



March 2010, Volume 22, Number 7

March chapter meeting

6:00 p.m. (5:45 registration and networking)

Note: new start time

March 2, 2010

Prairie Ink Café,
Grant Park Shopping Centre

Should technical writers also write fiction?

Ron Blicq and Susan Haire

Please confirm your attendance by noon, Friday, February 26, with Joanne Kusiak at meetingcoordinator@stcmanitoba.org

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March chapter meeting—technical communication café

Should technical writers also write fiction?

A discussion led by Ron Blicq, Playwright/Technical writer and Susan Haire Novelist/Technical writer

Ever wondered what it would be like to author a novel or a play? What is the advantage to technical writers also writing fiction? Is there one?



We know that many technical writers in Manitoba “dabble” in fiction. Does that enhance or confuse their technical writing? Can technical communicators look at fictional writing as a way to strengthen their writing or even earn extra income?

Susan and Ron will describe their experiences as writers of fiction and drama and the impact this experience has had on their technical writing. They will then lead a discussion to exchange ideas about their work and the questions it raises.

Wondering what to do on Tuesday night? Why don't you come and join the discussion!

About the speakers

Ron Blicq (still) is a technical communicator and was a Red River College instructor for many years. Since his “retirement” in 1990, he has turned his hand to writing novels and dramatic stage scripts, which he claims is equally as exciting as technical writing.

Susan Haire has been a technical communicator for over twenty years, but is also a local novelist. Susan is a past president of STC Manitoba, is its current Vice-President, and is a recipient of the Distinguished Chapter Service Award. She currently works as a technical communicator for Manitoba Public Insurance.



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

About *Manuscript*

Manuscript and its shorter sibling *Micro Manuscript* are the official newsletters of STC Manitoba. Together, they are published 10 times annually between September and June. The opinions expressed are those of the authors. Submissions, news, reviews, and other items of interest are welcome. Contributions may be edited for length. Deadline is the fifteenth of every month. For example, the deadline for the November issue is October 15.

Please make arrangements in advance with the editor. By submitting an article, you agree to its publication in *Manuscript* and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. The writer holds copyright. When submitting an article, please let the editor know if it has been published or submitted elsewhere.

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Past President, Andrew Quarry
Secretary, Vacant
Treasurer, Donald Nordman
Membership, Vacant
Public relations, Dorothy Davidson
Program, Vacant
Meeting coordinator, Joanne Kusiak

Members of Manitoba's STC chapter gather at the Annual General Meeting in May and elect members to the STC Chapter. Each member on the executive is elected for a term of one year.

From the President

I've been writing letters about the lack of STC Manitoba volunteers for the last several months. Unfortunately, the response has been silent, and we don't have time to continue beating around the bush. If we are unable to find volunteers for next year's executive committee, there will not be an STC Manitoba chapter.

Almost every position is going to be available next year, including the following:

- President
- Vice-President
- Treasurer
- Program Chair
- Membership Chair
- Secretary
- Newsletter Editor
- Webmaster
- Meeting Coordinator

Volunteering for the STC Executive is great experience and looks great on the resume. It enhances your network with other technical communication professionals, and gives you a first hand look at what goes on behind the scenes to make our chapter function.

For detailed job descriptions, please visit www.stcmanitoba.org/about_stc

If you care about the future of STC Manitoba and want to volunteer for a role, please contact me by e-mail ASAP:
benzeta21@hotmail.com

I look forward to hearing from you!
Ben

Around the STC

STC is offering the following events online. Visit www.stc.org for more details on the time and cost.

- March 3, 2010 Process Re-Engineering for Topic-Based Authoring
- March 9, 2010 Strategies for Achieving Success
- March 16, 2010 Working With Contract Agencies
- March 23, 2010 Optimizing the Source Using Translation Memory

STC Technical Summit, Dallas 2010

May 2-5, 2010
Dallas, Texas
visit www.stc.org for more details



From one technical communicator to another

If only I had a Word document instead of a PDF ...

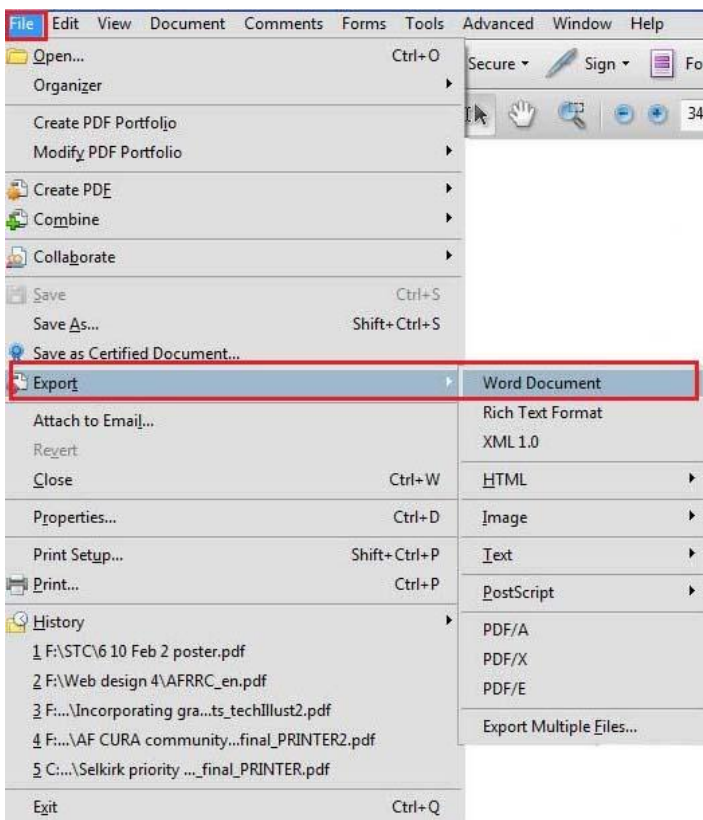
By Rachel Ines

Have you ever wondered, "If only I had the PDF in Word, my life would be much simpler!"

Well no more need to wonder!

For those of you with Adobe Acrobat Professional, the solution is right in your hands. Adobe Professional allows you to convert PDF documents into Word or text files, and even to extract images. You can even convert files into HTML and convert more than one file from PDF into your desired output.

To convert your PDF in Adobe Acrobat Professional (or equivalent), simply open your file, select Export, choose your file output format, and identify a place to save your converted file.



Limitations

While having this option is handy, I have come across problems when using this feature of Adobe Acrobat. When converting some Web pages that were in PDF format into a Word document, I found some text converted to gobbledygook resembling the Wingdings font and

some converted to images.

Conversion of the same Web pages into a text file using this feature of Adobe Acrobat were more successful, but required a disappointing amount of reformatting.

I also decided to test this using an STC chapter meeting poster. While the document converted to Word, the formatting was, to be polite, a giant mess.

Free conversion tools

So what other options are available? I did a Google search and came across Nitro PDF's site: www.pdfword.com. Nitro offers a free service to convert PDF files into Word files.

A screenshot of the 'PDF to Word' conversion tool interface. The top section features the logo 'PDF to Word' with a 'free!' badge and a globe icon. Below the logo, it states 'The Most Accurate PDF-to-Word Converter' and provides a brief description of the technology. The main interface is divided into three steps: Step 1: Select PDF to convert (with a 'Browse...' button); Step 2: Convert PDF file to (with radio buttons for '.DOC' and '.RTF'); Step 3: Email file to (with a 'Convert' button). Below the steps, there are three green boxes highlighting features: 'Create High-quality, Easier-to-edit Word Files Totally Free.', 'Layout Pages Using Microsoft Word Formatting Tools', and 'Accurately Reproduce Graphics and Maintain Image Fidelity.' Each feature box includes a small icon and a brief description of the benefit.

I've used Nitro PDF in the past and was familiar with their product, so I decided to give it a try. In my initial test run, I uploaded a small file, provided my contact information, and waited. Did I mention that I waited?

("If only I had a Word document ..." continued on page 4)

(“If only I had a Word document ...” continued from page 3)

While the service is free, it did take some time to receive the converted file (about two hours)—but you get what you pay for. In my case—nothing. However, upon receiving the file, I found it to be much more user friendly than the Adobe Acrobat Professional option.

The newsletter was converted in a usable Word document, complete with section breaks, columns, and textboxes. As you can see in the Word example, I’ve included the paragraph marks in the screen shot to help illustrate how the document was converted from PDF to Word. I was able to use the file immediately and make the necessary changes as if I created it in Word originally.

So if you’re looking for a functional solution, don’t have access to Adobe Acrobat Professional, don’t have a lot of money, but you do have a lot of patience ... consider using Nitro PDF for converting your documents.



From the Editor

The perils of technology

Every now and then I find myself cursing advancements in technology. While my personal computer and laptop have contributed greatly to my work life, often I find them to be a burden.

As I mentioned to the individuals who attended my InDesign session at the January progression, I purchased the Adobe Creative Suite 4, which includes Photoshop, InDesign, Acrobat Professional, and Illustrator. My PC has an older version of Photoshop so I thought it would be great to install the newer version on my computer. So one day, I removed the older program and got ready to install the program. That’s when the trouble started ... I have only a CD-ROM drive on my PC and am unable to read any DVDs! Well fine, I thought, at least I can view them on my laptop.

Now having both a PC and laptop is great, as they both have their own pros and cons. However, when you’re doing your homework assignment for your Web design class, repeatedly moving your USB data stick from one machine to another gets rather annoying. Since I can only use my Adobe suite programs on my laptop, that’s the price I pay.

The lack of wireless Internet in my home increases the level of my annoyance. Often I will work on my laptop upstairs because I like to have windows and see what’s happening outside. The PC resides in my basement, which is dark and lacks large windows.

Lately I’ve been doing the Internet dance. Using my Internetless laptop and then going downstairs to access the Internet on my PC. I’ve tried using them both while working downstairs, but having both the PC and laptop on the same desk is a whole other issue. Often I reach for the PC keyboard when I should be using the laptop keyboard.

So it looks like I’m going to have cough up some money to solve my issues. I either

- install a DVD ROM on my PC (which is now going on four years and has its own issues)
- buy a new computer (even though I just moved up and bought a new flat screen monitor)
- get wireless Internet for the house and concentrate on using my laptop

Oh technology! Why do you irk me so!

Until next month,
Rachel

February chapter meeting

Writing for the Web

By Rachel Ines

On February 2, 2010, senior member Kelly Thibodeau shared her experience with writing for the Web. The popularity of Web sites as a medium for communication continues to grow. Although users have adapted the medium, not everyone is convinced. Kelly noted that the power has now shifted to the user. If the user has a bad Web experience that person will share his/her experience with others and visit the competition's Web site. Users no longer trust companies, they seek out the opinions of strangers or other users to see what their personal experience was.

Many educational institutions offer Web design courses, allowing individuals to specialize and use their skill and experience in developing Web sites. Yet in many organizations, the task of posting information on the Web site is falling to people who are not formally trained and complete this job solely as a secondary component of their job. For example, an administrative assistant may be responsible for updating an established Web site's content, not because the assistant has the necessary training, but because it's become part of the assigned job duties.

Designing for the Web: think before you create

The key to designing Web site is planning. Just as we plan our documents, we need to plan our Web site's content and overall look. The first step is to create a wire frame, which is a draft of how the Web page will look once the content and visuals are added to the site. Professional Web designers will use a program such as Photoshop to design the wire frame; however, not everyone has access to Photoshop. One solution is to use Microsoft PowerPoint, a program that most people have access to, and can be used more easily to develop the wire frame than Photoshop, which requires some experience and training in using the different tools.

Using the wire frame as a draft document, allows the Web designer to share the Web site vision with key personnel by providing an idea of how it will look, where text and images will be placed, and provides an opportunity for people to provide feedback. The key is to share the wire frame with key people and wait for the necessary people to sign off on the design. Then the next step can be to design the actual Web site.

Why we need to take a step back

Creating a wire frame and getting consent allows people to focus on what is important. When a designer creates the visual elements first, the danger lies in people becoming married to the initial styles and presentations. It becomes difficult for people to separate themselves from the original design and they lose the ability to control the look and involve more people who may not be involved.

Finding your inner designer

Once you have received all the sign offs, the next step is to develop the content. One key feature is to reduce the amount of copy on a page. Kelly cited Ginny Redish's book *Letting go of the Words*, to further emphasize the need for concise and succinct writing. She stimulated some debate amongst participants when she noted using numbers instead of writing numbers out, simply because it's easier for the user to process. Kelly pointed out that the web is a different medium. People are conditioned to scan documents and with different screen resolutions, not all Web sites are created or seen equally.



Chapter President Ben Davies (left) thanks Kelly Thibodeau (right) for her informative presentation.

Finally, Kelly noted that Web sites should be writing using the inverted pyramid style. Text should be written to capture the user's attention. By developing Web sites and accompanying features that match the user's expectation, Web sites can be more effective.

STC Manitoba chapter members

The first 15—Where are they now?

By Susan Haire

STC Manitoba became a chapter in January, 1989, after 15 people joined STC. But even though we were not officially a chapter, we had an executive and several meetings leading up to that momentous occasion. To mark our twentieth year as a chapter, *Manuscript* is running a series of articles about these first 15 members.

As this year's chapter Vice-President (and one of those first 15 members myself), I was asked to track down my fellow pioneers and find out what they're all doing now. I asked everyone the same five questions. This month we are interviewing Laurie Morgan and Penny Staples.

Laurie Morgan

Q. How did you get involved with STC Manitoba back in 1988?

LM: Joanne Blackwood and I had an STC membership through the company where we both worked (Unisys). Alexa Campbell contacted us when she was trying to form a new STC chapter in Manitoba.

Q. What was your role at that time?

LM: The first year, I co-chaired the program committee. Later on I co-chaired the newsletter with Suzanne Shephard. We won an international STC award for the newsletter that year, I think. Over the years, I also served as Vice-President and President.

Q. What have you been doing over the past 20 years? Are you still involved with STC Manitoba and/or technical communication? Did your membership in the chapter help you in any way?

LM: Over the past 20 years I have worked for several companies as a technical writer. After Unisys (health care software), I worked for a startup called Iris Systems (they made wireless meters for utilities with automated software that collected the data), then for Broadband Networks Incorporated (BNI), who designed and built wireless communications networks.

In 2000, I moved to Ottawa (transferred with Nortel who bought BNI), but got caught in the big layoff of 2001. Fortunately, I got a job almost immediately with Quest Software, where I have

been working as a senior technical writer ever since. Since I moved to Ottawa, I have not been active in the local STC chapter.

During my time with STC Manitoba I got to develop professional skills in a safe environment that I used later in my work life. For example, I worked on the committee (headed by Andrew Quarry) that coordinated the Plain Language Workshop by Siegal and Gale. The following year I spearheaded the STC workshop "Designing effective computer training" by Celia Clark. I was responsible for public relations, logistics, and general coordination and I learned a lot.



Laurie Morgan, one of the original STC Manitoba members

We drew more than half of the workshop attendees from groups outside of STC and contributed significantly to the Manitoba chapter revenues for the next few years. I was also on the Technical Communication in Western Canada project (1993–1995) but, really, Jamie Conklin and Andrew Quarry did all the heavy lifting.

Q. How do you see the chapter moving forward in the next few years?

LM: I don't know how the Manitoba chapter is doing now, but when we started we adopted a few key rules (mostly from Alexa) that I think helped keep the Manitoba chapter healthy.

Always have a regular newsletter that comes out before the next meeting. It keeps members in touch with chapter activities, helps members maintain contact with each other, and reminds them of the next meeting.

("The first 15—Where are they now?" continued on page 7)

("The first 15-Where are they now?" continued from page 6)

Have chapter meetings on the same night at the same interval (such as the 3rd Thursday of each month), and at the same location during the year.

Do everything possible to get new blood on the executive and try very hard not to have the same people continue in the same executive role for more than one year. To this end, our nominating committee would aggressively canvass new members to take a role on the executive. If someone gets a phone call "We think that you would make a wonderful (newsletter editor/ program committee chair/etc.) and would like to nominate you," that person is much more likely to respond positively. Sending out blanket requests for volunteers is not effective.

Keep the business portion of the chapter meetings to 10 minutes or less (5 minutes is ideal). The real purpose of the chapter meetings is for the members to network, share information, and have some fun. If people don't have a chance to talk to each other and just sit listening to a business meeting, they stop coming.

Keep the chapter focus (newsletter, meetings) on technical communication and related topics. The odd wild card topic is fun, but I've seen professional groups that lost focus and eventually dissolved.

Penny Staples

Q. How did you get involved with STC Manitoba back in 1988?

PS: I was working at Great-West Life at the same time as Alexa Campbell (it was my first "real" job after university). We weren't in the same department but we had spoken a few times, and she encouraged me to come out.

Q. What was your role at that time?

PS: I agreed to be treasurer but then came to my senses and realized that the job needed someone with actual accounting skills (which I lacked, both then and now). I was replaced within about two weeks, much to everyone's relief, including mine.

Q. What have you been doing over the past 20 years? Are you still involved with STC Manitoba and/or technical communication? Did your membership in the chapter help you in any way?

PS: I started out with a university degree (English) but no job. I stumbled into Technical Writing because it was something people seemed to be willing to pay me to do. I had no idea I'd have an aptitude for it until after I was already working in the profession.

Great-West Life hired me in 1988, and I worked there until the early '90s but was laid off in one of the waves of lay-offs they had at around that time (1993 I think).

After a year or so of freelancing, I was offered a job for a small company that was trying to make and market a tablet-style computer designed specifically for use in hospitals. I got the opportunity through Joanne Blackwood, and I will be grateful to her forever for it. They were a splendidly creative and brilliant group of people to work with. I was responsible for end-user documentation and the company intranet. I also managed all of the documentation for our ISO 9001 certification. I stayed with that company for about five years, through several incarnations. They were a great bunch of people, but in the end, we were purchased by a large American corporation that had an entire department of technical writers in New York. There began to be less and less for me to do, which left me both bored and very anxious.

When I got a call and an offer from a former colleague (a programmer I had worked with at Great-West Life), I jumped at an opportunity to change jobs. I have been working for my current employer for eight years now. I am the only writer for a small (fewer than 40 employees) but quite successful company—another brilliant and creative bunch. I am responsible for bid proposal documents for RFPs, end-user documentation, release notes and anything else that comes along.

I owe a great deal to STC Manitoba, though I haven't been actively involved for years. I met a lot of very encouraging people who talked me through my panic when I was laid off from Great-West Life, and who gave me some great advice and job leads.

At the moment, I find that between my job and my family obligations (aging parents, special needs child), I simply don't have the energy for many outside activities. I do hope that this won't last forever and I intend to get involved again.

("The first 15-Where are they now?" continued on page 8)

(“The first 15—Where are they now?” continued from page 7)

Q. How do you see the chapter moving forward in the next few years?

PS: Because I haven't been involved in recent years, I really can't comment, other than to say that I'm very glad to hear that the local group is doing well.

I do have one suggestion: getting any place before 7:00 pm on a weeknight has always been a problem for me. One suggestion I have is to separate the dinner from the activities afterwards, so that those of us who can't manage dinner can still take part, i.e., latecomers could turn up at 6:30 or 7:00 pm to hear the speaker—perhaps paying a smaller fee that includes coffee but not dinner. Or possibly replace dinner entirely? Start at 7:00 pm with the meeting and speaker, and

Susan Haire has been a technical communicator and member of STC for over 20 years. She was one of the 'first fifteen', and has served the chapter as President, Secretary, and Vice-President (this year).

follow it with coffee and dessert.

Q. Any other comments or words of wisdom you would like to share with the chapter?

PS: Something I learned with my first layoff: always have a backup plan in mind, just in case you get blind-sided by something you never expected. “Once in a while it's worth asking yourself what will I do if my job disappears tomorrow?” On a day to day basis, I have also found this type of approach to be useful in the workplace for dealing with sudden changes in projects and project scope. Always have a Plan B.

Stay flexible. And never stop learning.

Final note: Does anyone have an email address or telephone number for Denise Laporte-Dawes? If so, please contact me at

Professional development

Spring is almost here, so why not consider boosting your brain power. Red River College is offering courses to help you improve your skill set. Why not take a course and meet some new friends! You're never too young to stop (or start) learning. Consult the College's Web site for more course information.



Course	Date (2010)	Location
Report Writing	March 16–May 6	Red River College
Graphic Communications 1	March 1–May 31 April 6–June 1	
Digital AV Production—Intro	April 7–June 9	Red River College
InDesign (PC) 1	April 7–June 2	
Web Site Development—Intro	March 1–May 31 April 8–June 10 April 12–June 21	Red River College

For more information about the courses listed, consult the school's Web site.

Red River College Continuing and Distance Education: www.rrc.mb.ca

2009–2010 presentation schedule

Speaker	Presentation title	Date
Ron Blicq, Susan Haire	Technical Communication café Prairie Ink Café (Grant Park)	March 2, 2010
IMRIS	Tour of IMRIS	April 6, 2010
Sue Hemphill	Conflict resolution	May 4, 2010
Annual general meeting		

STC [international] elections

Making change happen—your vote counts

STC members are asked to familiarize themselves with the candidates running for the 2010 STC elections. Voting for STC elections will be held March 9 to April 8, 2010. Voting instructions and ballots will be sent to members by mail or email. The STC encourages members to vote online instead. By doing so you will save time and postage, and ensure that your vote is received immediately. The last day for elections is **April 8, 2010** at Noon EDT.

Candidate information is available on the STC Manitoba forums (See other events): <http://stcmanitoba.org/forums/viewforum.php?f=18>

Election candidates

The 2010 slate of candidates for Society office, the STC Board of Directors voted during its August 24, 2009 meeting to amend the Society Bylaws to reflect the following position changes:

- Remove the Second Vice President position
- Remove one Director position
- Change Director terms to two years
- Allow Directors to serve two consecutive terms

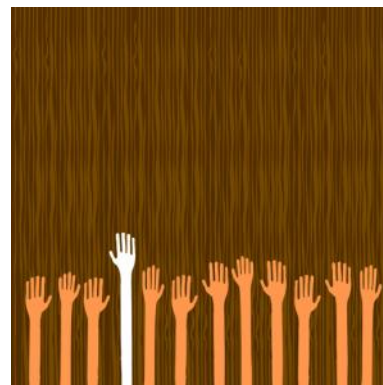
For President: Mike Hughes will automatically succeed from First Vice President.

For First Vice President: Hillary Hart will automatically succeed from Second Vice President.

Candidates on the slate for the 2010 STC election:

For Secretary:

- Rachel Houghton
- Steven Jong



For Director (three positions to be elected)*:

- Nicky Bleiel
- Al Hood
- Tricia Spayer
- Makarand (Mak) Pandit
- W.C. Wiese

*Lisa Pappas resigned from the STC Board effective November 23, 2009, which creates an additional position for someone to serve the one year remaining in her term. For Nominating Committee (two positions to be elected):

- Lory Hawkes
- Nathaniel Lim
- Linda Mikkelsen
- Preeti Mathu

If you have any questions, please contact Chief Operating Officer and Director of Community Relations, Diana Buttram, at diana.buttram@stc.org, or reply to stc_election@stc.org.

STC MANITOBA MESSAGE BOARD

Strong leader wanted!
Looking for chapter
President with bold ideas
to revitalize chapter!
Contact: Nominating
chair

Do you like bananas?
Needing a second
banana or Vice-
President to lead
chapter forward.

WANTED: individual with
strong listening skills and
attention to detail. Chapter
secretary contact
andrewquarry@gmail.com

Person with strong
counting skills needed.
No abacus required, just
the ability to count.
Contact Ben if
interested in Treasurer
position

Chair persons wanted.
Chairs provided—just
bring yourself:
Membership chair
Public relations chair
Program chair

Creative persons
needed to keep STC
Manitoba chapter
members informed.
Newsletter editor
needed, start Aug 2010.

STC Manitoba Job Bank

Searching for that perfect job? Need a change in your career? Visit the STC Manitoba job bank online: www.stcmanitoba.org/forums at **Employment > STC Manitoba Job Bank** to find the most recent jobs posted.

STC members who have registered for the forums are able to view new postings for 10 days before the postings are made available to the general public.

Remember, if you haven't registered on the forums yet, please do so! You must register for the forums to be certain that you are viewing the most recent job postings. Don't be the last to know!

Bring a guest contest

STC Manitoba's Bring a guest contest is back for 2009–10.

Win a free membership worth roughly \$250.00. For more details, visit the STC website at www.stcmanitoba.org.

