazed at how well the book has stood the test of time. But, if you were writing the book today, how would you approach it?

**Karen:** If I were doing the book today, I would really have to focus more on online reading.

In this book, I mainly take the point-of-view of [readers] of paper documents. I dabble in the online world there, but it really hadn't come into its own at that point. It was out there; certainly the Web had been around for quite a bit of time.

But what I would do if I had to do it over again would be ... probably I wouldn't write the same book, but I would write something that capitalized on one of the themes I tried to make clear in the book. That is, that people can really learn more from usability testing than just what to do with the document or the website at hand. And that they can actually benefit in the long term. And that the more you do testing, the more you are able to develop a mental model of a reader or a user or a stakeholder, and so probably what I would do is take examples that are current from today's world, across platforms, across genres, and I would test theses, and I would have famous designers revise those.

And then I would try to make the book interactive by putting most of it on the Web, and having writers and designers look at an initial text that could be print, but probably would be more electronic, and to diagnose what they think a user or reader might do with that text and what problems they might have. And to have a forum for them to post problems, to note things they thought were good, note things they thought were bad, and have some kind of forum for sharing those ideas. And then, that they could have a kind of self-paced experienced where "OK, then you get to see some user protocols that were collected on that text. Or some feedback on preference, or some comprehension tests; whatever was available." And then [the reader] could say, "Hmmm ... here I was right, and here I missed that. Boy, I was really wrong about that." Basically, to give them that sense of "Here's where people really had difficulty." And then to show a revision that was created by somebody who was theoretically pretty good at doing revisions. And for whatever, whether it was for a cell phone, or a video, or some multimedia platform, and then to have the reader see the whole process of seeing a text, evaluating a text, getting feedback on a text, seeing a revision, and then making comments about the revision. "If it were me, I would have done this. Or if it were me, I would have done that." As we all know, there's really no answer ... there's no perfect solution. But there are real problems that people will come up with, even with something that we think is great.

**Alan:** A dynamic community-based learning experience?

**Karen:** Yes, I think so.

**Alan:** And when can we expect that?

**Karen:** <Laughter> Well, actually, first I'm working on a book on information design and plain language guidelines. I promised people that I would do this ... I've been working on this giant literature review over the past five years. It comes and it goes ... I come back to it, and then I think "Oh no, what was I thinking? Was I trying to organize the whole world of text and graphics?" So I was trying to shake out the key pieces of advice that we can take away from this research, primarily from where I left off in *Dynamics* today. So we have close to 15-20 years of stuff that's been out and there's a lot of stuff that's really good, and I've been kind of curious as to what form guidelines should take.

There are a lot of books that do something like that now, but they are mainly from a user interface perspective, and I thought maybe there's room for a book that brings together writing and design, that brings together research and pulls out some of the highlights that we've learned from that work.

**Alan:** You have a tremendous amount and breadth of experience. How do you describe yourself in this profession? Researcher, consultant? You have a lot of stories about many different encounters with organizations.

**Karen:** As you know, I started out as a professor at Carnegie Mellon. When I was wearing that hat, I was doing both teaching and research, as well as practical projects on the side. We had an organization that you were part of: the Communications Design Center, where we could do practical projects for business and industry. So, very early on in my career I got a kind of appetite for all three: teaching, research, and consulting.

I was lucky to be immersed in all of that. It gave me a great launching pad for having options ... and being able to pretty much call the shots in how I would like to carve out my career.

I started out with teaching and left to do my own company, KSA Communication Design and Research, which has been primarily a research and consulting company. So I would see myself today as both a researcher, a consultant,

and as a teacher. It just depends on the day what I'm doing. I've always felt really comfortable moving back and forth between the academic and business environment.

**Alan:** It's been a privilege to talk to you. You've shared many insightful stories and anecdotes and principles from your wonderful career. ■



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#### RESOURCES

Google Scholar — <https://scholar.google.com>

ResearchGate — <https://www.researchgate.net>

Center for Plain Language — <http://centerforplainlanguage.org>

Federal Plain Language Report Card — <http://centerforplainlanguage.org/report-cards/>

Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN) — <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>

Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) — <http://plainlanguagenetwork.org>

*Dynamics in Document Design: Creating Text for Readers* by Karen A. Schriver (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997).

The rhetoric of redesign in bureaucratic settings — From *Information Design as Principled Action: Making Information Accessible, Relevant, Understandable, and Usable*, ed. Jorge Frascara (Champaign, IL: Common Ground, 2015).

Reading on the Web: Implications for online information design — From *On Information Design*, 2016, [www.mao.si/News/E-book-On-Information-Design.aspx](http://www.mao.si/News/E-book-On-Information-Design.aspx).

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# Ask the Keynotes



BY NICKY BLEIEL | *Associate Fellow*

THE STC ANNUAL CONFERENCE (also known as the Technical Communication Summit) has been fortunate to host many distinguished keynote speakers over the years. I asked them what advice they had for technical communicators and what they admired most about the profession.

## What advice do you have for technical communicators?

“Experiment. Learn anything that anyone will teach you. Dabble. Test. Take on risk. Fail quickly and often. Be radically open about what you’re learning because your success comes from not being afraid to fail. Earn trust through humility because it helps you lead with empathy. Teach others so that we can all stop punishing failure and start rewarding learning. Start with the work, but expand your scope to the process, to teams, to culture, to organizations, and beyond. And never, ever let anyone diminish you or your work or tell you what you can’t do.”

—Jonathon Colman, *Product UX/Content Strategist, Facebook, 2014 Opening Keynote*

“Make sure you have tools in your arsenal to deal with your inner critic when it pops up, because no matter who we are or how good we are at what we do, it’s almost always there. If you find yourself sliding into perfectionism, remind yourself that “done is good.” If you’re procrastinating on a piece, remember that resisting the work feels far worse than finally doing it. And finally, if you ever feel like an impostor, remember the impostor syndrome paradox: that you only experience impostor syndrome when you are competent and skilled. Don’t let your inner critic keep you from doing the great work that you are capable of! Also, communicate what you need to, but still let your personality and sense of humor shine through. Just because it’s technical doesn’t mean you can’t

put a bit of you into it. Doing so will make the content more accessible and relatable, much more of a pleasure to read. And don’t we all want more enjoyable reading experiences, technical or otherwise?”

—Denise Jacobs, *Speaker, Author, and Creativity Evangelist; 2015 Closing Keynote*

“This may seem counterintuitive, but ... embrace jargon. Jargon is only problematic when it isn’t explained. When writers take the time to gloss jargon terms and set them in the proper context, the terms stop being barriers and instead welcome outsiders into the community of knowledge. Give your readers the necessary vocabulary to discuss highly specific topics efficiently and idiomatically. Knowing the ‘right’ word for something in a field is an intellectual pleasure, and it saves a lot of circumlocution and vagueness. At Wordnik, we spend a lot of time looking for well-written sentences that explain unusual or highly-technical terms (we call them ‘free-range definitions’) and we use them in place of dictionary definitions for words that haven’t yet been defined in traditional dictionaries. So make more of them, please!”

—Erin McKean, *Lexicographer, Founder of Wordnik.com, TED Speaker, 2010 Opening Keynote and Honorary Fellow*



Jonathon Colman



Denise Jacobs



Erin McKean

“As a technical writer, you most likely work in a highly analytical field writing and distilling volumes of complex information. There are times when someone may read a thoughtful 300-page manual with dense copy and figures, but today content needs to be more easily digestible than that. Research shows that attention spans are getting shorter, which means that information needs to be in smaller, more scannable chunks.”

—Nancy Duarte, CEO, Duarte Design,  
TED Speaker, 2015 Opening Keynote

“Laugh more! We take ourselves so very seriously, but communication is about connecting people and being deady serious all the time rarely helps. If you can find ways to make fun of yourself, your profession or even your project, you’ll free yourself to find better ways to think, behave, and to write.”

—Scott Berkun, Best-selling author and  
popular speaker, 2012 Opening Keynote

“First and foremost, understand the science. And admit to yourself when you don’t understand a component ... and then have a conversation with a communicative expert to better comprehend the phenomena.”

—Felice Frankel, Science Photographer, Research Scientist in the  
Center for Materials Science and Engineering at the Massachusetts  
Institute of Technology, 2005 Keynote and Honorary Fellow

“The coming challenge for technical communicators will be to design the complicated dance we will all play with AIs and bots. Will these services be sensitive subtle coaches and guardian angels, or obnoxious, dominating, Trumpian and controlling?”

—David Rose, Instructor and Researcher at the  
MIT Media Lab, 2016 Opening Keynote



Nancy Duarte



Scott Berkun



Felice Frankel



David Rose



Simon Singh



Vinton Cerf

**“Experiment. Learn anything that anyone will teach you. Dabble. Test. Take on risk.”**

—Jonathon Colman

“I think feedback is crucial, whether it is technical communication or anything else. I actively seek feedback from several people, perhaps with different perspectives, such as a fellow writer, a typical reader and an expert in the particular field that I am writing about. I emphasize the need for honesty, even if it means that some of the comments will be very negative. Dishonest feedback is worse than no feedback at all.”

—Simon Singh; Author, Journalist, and TV Producer;  
2007 Keynote and Honorary Fellow

“Know your audience. Find ways to relate your message to their experience. Use easily grasped metaphors that are accurate enough that if used to reason about a system or process or product, the conclusions based on the metaphor will hold well for the real thing. For example, I use “electronic postcards” to explain the behavior of Internet packets and protocols.”

—Vinton Cerf, one of the “Fathers of the Internet” along with  
TCP/IP co-inventor Robert Kahn, 2006 Co-Keynote  
(with Robert Kahn) and Honorary Fellow

## What do you admire most about the profession of technical communication?

“Technical communicators are agents of clarity sent to the front lines of an unclear world, fighting against both entropy and ambiguity. By simplifying that which is complex, by “making the unclear clear,” as Abby Covert puts it, you’re enabling people not just to understand more, but also to do more and even to be more. I can’t imagine a more noble, fulfilling pursuit—other than teaching technical communication, of course.”

—Jonathon Colman

“Technical communicators deserve our thanks and admiration because the work they do is largely underappreciated. Technical communicators perform essential work, for little or no recognition, under deadline pressure and often in low-information conditions. Good technical communication is like air: we need it to live (or at least to live well!), but we only really notice it when something’s wrong with it. I’m glad the STC exists to help give recognition and support the technical communicators! They deserve it.”

—Erin McKean

“Imparting real understanding of complex and esoteric things. Done well this is an art. Alan Alda is really good at it.”

—Vinton Cerf

# The 2015–2016 Salary Database Is Now Available for Download and Purchase

THE 2015–2016 SALARY DATABASE is now available for download. All 2017 members receive a free copy via email of the *Salary Database* PDF, which includes charts, maps, and an evaluation by an economist, as well as the Excel Workbook. Nonmembers may purchase the publication for \$149. Visit <https://www.stc.org/salary-database/> for full details.

The STC *Salary Database* is a tool that can be used to conduct more powerful job searches, make a strong case for a raise, or prepare department payroll budgets. The data in the *Salary Database* are drawn from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics' (BLS) Occupational Employment Statistics (OES), the main resource of human resource departments across the United States.

Use the STC *Salary Database* if you are:

- ▶ **An employee** looking for solid facts to back up a raise request
- ▶ **A manager** seeking salary figures to assist with setting budgets or bidding for projects
- ▶ **A freelancer** investigating average hourly fees for a different industry or city
- ▶ **A job-seeker** needing insight on what industries and what geographic areas hold the most new jobs




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Society for Technical Communication



- ▶ **A global technical communicator** looking for rates to charge or pay for a project or consultant in the United States
- ▶ **Any technical communicator** in need of either annual or hourly wage information

This year's data offers new insights into how the emerging recovery has and will continue to influence the demand for technical writers. The most dramatic story is the growing importance of export markets to the U.S. economy, but the *Database* also shows a shift from traditionally large markets for technical writers both regionally and by industry. The *Database* also highlights the largest and fastest-growing industries and geographic areas in terms of both wage growth and job growth.

2017 members now receive the Excel Workbook for free, which can be used to format, analyze, and manipulate the data easily. Visit <https://www.stc.org/salary-database/> for more information on the *Salary Database*. 

## FOUNDATION CERTIFICATION

STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC)



# NOW OPEN

For more information, visit [www.stc.org/certification](http://www.stc.org/certification).





# Gaylord National Resort Named STC Summit 2017 Official Hotel

THE 2017 SUMMIT takes place 7–10 May 2017 in Washington, DC. This year, the official conference location and hotel is the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center, located at 201 Waterfront Street, National Harbor, Maryland 20745.

The Gaylord National Resort is situated on the banks of the picturesque Potomac river, surrounded by the premier entertainment district, the National Harbor, and is only minutes from downtown Washington, DC. All Summit events including education sessions and the Expo Hall will take place on *one level* at the Gaylord, just steps away from your room. The Gaylord is a hotel experience like no other. It boasts a 19-story glass atrium with sweeping views of the Potomac River and National Harbor, luxurious guest rooms, and

a plethora of dining and relaxing options; you won't even have to leave the comfort of the Gaylord! Everyone who books their stay in the STC room block will receive:

- ▶ Two complimentary water bottles in the comfort of newly renovated guest rooms
- ▶ Daily complimentary high-speed wifi in your guest room
- ▶ Resort-style amenities including a spa and fitness center, indoor pool and six onsite restaurants
- ▶ A coupon book with a valued savings of \$100 for area attractions including the National Harbor, just steps from the Gaylord

With endless choices of activities outside your hotel room, we encourage you to come in early or extend your stay to take full advantage of your visit to the Washington, DC area.



STC has negotiated a **special conference room rate of \$229** (plus applicable taxes and fees) for single or double accommodations at the Gaylord National Resort.

Registration opens 1 December, with the super low, early bird rate of **\$895 only available for a limited time**. Register early to get the best rate possible and ensure your spot at the premier technical communication conference!

Check out the Summit website, [www.summit.stc.org](http://www.summit.stc.org), for full details on the preliminary program, Summit registration rates, additional hotel information, and activities in and around the National Harbor and Washington, DC. ■



© National Harbor

# Community Achievement Award Applications Due 29 January 2017

## What is the Community Achievement Award (CAA)?

The STC Community Achievement Award exists to recognize our communities for providing outstanding member services, modeling success, fostering innovation, encouraging collaboration, and ultimately serving the members of STC. This award honors STC communities that have achieved success by offering their members the best possible STC experience.

There are four levels of recognition: Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze.

An award of Bronze means that a community is running properly and providing programs and services that further the mission of the Society. Silver, Gold, and Platinum awards are given to communities that go above and beyond the minimum requirements. Awards are based on a point system that is defined in the Guidelines document found at [www.stc.org/community-achievement-awards/](http://www.stc.org/community-achievement-awards/).

The CAAs will be presented at the 2017 STC Summit in National Harbor, MD, just minutes outside of Washington, DC.

## Who Should Apply for the Award?

All STC communities (Chapters, SIGs, and Student Chapters) should apply for this award! There is a single application that has been created to accommodate the different community types.

Earning a CAA means that you have a successful community. You can post the award banner on your website, brochure, or other communications. It gives your community credibility, and people are more likely to join your community if you have a good track record.

## Why Should You Apply?

Take advice from community leaders who have applied for CAA and used it for community planning:

“Completing the CAA for our community is important for the following reasons:

- ▶ It helps us keep track of our accomplishments
- ▶ It also helps us identify opportunities for improvement
- ▶ Most of all, completing the CAA helps us formally recognize all our volunteers who work hard to make our community successful.”

—*Jamye Sagan, Past Co-Manager, IDL SIG*

“NEO STC has earned a Community Achievement Award from the Society for over ten years for its outstanding service to members.

These distinctions:

- ▶ Are impressive to spotlight on our NEO chapter website, include in marketing and promotional materials, and use for volunteer recruitment


# Registration for the 2017 STC Technical Communication Summit Is Now Open

JOIN STC and fellow colleagues at the 2017 Summit, the premier conference for technical communication education and networking, 7–10 May at the Gaylord National Resort in Washington, DC!

Registration for this can't-miss event is now open and STC is offering a special early bird registration **rate of only \$895 for STC members, a \$500+ savings** from the full rate! Your conference registration includes continental breakfast, receptions, access to unparalleled education sessions, and information on the latest industry tools and technologies.

STC is also pleased to announce its Opening Keynote Speaker:

Workforce Strategist and Speaker Seth Mattison. Born on a farm in Minnesota, Mattison learned from four generations of his family, which spurred him to study generational workforce trends and shifts, with particular attention to the influence of technology. Per Mattison's website, “We are witnessing the greatest fundamental shift the world has seen in the way we organize, collaborate, connect and contribute since the industrial revolution.”

More exciting news and speakers will be announced in the coming months. So what are you waiting for? Register today! See you in Washington, DC! 

- ▶ Can attract nonmembers to check out chapter programs, and make them into potential future members
- ▶ Give the NEO chapter members a level of pride about their chapter. No matter what your level of participation is in the chapter, each NEO member plays a role in making these achievements come to fruition. “

—*Janean Voss, Past President, Northeast Ohio Chapter*

### Tips for Applying

**Plan Ahead:** While it's too late to begin planning for the 2016 year, use the award criteria as a success plan to run your community in 2017. Assign a community member to keep track of accomplishments, and have council/board members report to that individual when they have accomplished something. An immediate past president/manager is often a good choice for keeping track of accomplishments.

**Take credit where credit is due:** Thoroughly read through

the application and guidelines and make sure to take credit for all of the accomplishments of your community. If you are in doubt about an activity, feel free to reach out to the CAA chair with your questions.

**Use Innovative Activities:** If your community is doing activities you believe should count on your application, include a description of those items in the Innovation section of the application.

### What's New This Year?

The application and guidelines documents have been completely revised and simplified.\*

*\*Note: After the initial presentation of the new application at the 2015 Summit, the committee made significant changes in response to community leaders' concerns. If you have not seen the latest version, please take a look.*

There is now a single, shorter application regardless of community type (some minor alterations are made to point values for individual line items based on community type).

The number of activities has been pared down to the core amount that the board feels is necessary for running a successful community.

Communities receive awards on points earned, and the award levels are spelled out clearly on the application. There are no individual award sections (besides required activities) to complete. Communities are judged on standard criteria and, as always, communities are not in competition with each other.

There is a new bonus section where communities can earn extra points in addition to the base points for going “above and beyond.”

### Get More Information

The CAA Application and the CAA Guidelines for 2015 Activities can be found on the STC website at [www.stc.org/community-achievement-awards/](http://www.stc.org/community-achievement-awards/).

### Questions?

Contact the Community Achievement Awards evaluation committee (CAAEC) chair, MaryKay Grueneberg, at: [marykay.stc@gmail.com](mailto:marykay.stc@gmail.com). 

# The 2017 Preliminary Slate of Candidates for the 2017 STC Election

THE STC NOMINATING COMMITTEE (composed of members Cindy Currie, Viqui Dill, Rick Lippincott, Becky Todd, and Chair Bernard Aschwanden) is pleased to announce the preliminary slate of candidates for the 2017 Society election.

### President

Alyssa Fox will automatically succeed from the office of Vice President

### Vice President

- ▶ Craig Baehr
- ▶ Jane Wilson

### Treasurer

- ▶ James Bousquet
- ▶ Timothy Esposito

### Director

(two positions to be elected)

- ▶ Ramesh Aiyangar
- ▶ Jessie Mallory
- ▶ Robert Perry

### Nominating Committee


(two positions to be elected)

- ▶ Jamie Gillenwater
- ▶ Grant Hogarth
- ▶ Larry Kunz

Congratulations to the candidates, and thanks to all STC members who expressed interest in running for office. Note that the preliminary slate was prepared in accordance with the current Society bylaws ([www.stc.org/governance/](http://www.stc.org/governance/)).

Individuals who meet the qualifications for Society office and engaged the nomination process, but were not selected for the slate, may choose to pursue nomination by petition of 10 percent of the voting members (see Article VIII, Section 2, Part D of STC's Bylaws). Individuals who seek nomination by petition must submit the required materials to the Society office by **6 January 2017**.

The final slate for the 2017 election will include candidates appearing on the preliminary slate as well as any qualified individuals who are properly nominated by petition and approved by the Board of Directors.

The Society election is scheduled to open on **27 February** and close on **10 March 2017**. To be eligible to vote, members must have paid their 2017 dues by **1 February 2017**. 

# Interview with Val Swisher, CEO of Content Rules

BY SCOTT ABEL | STC Senior Member

IN THIS INSTALLMENT of Meet the Change Agents, I chat with Val Swisher, CEO of Content Rules, about her passion for making content available to those who need it for work, for play, or in times of need. We discuss the changes that have taken place in the technical communication industry and how the future of our industry will rely on our ability to mesh people, processes, and technology together for maximum impact.

**Scott Abel:** Thanks for making time to talk to us about global content



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email them to [scottabel@mac.com](mailto:scottabel@mac.com).

strategy and all things content. I'm super excited to chat with you, but before we get started, for our readers who don't know who you are, can you tell us a little about yourself and what you do?

**Val Swisher:** I'm Val Swisher, CEO and Founder of Content Rules. I've been in the technical communica-

tion world since 1988. I started my company in 1994. Back then, I was a contractor who wrote technical documentation. Things have changed since then. These days, I focus most of my time on helping customers develop content strategies for the creation, management, and delivery of intelligent content, especially for organizations with a global audience. I am particularly interested in content optimization; making sure that content can be easily and well-understood in English and every other language.

I am particularly passionate about my volunteer work. I am a board member for Translators Without Borders (TWB), a U.S. nonprofit organization that aims to close the language gaps that hinder critical humanitarian efforts worldwide. TWB recognizes that the effectiveness of any aid program depends on delivering information in the language of the affected population. By maintaining a global network of professional translators, we help nonprofits organizations overcome communication barriers, increasing access to critical information and services while fostering a climate of understanding, respect, and dignity in times of great need. The ability to use everything I've learned in my career to help save lives is an amazing gift. I run the Simplified English program for TWB and am honored to be part of this great organization.



**Scott:** Technical communication has changed a lot over the last 30 years. We've moved from typewriters to computers to desktop publishing to intelligent, multi-channel, multilingual dynamic publishing. It's been a whirlwind of change. In your career, what changes do you think impacted the profession the most and why?

**Val:** The Internet has affected absolutely everything we do in technical communication. When I started back in the late 1980s, we didn't have email. We didn't have the Internet. We printed manuals. We used telephones to communicate. Sometimes I wonder how we ever got anything done!

Aside from the Internet, I think that the advent of intelligent content and XML has had the next biggest impact on our profession. Intelligent content is content that is modular, structured, reusable, format-free, and semantically rich and, as a consequence, discoverable, reconfigurable, and adaptable. Before intelligent content, we had no straightforward way to write once/use many. We didn't separate text from formatting information, which



made producing content for multiple channels tedious and expensive. And, we didn't have ways to locate legacy content quickly and repurpose it without rework.

In the global world, translation memory has had the biggest impact on the localization and translation process. Think of translation memory as a central repository that contains translated source and destination language pairs. The ability to compare content against a set of existing translations—and automatically reuse the previously translated words—has revolutionized the way that we translate. It's dramatically increased the speed at which translation moves, and how much we pay for it.

**Scott:** We both have broad experience in the discipline of content strategy. In fact, you worked closely with me on a few projects that attempted to demystify content strategy and help our peers understand what content strategy is—and isn't. Over time, our thoughts about the subject have changed. What is content strategy? And why should technical communication professionals adopt more strategic thinking about content (outside of the obvious things like writing and editing)?

**Val:** Content strategy is a process and methodology for how you create, manage, deliver, and archive content. To provide real value to a content organization, technical communications professionals need to look at the larger world in which the content they produce exists. By that, I mean the entire content ecosystem.

Content strategy is a business plan for content. It addresses the lifecycle of content and includes plans for authoring, managing, storing, translating, localizing, formatting, tagging, and delivering content. It also is concerned with a host of other tasks, including access, change, and version control, as well as how we will retire, archive, and destroy content.

Content strategy as a discipline is a much larger universe than a

particular topic or chapter in a document. As companies create, store, deliver, and manage increasing amounts of content, the need for a unified strategy has become greater. Many people can create content, ensuring it is well-written, styled, and punctuated. Far fewer communication professionals can create—and maintain—a solid content strategy that addresses the needs of today and the needs of the future. Content strategy is a critical, high-value skill that technical communicators can—and should—add to their professional development efforts.

**Scott:** We often discuss the ways that technical communication professionals can increase their marketability by adding additional skills to their tech communication tool box. I think that one of the best ways to add value is to find a way to connect technical communication to sales. Do you agree? Can technical communication content enable sales? And, if so, how might technical communication professionals begin to connect their efforts to sales?

**Val:** I agree. I think that the link between technical communication and its impact on sales is important to make.

Buyers are savvier than they used to be. It is much easier to do extensive research on a product before making the purchase. For example, I bought a new pair of earbuds the other day. I looked at all sorts of specifications and information before making the purchase. I know a whole lot more about earbuds now than I did last week. All of our customers are like this now.

Product content drives sales. Prospective customers often rely on technical content to make purchasing decisions. Several recent surveys have discovered this connection.

Forrester estimates that buyers complete 60 to 90% of their buying decision before they engage with a sales person, in both B2B and B2C relationships. Our content impacts

sales, whether we want it to or not. The goal is to connect our efforts to sales. Doing so will increase our value and make it increasingly unattractive for upper management to replace us.

Additionally, research from Shotfarm indicates that brands that provide complete, high-quality product information in one convenient location are viewed as “most trustworthy” by shoppers. Repeat purchases, lower levels of returns, and long-term loyalty are the rewards. The same study finds 76% of consumers noticed inconsistent product content (for the same product) across multiple channels. Similarly, 87% of information seekers say multi-channel content inaccuracies negatively impact their purchasing decisions.

Consistency in style, tone, and terminology enhances brand perception. Consider Apple. They are sticklers for consistency—in structure, in voice, and in language usage. This consistency shines through in all their product content.

**Scott:** Content strategy is, in its purest form, inherently global. That is to say, if your company is global so, too, should your content strategy be. As the author of *Global Content Strategy: A Primer* (The Content Wrangler/XML Press), you know a lot about global content. Why is it important to think globally and act locally? And what does that mean, exactly?

**Val:** You know, Scott, I have a terminology problem with the words “content strategy” and “global content strategy.” To me, you cannot have a comprehensive content strategy if you are missing the global component. Time and again, I work with customers who treat translation and localization as an afterthought. And I think this is a huge mistake for many reasons.

Not everyone speaks English. Many people in the United States believe that people all over the world speak English. There is nothing further from the truth. If you want to attract

prospects and maintain existing customers outside of the handful of countries that have some form of English as their primary language, you need to focus on global content from the beginning.

Many who speak English use it as a second or third language. Whether you translate your content or not, your content strategy should focus on creating content that is easy for everyone to understand.

Not everyone wants to be your best friend. There is a growing trend in the United States to create content, even technical content, in a way that addresses the reader as a “pal” or “chum.” Trying to translate this type of material is tough. And, in many parts of the world, your prospects and customers do not want to be treated this way. They could even be offended, which will have serious ramifications on your brand.

The strategy for creating, storing, publishing, and archiving content becomes exponentially more difficult as you add languages. If you fail to plan for a multilingual content strategy, the clean-up involved will be infinitely more complicated than if you had considered multiple languages from the start.

**Scott:** Terminology management is one of my favorite topics. It’s the science nerd in me, I guess. What is terminology management and why is it needed today?

**Val:** Terminology management is one of my favorite topics, too. I guess that’s why we get along so well. Terminology management is the science of controlling the words that writers use and the way in which writers use them. Every company needs terminology management. It is critical for legal reasons (to control trademarks). And it can help you improve readability, accessibility, findability, and translatability.

From a readability standpoint, particularly in technical communication, we need to focus on saying the same thing, the same way, every time

we say it. For example, did you know that there are over 20 ways to say “Click OK”?

Here are a few: Click OK. Press OK. Tap OK. Select OK. Hit OK. Click the OK button. Press the OK button.

You get the idea. From a readability standpoint, pick one way and use it always. In this particular case, I would recommend Select OK. That way, the same term can be repurposed for a device that has a keyboard and a device that does not.

If you translate content, terminology management is even more critical. Did you know that you have to pay for each variation of “Click OK”? How much do these extra words cost you? Multiply the number of words that are different by the number of languages you support. Then multiply the total by the translation cost per word. It can add up pretty fast. And you end up wasting money—lots of it.

**Scott:** How does a company know if they have a terminology management problem? Is there a way to determine the healthfulness of a set of content? What approaches would you suggest? What criteria matters?

**Val:** The easiest way to determine if you have a terminology challenge is to examine your translation statistics. If you have a very high number of “fuzzy matches” in your translation process, you likely have a terminology management problem. All of the ways to say “Click OK” that we discussed are fuzzy matches. The higher the number of “fuzzies,” the more likely it is that you are using different terms to mean the same thing.

Highly regulated industries, such as finance and medical, already understand the impact of managing terminology. They know that if words are misused or confusing, the results can have serious ramifications. But, even in unregulated sectors, terminology mismanagement can have an adverse impact on the way people perceive your brand and understand your message.

There are specialized tools on the market that can evaluate your content from a terminology, brand, and style perspective. Content Rules offers a free content health check using some of these tools. We analyze 100,000–200,000 words you provide. We return a report detailing the quality aspects of your content, including whether your content is global ready and what changes you need to make to optimize it for translation.

**Scott:** We’ve talked a lot recently about something we dubbed the “Holy Trifecta of Content Management.” Can you help our readers understand what it is and why it is perhaps the most efficient way of creating, managing, and delivering the right content, to the right people, at the right time, on the device of their choosing?

**Val:** Ah yes, the Holy Trifecta. It has three main components:

- ▶ Intelligent content
- ▶ Terminology management
- ▶ Translation memory

By marrying the strategy and technology for all three of these components, you can achieve *content nirvana*. Let me explain.

Intelligent content is modular, structured, reusable, format-free, and semantically rich. As a consequence, content that is intelligent is discoverable, reconfigurable, and adaptable. Intelligent content can be easily mixed-and-matched to create content deliverables, automatically formatted for display on nearly any device type.

To deliver on the promise of the Holy Trifecta, we also need *terminology management*. Failing to control the words we use can have a negative impact on the experience our prospects and customers have with our content. Without a terminology management strategy—and tools—in place, we may inadvertently confuse, frustrate, or otherwise turn off those we seek to attract.

An example. What if we create a user guide for dog owners that

includes multiple topics that leverage synonyms: Walking your *dog*; feeding your *canine*; grooming your *puppy*; training your *pooch*; keeping *man's best friend* happy.

When we fail to control terminology—to agree on a single word to use when we mean *canine*—there will be challenges with our content. Once we weave the topics together into a user guide, we end up with unnecessary, expensive, and potentially confusing terminological inconsistencies. When you add translation to the mix, things can get messy and more expensive.

To round out our Holy Trifecta, we add *translation memory* (TM). Translation memory is a database created when a translator works on content. The database stores content in translation units. Each unit is a pair: a source language version and its destination language equivalent

(e.g., English and French). The pair is stored together (as a unit) in the TM.

When a translator works on content, translation tools evaluate whether the source and destination terms already exist in the TM database or not. If they do, then we save time and money by reusing previous translations of those words stored in the TM database.

When we use new words, we have yet to translate (and remember in our TM), we have to pay to translate those words.


So, how do we put all of this together? It looks like this.

Intelligent content allows us to reuse modular topics of content in multiple deliverables without incurring additional content creation costs. Managing terminology ensures that the English (source language) is unambiguous and consistent. It also ensures that we only pay to

have content translated one time because we're optimizing our content translation expense by reusing the same terms over and over again. We save significant amounts of money because the words we use already exist in our translation memory database.

This way, our content ends up being easy to create, easy to manage, easy to store, and cheaper, better, and faster to translate. A beautiful, well-choreographed dance!

**Scott:** Thanks for sharing some of your thoughts about content development, optimization, and the role of technical communication professionals in content strategy. I really appreciate you taking time to share your expertise with others.

**Val:** Thanks for including me, Scott. I hope your readers found my comments useful. 



# STC SUMMIT 2017

WASHINGTON, DC IN GAYLORD NATIONAL RESORT

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# When Is a Sentence a Sentence and a Frog a Frog?



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**BY ARLE LOMMEL** | *Guest Columnist*

AS A TECHNICAL AUTHOR, you may not normally think about readers in other countries. You may not even know where your readers will live or what they will speak. Nevertheless, writers need to consider how people outside their home country will use their texts. Common Sense Advisory estimates that far less than 1% of all content is translated, but, as technical writers, you are producing particularly valuable content that often ends up used around the world. Seemingly minor decisions can have a big impact when your content is translated into 10, 20, or even 150 languages.

Translation, like most fields, has many standards and some of them—let's be honest—make drying paint seem exciting by comparison. So why should you learn about them and even get involved in creating them? The short answer is that knowing about them can make you a better writer, improve the value of what you write, and make life easier for the poor translators who have to spin gold from what is too often straw. But the people who create these standards often lack meaningful input from authors, and so may make decisions that make your life difficult.

Well-meaning authors can end up creating nightmares for

translators. To understand why, we need to consider three standards that translators commonly work with:

1. XML Localization Interchange File Format (XLIFF) is a standard format for representing content that needs to be translated. Chances are that any text you write will end up in XLIFF at some point.
2. Translation Memory eXchange (TMX) represents text that has already been translated so it can be automatically retrieved and reused.
3. TermBase eXchange (TBX) represents information about how terms should be used and translated.

These standards all interact with what you write in various ways. First off, when

your content management system sends text off to translators in XLIFF format, it slices and dices it into sentences. If you happen to have used hard returns to force line breaks, it may end up as follows:

- ▶ Sentence 1: "Technical writing is terribly"
- ▶ Sentence 2: "difficult to teach effectively."

Translators encountering these may not see



*Standard Deviation is a column all about standards—a subject that affects most of our lives, but that we seldom think about. As the title implies, I want to keep the conversation lively and engaging. I'm always looking for guest columnists, and we welcome feedback with comments or requests for standards-related topics to cover. Email Columnist Ray Gallon at [rgallon4stc@culturecom.net](mailto:rgallon4stc@culturecom.net).*



them in context and thus make their best guess and translate Sentence 1 as “Technical writing is terrible” and Sentence 2 as “Effective teaching is difficult.” To address this problem, you need to avoid manual “fixes” based on appearance and instead use margins or paragraph formatting to achieve the appearance you want.

Another problem is that writers working in formats like DITA or S1000D may not even know how text will be rendered or where it will appear. Because these formats encourage reuse of text in multiple environments, chunks may lose context in ways that cause real problems for translators. For example, in many languages the way you translate “it” and other pronouns depends on what they refer to. If a chunk starts with “It is an important task,” and it is not clear what “it” refers to, the translator may not be able to provide a correct translation

or may provide one that works in one context but not another.

The problem is complicated when they employ TMX to reuse a previous translation that made sense in a different context. You can solve this problem by writing chunks and sentences to be complete in themselves (e.g., “Technical writing is an important task”). Taking this approach not only makes translation easier but also helps speakers of English as a second language or those who have difficulty reading.

Finally, when translating a term like *frog*, translators need to know what it refers to. For example, they would generally translate *frog* as *Frosch* in German, but, in a text about railroads, *frog* is a term for the place where two railroad tracks cross and should be *Herzstücke* (literally “heart piece”). Using *Frosch* in this context would leave German readers totally puzzled. A good terminology

management system coupled with a standard such as TBX helps you know what terms to use consistently to prevent confusion.

As you educate yourself about localization standards and processes, you will discover ways to improve how you write for international audiences, ones that often also make you a better writer in general. But you can also provide input into the standardization process, by getting involved either personally or through an organization like STC. Doing so will allow you to make a difference for writers and users around the world. **i**

*ARLE LOMMEL is a senior analyst with Common Sense Advisory. He is a recognized expert in quality processes and interoperability standards. Arles research focuses on technology, quality assessment, and interoperability. He has been actively involved in standardization efforts for translation since 1998.*

## “MY DOCUMENTATION STAYS ON TIME, ON SCHEDULE, AND IN BUDGET THANKS TO THE STC SUMMIT”

“When you get students, academics, and practicing professionals all together in the same space for the Summit, the energy is amazing. I always learn a lot from the presentations, and my manager really appreciates what I bring back to the workplace. He has me summarize the sessions I attended in writing and passes the summary up the management chain. The knowledge I share from the Summit helps my company’s documentation stay on time, on schedule, and in budget.”

*Louise H. Tinsler*



MY NAME IS LOUISE TINCHER AND

# I'M AN STC MEMBER

<http://summit.stc.org>

# Mark Your Calendar

## Organization Events Across the Globe

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to [intercom@stc.org](mailto:intercom@stc.org).

### 1 2-5 Nov

The American Translators Association (ATA) will hold its 57th Annual Conference, 2-5 November, at the Hyatt Regency in San Francisco, CA.

ATA  
+1-703-683-6100  
[www.atanet.org/conf/2016/](http://www.atanet.org/conf/2016/)  
[ata@atanet.org](mailto:ata@atanet.org)

### 2 9-10 Dec

The India Chapter of STC will hold its 18th annual conference in Hyderabad, India. For more information, contact STC India.

STC India  
[www.stc-india.org/2016/10/stc-india-annual-conference-2016-registration-now-open/](http://www.stc-india.org/2016/10/stc-india-annual-conference-2016-registration-now-open/)

### 3 23-26 Jan 2017

The Annual Reliability and Maintainability Symposium will be held 23-26 January 2017 at the Rosen Plaza Hotel in Orlando, FL.

RAMS  
[www.rams.org/](http://www.rams.org/)  
[RAMS2017@rams.org](mailto:RAMS2017@rams.org)

### 4 16-20 Feb

The 2017 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting will be held 16-20 February 2017 at the Hynes Convention Center in Boston, MA.

AAAS  
<http://meetings.aaas.org/meetings@aaas.org>

### 5 22-26 Mar

The Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) will host the annual Information Architecture (IA) Summit 22-26 March 2017 at the Hyatt Regency Vancouver in Vancouver, BC, Canada.

ASIS&T  
[www.iasummit.org/](http://www.iasummit.org/)

### 6 26-28 Mar

The Annual Spectrum STC Rochester Conference will be held 26-28 March 2017. STC Rochester

<http://stc-rochester.org/spectrum/spectrum@stc-rochester.org>

### 7 31 Mar-1 Apr

The Annual Conduit STC-Philadelphia Metro Chapter Mid-Atlantic TechComm Conference will be held 31 March through 1 April in Philadelphia.

STC-PMC  
[www.stcPMC.org/conferences/conduit-2017](http://www.stcPMC.org/conferences/conduit-2017)

\* STC-related event

# Time Flies When You're Having Fun: JoAnn Hackos Reflects on Her Career and Upcoming Retirement

BY PAUL MUELLER | Fellow

ONE OF THE GREATEST STRENGTHS of STC and the technical communication industry is the sharing of ideas and practices between colleagues. Many of us identify with industry leaders who have made an impact on how we approach our craft.



JoAnn Hackos

JoAnn Hackos' book, *Managing Your Documentation Projects*, helped me as I moved into a management role in the mid-1990s. I recently learned that JoAnn is retiring and I contacted her to talk about her technical communication journey.

JoAnn is a leader who contributed to our careers in many ways, including books and conference presentations. She started teaching

Technical Writing and Literature at the Colorado School of Mines in 1977. JoAnn also helped design the programs at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the University of California Santa Cruz extension program in Silicon Valley.

When her friend became the CEO of a medical software company, JoAnn founded Comtech and helped design task-oriented documentation, a relatively new approach at the time. JoAnn continued contributing to our industry through STC, the DITA Founders wCommittee in OASIS, and activities with ISO. She served as STC President from 1992–1993, and in many other roles through the years. Today, she travels the world helping organizations manage their information and making the business case to senior management about the value of content.

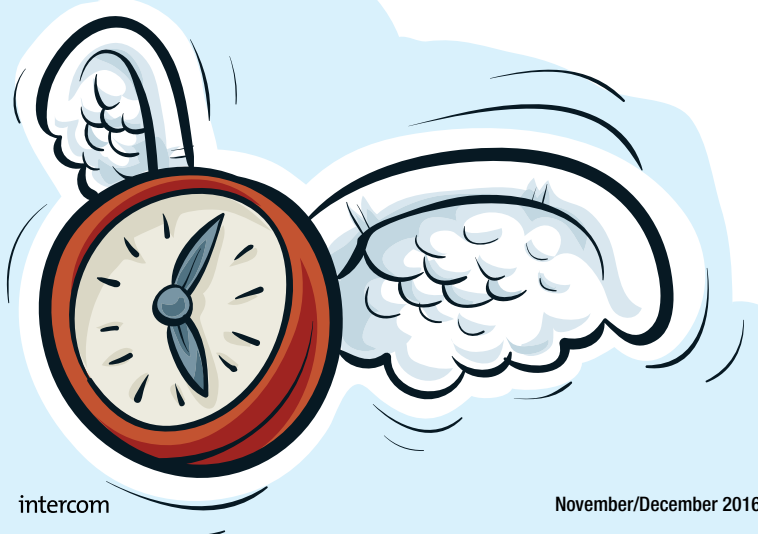
I asked JoAnn who had made the biggest impact on her approach to technical communication. "There are too many to name them all," she said. "John Carroll was a big influence with Minimalism, and John Brockmann with his work on scientific literature. Ginny Redish, who wrote *User and Task Analysis for Interface Design* with me, and of course Bill Horton and Karen Schriver."

When I asked JoAnn about her accomplishments, she immediately mentioned the joy she had teaching and helping to design technical communication programs. She also helped to start the Center for Information-Development Management, which recently celebrated its 18th anniversary. "It's about bringing people and ideas together." She is also proud that the books she wrote have helped so many of us.

So, what's next for JoAnn? She is transferring Comtech to Dawn Stevens, who has been with the company since the early 1980s. She is also looking forward to having more time to travel and go birding, a longtime passion of hers, and finding time to play piano and harpsichord again.

I remember watching JoAnn and several others share their experiences during a panel discussion at an STC conference. During that session, I learned how multiple perspectives and ideas come together to produce a better solution. As JoAnn says, "These are exciting times for technical communicators as we stop writing documentation and focus on working for the customer. Sharing information is critical for customer success and we have many new ways to share that information." Thank you, JoAnn, for sharing your ideas and I hope you enjoy your new adventures while traveling, birdwatching, and making music. **I**

PAUL MUELLER is the President of UserAid and a past STC Summit Chair and Board member.



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## CONTACT

For more information about certification and to start the process, visit [www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org) or email [stc@stc.org](mailto:stc@stc.org).

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STC Live Educational Webinar (free, sponsored, and community webinars excluded)	2
STC Online Courses	6
STC Summit Pre-Conference Courses (full day)	6
STC Summit Pre-Conference Courses (half day)	3
STC Virtual Summit	4
STC Annual Summit	8
Begin and complete a college-accredited course related to the Technical Communication field	8
Published articles that relate to any aspect of Technical Communication (2/article)	2
Published books publicly available on topics related to Technical Communication (5/book)	5
Presentations at conferences related to aspects of Technical Communication (2/presentation)	2
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### Fees

Exam fees: STC Members \$250, Non-Members, \$495

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