

# TechView

Semester Newsletter for STC-NIU  
The NIU Student Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication



Volume 3, Issue 1  
Spring 2010

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## From the Desk of Shelley Korth

STC-NIU President

**Workshops.** This semester has been busy—we sponsored two workshops. Linda Watson, editor of *The Reavis Newsletter* (a publication for NIU department of English alums), spoke to a group of students in February about newsletters. At the workshop, we learned how to produce a newsletter and particularly how to:

- Set publication goals
- Apply formatting and layout techniques
- Choose typography
- Create content
- Apply design principles effectively

Some of the students who attended the workshop were able to use what they'd learned for revamping this newsletter. Our goal this semester was to redesign the template and streamline the publication process and I'm very happy with the results.

The second workshop was held in March. Professor Eubanks, department of English chair, made a presentation on brochures. During the presentation we learned:

- Basic brochure design
- How to think about the usefulness of brochures
- Surprising things that make brochures effective

The things we learned about brochures will help STC-NIU members interested in developing a brochure for our organization to create an effective piece that will attract new members.

**STC-NIU Wiki.** As part of a class project, Cameron Orr and I have been working this semester to develop a new Web site for STC-NIU. We chose to use a wiki application because we believe it will help members learn how to use this type of tool and that it will be a useful thing to know in the job market. Our new site is currently under construction, and we plan to formally introduce it at the beginning of fall semester later this year. Feel free to check it out at <http://stc-niu.wikiidot.com/> in the meantime, and let us know what you think. We appreciate the four people who helped us with the usability testing: Natalie Christensen, Amy Glaves, Jen Holland, and Nina Mancuso.

**Fundraising.** I want to thank Amy Glaves for coordinating and leading our bake sale in March; we earned almost \$90.00. The money will help us to continue sponsoring meaningful activities for our members.

**Kudos.** Congratulations to Amy Glaves for winning the Rosalie Hewitt Scholarship in English, 2009. This endowed scholarship is awarded each fall to a fulltime undergraduate English major on the basis of academic achievement, socio-economic background, career goals, and community service.

As for this publication, I think you'll be interested to read Joyce Nemenyi's article, "A Career in Technical Communication: What You Need to Do." In it you will find some practical information about getting started in the technical communication profession. Nicole Rutan offers some insight into commonly used technology tools. Alex Otil reports on a recent interview with a technical writing blogger. Ahren Swan lays out some interesting information about jobs in technical communication. Bijan Partowazam weighs in with some thoughts on newsletters.

As always, I'd appreciate hearing from readers. Please take time to send me an email to tell me what you think of this issue. Which articles did you especially like? What would you like to see in future issues? STC-NIU and this publication exist to respond to the needs of students interested in technical communication. You can help us to meet your needs.

In the meantime, keep writing!

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# Job Opportunities in Technical Writing

By Ahren Swan



When I decided to change my major to English, the one question everyone asked me was, “Oh, are you going to be a teacher?” For the first few weeks, all I could say was no; when asked what exactly I was planning on doing, I would lamely reply “Um, editing?” I did not really know about any other

careers for English majors besides teaching and writing books. Luckily, one of my professors suggested that I check out the technical writing classes NIU offers. There, I found many other English majors who also did not want to teach. I began to see that there are several careers in the technical communication field for those who care to look.

The first job I found out about was that of a technical writer. If you have ever used written instructions to make or use a product, you have seen the work of a technical writer. In this profession, the writer designs, writes, creates, maintains, and/or updates technical documents; which might include online help or user guides, design specifications, system manuals, and other similarly styled documents. These writers can be hired in any work field. The writers are hired not because they know a lot about a certain subject, but because they know how to gather information, analyze subjects and audience samples, and produce clear, concise documents.

Technical editors do the job of typical editors except that they specialize in the editing of technical documents. These individuals need to not only have a good grasp of grammar and language, but they also need to be able to identify a good page layout, good graphics usage, and overall usability of technical documents. This makes the job more demanding but also more varied than the standard editing job.

A technical illustrator designs graphics and charts that go in technical documents. Any instruction booklet you may have read that featured a drawn instruction was designed by a technical illustrator. These illustrators can work and specialize in many different fields, such as online design or print design. This field is growing at a rapid rate, because graphics

can transcend language barriers and an online expansion of written literature has opened many job options all over the world.

These are only a few jobs that fall within the technical communication field so if any sound interesting but not exactly what you want to do, check out more options

online or contact one of the professors who specialize in technical writing at NIU's English department. Professor Reyman teaches many of the technical communication courses and is a very knowledgeable source. All of these careers are open to anyone with a passion for communication, so even if you are not an English major, check them out and explore the huge and varied field of Technical Communication.

*Ahren Swan is an undergraduate student at NIU studying English.*

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**“Luckily, one of my professors suggested that I check out the technical writing classes NIU offers. There, I found many other English majors who also did not want to teach.”**

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# A Career in Technical Communication: What You Need to Do

By Joyce Nemenyi

If you are reading this newsletter, then you are probably curious about technical communication.

If you are interested in pursuing a career in technical communication, prepare to arm yourself with some important skills. According to the Web site <http://www.school-for-champions.com>, writer Sean Hower says there are several things you can do to increase your marketability in the workplace. In his article "5 Ways to Write Your Way into Technical Writing," he offers five suggestions to help people further their skills in the technical communication market:

1. **Education:** Many employers are looking for candidates with at least some type of degree or educational experience. Employers are looking for majors in English, communications, or some other technical field such as engineering. There are also colleges and universities that offer certificate or degree programs in technical writing. If these options don't work for you, at least take a few courses in writing and communications.

2. **Technology:** Employers are increasingly searching for candidates who have some experience or knowledge with the leading document design programs. These usually include, but are not limited to, one or more of the following: Adobe FrameMaker, Adobe InDesign, EHelp's Robohelp, Microsoft Word, and Illustrator. Many universities offer student discounts and some how-to books come with demos or shareware versions of these programs.

3. **Networking:** Joining an organization is one of the best ways to get some experience with technical communication. For example, The Society for Technical Communication (STC), which has many local chapters including our student chapter at NIU, can help you meet and network with other technical writers. There are many organiza-

tions out there, so do your own research until you find one that suits your needs.

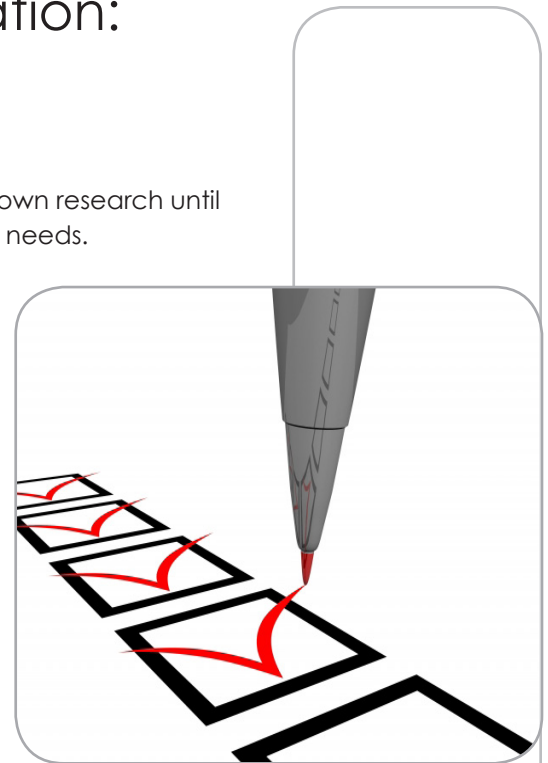
4. **Portfolio:** After you've completed a few projects on your own, show off your knowledge by putting together a portfolio of your work. This will show employers what you know and how much experience you have. Although Hower doesn't go into detail about how best to assemble your portfolio, most Web sites suggest either a hard copy or an electronic version like a Web site or CD-ROM. Either way, always keep a backup of your work on a ZIP drive or some other reliable device.

5. **Job Search:** After you've assembled your portfolio, you have a few different options to choose from when sending your résumé to employers. Start with companies that use technical communicators, even if they are not currently hiring. Try branching out to other types of companies because they might need

a person with technical communication skills, too. Another helpful arena for your job search is an online job board such as Monster.com. They filter your search engine results and allow you to post your résumé to the Web.

While these objectives are helpful tips to consider in your job search, remember there are lots of other ways to get information about a career in technical communication. You can go online and search Web sites for additional skills and knowledge or check out books that cover topics in technical communication such as writing, document design, and software information.

*Joyce Nemenyi is an undergraduate student at NIU studying English.*



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# Technical Communicators Create Newsletters

By Bijan Partowazam



Technical communication can involve an assortment of applications amid many career fields. The ability to communicate effectively in a range of genres—newsletters, brochures, instructions, user manuals, proposals, reports, surveys, Web sites—is invaluable

no matter the field.

Newsletters, for example, communicate important and specialized information to a limited audience on a regular basis. This limited audience may be product users, company employees, or members of an organization. Newsletters can help to increase sales, maintain relationships with subscribers, and serve as a source of revenue if a subscription fee is charged.

Successful newsletter publishing involves working within budget and deadline parameters. A working knowledge of certain publishing software like Adobe InDesign or Microsoft Office Publisher is essential, and looks good on a résumé, in any event. These programs offer a multitude of templates with preset design formats, color schemes, and other page layout features.

Successful newsletters engage readers with good writing—headlines, images, captions, and text. First, headlines summarize and relate to the content of the article. Writing in the present tense keeps the news

or story fresh and timely. Next, images such as photographs or graphics (charts, graphs, tables, or maps) catch readers' attention, but should be used judiciously and mainly to underscore content. Every image or visual needs a caption. Captions connect the reader with the article by conveying context and meaning for the image. Finally, the text of the article should be written in a natural speaking voice. Because readers skim and scan, articles must be written concisely to facilitate their search for useful information.

Naturally, design should draw attention without distracting from the content. Newsletter design includes format, type, and depictions of things such as the nameplate. In terms of font, serif font tends to work well for the body, especially if offset by a match-

ing sans serif font for headlines. The aforementioned software programs have templates that select font automatically.

Newsletters can be distributed on paper, on-screen, via email, or a combination of all these methods. Decisions about paper and the use of color are determined by the constraints of the budget. Increasingly, however, electronic newsletters (e-newsletters) are

distributing information via email, blogs, or Web sites.

Newsletters play an important role in spreading ideas throughout a company or an organization. There is a need in the workplace for people with ability and experience in creating newsletters. Technical communicators should take advantage of opportunities to work on this type of documentation gain valuable knowledge and skills.

*Bijan Partowazam is an undergraduate student at NIU studying English.* ■

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# Electronic Book Readers: Tools of Our Future

By Nicole Rutan

Everybody uses technology; let's face it, technology makes life easier. Whether you use a cell phone to stay in touch or a computer to find information, these things make life a little less difficult and a little more entertaining. Consider calculators. Calculators are basic necessities in the math world, but you first need to know how to add and subtract without them. You would not use a calculator to make simple calculations; you would use your brain. Or maps—how many of us can actually read a map? What if your trusty GPS gets you lost or your handy cell phone with turn-by-turn directions breaks? What would you do? Would you sit in your car banging your head on the wheel, find someone who might know where you should go, or break out the old map and stare at it blankly? Technology is a godsend, but most people are lost without it.

Electronic book readers (e-readers) are among the newest tools to help us in daily life. These devices display books and other media on a hand-held screen. Amazon was one of the first companies to produce an e-reader. In November 2007, the First Generation Kindle was sold. Sony now has an e-reader as does Barnes & Nobel (Nook), and most recently Apple with its newly released iPad. Prices for e-readers range from \$250 – \$700. Of course electronic books (e-books) are purchased separately.

Using e-readers in the classroom is very new. Princeton University first introduced Kindles into their curriculum with mixed reviews in 2009 and 2010. The major purpose of the project was to determine if e-readers could be used to cut down on paper at the university without negatively influencing learning. Many students felt it affected their classroom experience. Some students explained that they could not annotate, did not have page numbers for reference, and that the devices were too similar to hand-held computers, which many already had. Other students felt using

a Kindle made life simpler (Lee). Many liked that they used less paper, which was better for the environment, and that all of the course work for a class was on one device (e-reader).

We can lean heavily on technology to do simple things like finding our way on the road or even reading books, but let's learn how to function without technology first. You never know

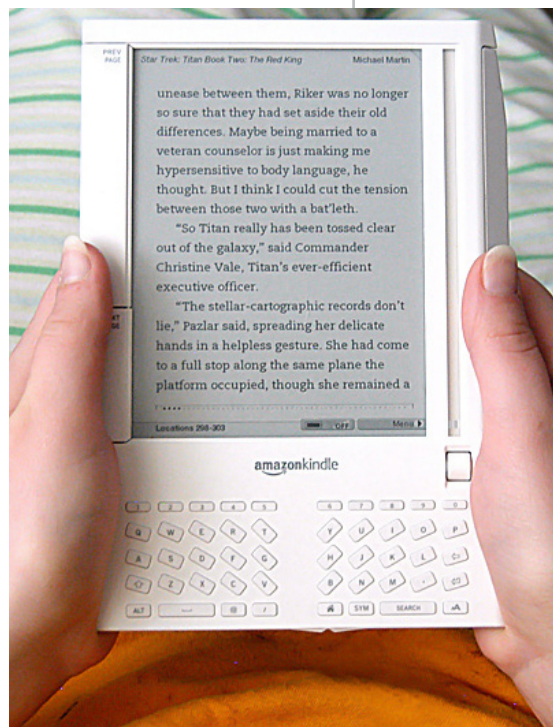
when you may need to find directions on

a map or read a book without electronic crutches.

*Nicole Rutan is an undergraduate student studying English at NIU. She will be majoring in English education.*

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<http://www.princeton.edu/ereaderpilot/>>.



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**“Technology is a godsend, but most people are lost without it.”**

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# Tom Johnson: A Modern Day Technical Writer

By Alex Otil

Tom Johnson is a technical writer and the author of *I'd Rather Be Writing*, a technical communication blog (<http://www.idratherbewriting.com/>).



After unfulfilling careers as a composition teacher and a copywriter, Tom turned to technical writing and began blogging. He believes blogging is beneficial to any career. "It's like a professional development tool. It keeps you up-to-date on trends and interacting with other colleagues in your field," Tom said.

As an experienced technical writer, Tom has some advice for students. Beyond just being

able to organize technical content intuitively, workers in the industry need to learn tools such as help-offering software (Madcap Flare or Adobe RoboHelp), graphics software (Adobe Photoshop or TechSmith Snagit), and video capturing software (Adobe Captivate). Tom went on to say, "Although a lot of tech writers don't do videos, it's really one of the best ways for people to learn software." He said technical writers need to be more like

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**"For students, my biggest recommendation is don't turn your nose up at technical writing."**

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investigative journalists: "The mindset [is] that if they don't have the information they need, they are going to find it." These skills alone, however, won't land you a job. Potential employers are looking for a strong portfolio. "A strong portfolio includes examples that demonstrate competence. You have to build your own experience if you don't have any. That will go farther than anything else," Tom continued.

But, how has today's struggling job market affected the future of technical communication? Tom was very optimistic since technology and software will always require technical writing. "Any time you have IT companies that are cranking out software applications, you are going to need technical writers to create help materials for [users]."

Another bright spot is that technical writing is a fairly lucrative field with average earnings that exceed that of English teachers. Tom has witnessed the struggles of teaching and copywriting firsthand. "Financially, there

is just not another road that would sustain me and help me support my family. For students, my biggest recommendation is don't turn your nose up at technical writing."

*Alex Otil is an undergraduate student at NIU.* ■

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We love to hear from you!

- Share your knowledge about technical writing, your internships, and your jobs. Send us 250–500 word stories; include photos and other images as appropriate. Your article could appear in *TechView*. Email to the editor at [rkorth@niu.edu](mailto:rkorth@niu.edu) (subject line: TechView News).
- Sign up for your free copy of the *TechView* e-newsletter at <http://stc-niu.wikidot.com/start>

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## STC-NIU Team Spring 2010

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