



# Ascent

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## President’s message

### STC-IC gives members opportunities

Several years ago I worked as a writer in Arizona. One day we were brainstorming with the marketing director to come up with an image that would convey constancy and stability. Someone proposed the Grand Canyon. At first everyone liked the idea. Then someone suggested that the Grand Canyon wouldn’t work because the canyon is always changing, as the elements etch away at the landscape. We all agreed that such constant change didn’t seem very stable, so we continued brainstorming.

But then I thought, wait a minute. The fact that the Grand Canyon is changing is the one thing about it that we can count on the most.

Change is often seen as the antithesis of constancy. However, in certain contexts, it is its backbone. We recently experienced a change in our region as Sherry Michaels was elected to be our new Region 5 Director-Sponsor. Within the last few years, STC introduced its Transformation Initiative—a program designed to identify needs, incorporate member feedback, and manage and direct change in the society and the industry. Soon we will see a change in the Intermountain Chapter’s executive council and board, as new leaders step up and take charge.

Change is an invigorating process, and one that, as is the case with the Grand Canyon, has the potential to reveal a beauty beneath that would not be seen otherwise.

We invite you to be a part of this process, to be involved in molding and defining—and leading—our chapter. If you are willing to serve on the council or board, or as a member of a committee, please let us know. For information on available positions, click <http://www.intermountain-stc.org/volunteer.html>, or log on to the chapter website and select Volunteer Opportunities from the menu on the left.

Thank you for being a part of our chapter!

—Melissa Jessop, STC-IC President

## Workplace

### From Tech Writer to Trainer

#### Introduction

Not all tech writers and instructional designers want to stand in front of a classroom full of computer users and teach. I understand that. Certainly, not many computer software trainers would be inclined to write technical documentation all day. But in some companies, the line between these two fields has blurred. In my current contract, I wear many hats: technical writer/instructional designer/trainer/onsite support. Granted, it keeps me hopping, but I never feel left out of the loop.

#### The Way It Was

Before I became a fulltime tech writer and instructional designer, I taught computer software classes. Although I found software training to be rewarding, technical writing contracts promised fewer evening hours at my desk and larger paychecks. I couldn’t resist making the transition.

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When I traded one form of technical communication for another, I earned more money, but I lost something in the trade. I lost contact with the end user. Like most tech writers, I worked with programmers, engineers, business analysts, and subject matter experts to gather the information I needed to produce technical manuals and training materials, but once the product passed quality control, I never heard any more about the book or the course. I had no idea how well it was received; I didn't know whether what I had written filled the client's needs or not.

## The Evolution

My current contract is with a company that does not subscribe to the kept-in-the-dark documentation process. Not only do technical writers and instructional designers research, write, and troubleshoot the online help and training materials, they also play an active role in the training.

When this company prepared to train thousands of employees to work with a new system, the managers decided to integrate the trainers and the writers so that everyone involved with a project would work with both the data and the business, from start to finish, including the classroom. In fact, the technical writers and instructional designers who create the help and the training materials also perform onsite support for the first week after a department goes online with the new system.

With this plan, train-the-trainer turned into a practice session where the technical documentation team members test the training materials and train each other. One member from another team audits this practice class, but no one from "training" has to ramp up on a new subject. The writers themselves are the trainers.

## Conclusion

With this company, the technical documentation experts who produce the training materials get to see firsthand how the customer receives their materials. Their vast amount of background information is actively used in the classroom, where it becomes very useful when students raise questions. For me, this solution offers the best of both worlds—the opportunity to both write and teach.

—Donna Ann Gordon, Owner, Gordon Computer

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## Tools of the Trade

### Member-to-member tips for effective data collection interviews

Whether you love them or hate them, data collection interviews are a critical part of a technical writer's job. Recently, STC-IC members were invited to contribute their tricks for getting the information they need from subject matter experts (SMEs). Here's what they had to say:

**Start early.** Contact SMEs as soon as possible, even if your schedule permits a little slacking. You never know when a SME may vanish behind a wall of work or go on an endless vacation.

**Bone up.** Review whatever materials you already possess. Becoming familiar with the subject and its terms will help you ask the right questions, establish your credibility, and gain cooperation from the SME.

**Make a prototype.** Sketch the general structure and layout of the document before your interview to identify any gaps in the source material or other issues to raise during the interview. Remember that you may need to change the prototype completely based on what you learn from your SME.

**Write your questions.** If conducting the interview over the phone or in person, a simple list of questions may be adequate. However, if you will email your questions to the SME, create a well-written document that guides the SME into answering clearly and completely.

**Respect the SME's time.** Be friendly, but then get down to business. Unless the SME has invited you to call or drop by without an appointment, set a time and be there.

**Respect your own time.** If your SME is ten minutes or more late, you may want to leave a polite request to reschedule or invite the SME to contact you within a certain time period. Ignoring the missed appointment may only set you up for further neglect.

**Follow through.** Often, a SME has little incentive to make your project a priority. If you don't get a response to your requests for an interview, verify that  
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the contact information is correct and that the SME is not out on leave. Continue to leave daily messages via phone and email until the SME understands you aren't going away.

**Be prepared.** Have your questions, notes, source documents, and anything else you need ready to go when the interview starts. If you are unprepared for the interview, reschedule it to avoid wasting everyone's time and damaging your credibility.

**Ask clarifying questions.** When something the SME says doesn't make sense, you may be tempted to try to figure it out later. Don't. If you're wrong, you risk producing inaccurate work and bogging down the project in revision.

**Repeat what you hear.** Verify your interpretation of the material by periodically summarizing what the SME says. If conducting the interview via email, write capture statements for tricky material and ask the SME to confirm or correct your understanding.

**Take good notes.** Even if you record your interviews on audiotape, it's wise to jot judicious notes, both as backup and as a guide to the audiotape. Be sure to verify spellings and acronyms and record the date, time, attendees, and purpose of the interview.

**Lighten the mood.** Though some SMEs prefer to be all business, a little good-natured humor can help open the channels of communication. If it feels right and suits your personality, inject the conversation with an upbeat tone. As long as your pleasantries are appropriate and brief, your SME may be more likely to return your next call.

**Communicate next steps.** If the SME will be part of the review process, discuss logistics as they relate to the SME. Don't volunteer to show the SME a draft if this is not in the project plan: adding another reviewer may throw your project out of scope or alienate a key stakeholder. If asked, offer to send portions of the text you may need to verify.

**Leave the door open.** Always ask if you may contact the SME with follow-up questions, even if you're sure you won't have any. Verify the best medium to use.

**End on a high note.** Thank your SMEs for their time regardless of whether they've been pleasant or

helpful. If you covered complex material, identified needs, or reached decisions, follow up with an email of capture statements. Ask the SME to explicitly confirm or correct your understanding in writing so you have a record of the exchange.

—Jenn Gibbs, Senior Writer and Editor, McKinnon-Mulherin, Inc

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## Connections

### STC opens enhanced Career Center

In response to members' requests for expanded services, STC has launched its new Technical Communication Career Center. More comprehensive than the former job board, the Career Center enables members to do the following:

- View listings before they're available to the general public.
- Access detailed job listings and descriptions from more than 300 job boards.
- Post resumes anonymously and control who can view your personal information.
- Store select job openings, resumes, cover letters, and more.

To see what the Career Center can do for you, visit <http://jobs.stc.org>.

### Region 5 director-sponsor bids Intermountain Chapter goodbye

It's difficult for me to believe, but my three years as director-sponsor for Region 5 are almost over. So much has happened in the last three years!

Where are we? Transformation of the STC has taken center stage. We have a new membership structure and members have a new, more robust connection with the STC board. Many communities have rechartered, determining what they do well and whether they are serving their members well. Society research grants are more practical and the Society has tightened its belt in places we never thought possible.

As one of 14 folks you elected to run the Society over the past three years, I have been proud to be part of the Region 5 Board of Directors. We may not have gotten everything right all the time, but we sure have made everyone sit up to watch, listen, and offer ideas. (Continued on page 4)

Since May 2002 when I became director-sponsor, Region 5 has held three phenomenal conferences. I'd like to congratulate those three host chapters: Oklahoma, Austin, and Intermountain. As we look to the future, Phoenix is planning to co-host the conference with the Instructional Design and Learning SIG. Lone Star has already begun planning the conference for 2006. Three Region 5 chapters (Austin, Southern Arizona, and Houston) have hosted STC Board meetings, and at least two international judging competitions were held in Houston. Several folks throughout the region have been honored as Associate Fellows and Fellows and many more have received the Distinguished Chapter Service Award. Many chapters in Region 5 have been recognized as a Chapter of Merit, Excellence, and Distinction by the Society. Still other chapters have received awards in newsletter competitions and publicity competitions.

Big events. Big changes. Big happenings. Yet, STC is mainly about the people. It always has been. No matter who or how we run the Society, its heart is its members and the connections we have with each other.

Since becoming an STC in 1979, I have traveled all over this country—sometimes in my duties as director-sponsor, sometimes as a Society board member, sometimes as an individual contributor. Now it's 2005, and I'll soon be opening a new door of STC opportunity. Whatever it is, I know that STC

friends will be on the other side to welcome me. I like that. Thank you.

—Linda L. Oestreich, STC Region 5 Director-Sponsor and Manager, Communities Transformation Committee

## Acknowledgments

### STC-IC members present at conference

In March, members Becky Jo McShane and Shelley Thomas presented a poster at the annual conference of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW). The poster, titled “Creating Community Connections: Student Projects at Weber State University,” demonstrates that students learn what being a technical writer means, why technical writing is valuable, and how writers can advocate for users. Look for Becky Jo and Shelley’s research in an upcoming issue of ATTW’s journal, *Technical Communication Quarterly*.

### Thank you

STC-IC thanks the Florida branch of Idea Integration for allowing us to use their conference line for our executive board meetings. One board member is a contractor for Idea Integration, a unit of MPS Group. Learn about Idea Integration at <http://www.idea.com>

—D. A. Gordon, Owner, Gordon Computer

## Contacts

### 2005 Executive Board and Advisory Council

STC-Intermountain Chapter 2005 Executive Board		
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Education committee manager	Tiffany Wheeler	<a href="mailto:tiffany_wheeler@yahoo.com">tiffany_wheeler@yahoo.com</a>
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