In search of ... intelligent help

Lori Tabone, Co-Editor

So, how 'bout that HTML help? Anybody else out there find that RoboHELP HTML is lacking the strength and character of good old RoboHELP Classic? That GUI is just so anemic!

Alas, it is the industry that dictates the direction we take as technical communicators. HTML help is definitely a leap forward with its reduced file size, ActiveX compatibility, and ease of use, but you'd think the development applications we use to create HTML help could be a little beefier.

For those of you who are GUI-phobic and prefer to type in cryptic code to get the job done, there's always the good old HTML Help Workshop that comes free with Windows. It's not too bad, I guess, but it's not that great either. Perhaps I've been using RoboHELP Classic entirely too long.

My coworkers and I have found that the RoboHELP HTML knowledge base is a great source of very helpful information. Along with the online help, the knowledge base gets us through the tight spots. You can submit a question to the knowledge base on the Web by visiting **helpcommunity.ehelp.com** and clicking the **Ask** hyperlink.

We have also spent some time testing other HTML editors like HomeSite to see which is most efficient. Along the way, we found some limitations with the TOC (Table of Contents) editor in RoboHELP HTML. To work around those limitations, we modified the TOC in HTML Help Workshop, but switching between the two applications corrupted our help projects. However, we've been able to successfully modify both the HTML files and the TOC in HomeSite with few problems.

Our search for the absolutely perfect HTML help compiler continues...

Effective listening pays big dividends

J. Susanna Laurent, Region 5 Director-Sponsor

A really good listener is a rare and priceless commodity. That's because effective listening skills do not develop naturally. Few of us have ever been taught the value or the process of active listening, and those who have are the ones getting the results they want. They reach the top of their professions, enjoy rich and fulfilling personal relationships, and suffer less from stress and worry.

The good news is that anyone can become a good listener. All it takes is the desire to learn the techniques that work. Listening is one thing that most people wish they could improve. Yet many people overlook simple and obvious ways to improve their listening skills instantly. Here are five guidelines that can help you sharpen your listening skills.

Use your mind. Being a good listener requires a conscious effort. You must listen with your mind completely engaged. Try listening for accuracy and inaccuracy—it helps keep your mind alert. Listen as if you are hearing the information for the first time.

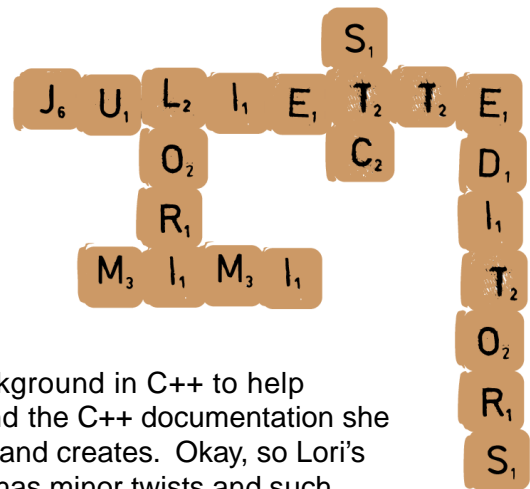## In this issue

We editors three

Mimi Byun, Co-Editor

My one-year anniversary as a technical writer is coming up, and lately I have been thinking about how I ended up where I am now, professionally. I've noticed that more and more entry-level technical writers and editors graduated with the intention of entering this field, and many even earned a technical communications degree.

Not so a few years ago. Everyone you crossed had an interesting story, complete with more plot twists and surprise endings than Highway 2222. It is still unusual to find someone who picked up a manual as a child and had that one epiphany, "That's what I want to do—I want to write these."

Well, as your collective editors, we thought it would be interesting to introduce ourselves by telling our story about how we ended up where we are, doing what we're doing.

Lori was raised in Boerne, a town just northwest of San Antonio. After changing her major three or four times, she decided on English. Thinking she didn't really want to teach, she decided to see what this technical writing stuff was all about. So, onward she marched! Two semesters and many scientific/research papers later, she decided this was her calling. Six years after high school, approximately 145 semester hours, and two colleges later, she graduated from the University of Texas in San Antonio in 1995 with a B.A. in English with an emphasis on technical writing. She worked as an intern for PDI in Temple, Texas, then accepted a full-time position there for a few years.

During her PDI stint, Lori decided she might want to be a computer programmer instead of a technical writer. So, onward she marched once again—this time, straight to the computer science department at Central Texas College in Killeen, and later to the computer science department at Augusta State University in Georgia. After two-and-a-half years of stimulating computer science courses like FORTRAN and COBOL, Lori realized that while she could greatly enhance her skills as a writer with the knowledge she gained, a programmer she was not. Onward she marched once more. This time, she headed to Austin to work for National Instruments, where she could use her basic background in C++ to help understand the C++ documentation she now edits and creates. Okay, so Lori's path only has minor twists and such. It refutes my theory, so let's move on.

Juliette loves to work with words. Ever since she can remember, she has been proofreading and editing anything she can get her hands on, even red-inking the local newspaper on particularly dull days. At Louisiana State University, she jumped from position to position on the school paper, working as a copy editor, editorial page editor, and movie critic. She also worked as a Capitol Bureau reporter during an internship for Gannett News Service. Eventually she earned a B.A. in print journalism from LSU, and then decided to go to graduate school for the usual (and worst) reason—to avoid having to find a real job.

It's the same old story—student arrives in Austin, student adores Austin, student doesn't want to leave even though it's going to mess up her career to stay. Juliette earned her M.A. in screenwriting from the University of Texas, realizing at the last minute that this is not a degree that normally earns someone a lot of money, particularly if that someone doesn't want to move to southern California. After a few years of temp work and grunt work around Austin, she landed a job as a graphic designer/technical writer for a federally funded medical organization, producing brochures about heart attacks and flu shots.

A few years later, Juliette decided she'd had enough medical writing and editing to last a lifetime. She moved into desktop publishing for a couple of years, specializing in localization. Eventually she realized how much she missed working with content and the English language, and transferred to technical writing.

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Editors

My story spans six universities, eight fields of study: from pre-med to feminism study (grrr!), and three continents. Call me internationally indecisive. I ended up with a B.A. in English literature from the University of Texas in Austin and a year of Bible School under my belt. I was studying with the intention of being a missionary of sorts in Russia (if you knew how shriveled I get from Texas winters, this would strike you as odd).

So things didn't work out quite as I expected. Pretty soon I found myself in high-tech Austin with a liberal arts degree, not prepared or motivated to look for a job. I wanted to write that Great American Novel, but frankly my life experiences were more vanilla than va-voom. Graduate school seemed a good buffer between indecision and the cold pavement, so I met with the English graduate advisor at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. He asked me if I wanted to try a new program. You know me, can't pass up something new. Next thing I knew, I was on track for a Master's degree in technical communication when I didn't even know anything about it.

It was like a whole new world opened up to me, writing in a simple clear language for the common person. No more obtuse literary references and circular reasoning that confused even me. I was exposed to business proposals, Web page design, and even usability.

A few months later, I landed an internship at a local startup company where a friend was working, which led to a full-time position where I am now. At times, I feel overwhelmed by the huge learning curve: balancing where technical communications as a field is going with learning the high-level technology I am writing about. But, I have to admit that I am really happy where I am and with what I am doing, although I would have never expected it.

Call us directionally challenged, but none of us ended up where we expected. If you have a story about how you became a technical writer or if you came from a totally unrelated field, send me your story (mimi.byun@ni.com) and we'll include it in an upcoming issue. It'll be great to see what paths others have taken to make their niche in this corner of the high-tech world.

Listening

Listen for the whole message. Many people tune in only to the words of a speaker, not the body language or tone of voice, so they do not receive the whole message. In understanding a message, both the verbal and nonverbal part of the message is important. You cannot develop the best understanding if you only listen to part of the message.

Control your environment. Distractions often destroy listening ability. We are surrounded by noise in the office and at home. We can be distracted by physical barriers, such as the placement of a desk or a seating arrangement in a group meeting, or by internal distractions. You can listen much more effectively if you can control both your external and internal environments. If you can't control the environment, reschedule or move elsewhere.

Take the initiative. In order to make better listening a way of life, you have to learn new skills and rid yourself of bad listening habits. This takes time and practice. You can become a better listener just by learning and practicing one new listening skill every week.

Use active and reflective listening. In active listening, the listener responds to the speaker based on the listener's understanding of the message that was communicated. This person is part of an ongoing conversation, the give-and-take of ideas. Active listening is used in group problem-solving situations.

In reflective listening, the listener is primarily a sounding board for the speaker. The listener helps the speaker come to grips with the problem being communicated. Reflective listening is used primarily in one-on-one conversations when the speaker needs a listener, not advice.

These guidelines can give you immediate results. If you want more help, dozens of good books are available on becoming a better listener. By using these guidelines and learning more about how to become an effective listener, you will be able to hear what's *really* being said.

Documentation—it *does* matter

Mary Connor, Chapter President

It's a constant struggle we as technical communicators face on a daily basis—why doesn't documentation matter to people? This past weekend, I was reminded just how important it is.

Katie, my 12-month-old daughter, woke up one morning and blew a quarter-cup of snot out of her nose. Okay, I thought, this is her first cold; no biggie. The day progressed, snot-filled but uneventful. After lunch, Katie ran into the kitchen alone, and then we heard her howl. The oven was off but still hot, and she stood there with her hand pressed to its glass front and crying. I saw the blistering on her little hand, and I knew she was in trouble.
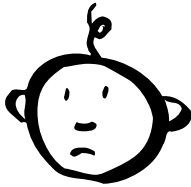
Emergency Manual

First, we looked through a pediatrics manual that Katie's doctor had written. The overstuffed comb binding made the pages hard to turn and the book vulnerable to losing pages. The emergency instructions were mercifully on the front page, although my husband didn't think to look there.

Here it is: go to the hospital. But which hospital? The book said Brackenridge, but was that for all emergencies? and was that only because of insurance coverage? This meant the difference between a hospital less than a mile away and one 12 miles away, and who knew how long it might take with traffic. Unable to find any more information, we sped Katie off to Brackenridge, the long drive.

Hospital Parking

The hospital's "interface" caused us a lot of stress, too: where do I turn? here? *here*? Can I park here? for how long? This door? This triage nurse? No, the arrow is *there*. Am I in line? this window? Do we just wait to be noticed? How can they not notice this screaming? Is it normal to wait this long? Clear signs would have made a big difference.

Many hours, much screaming, and untold tears later, we were back at home with Katie, her weary brain drugged on a narcotic and her hand invisible beneath a grapefruit-sized wad of wet dressings and tape. Then, the next phase of excitement came: the vomiting.

The first dose of painkiller she took caused her to vomit everywhere. And how were we to change her, with that grapefruit of a hand? Out came the pinking shears and we cut off the sodden outfit. Over the next few hours, we repeated this twice, but without the painkiller. So, did the painkillers cause the vomiting? How were they related? Was this serious? The emergency nurse we called calmed us somewhat, but it was clear that we were on our own. To get more help from them, we would have to drag her back to that awful place.

Emergency Manual—Part II

So, out came the books. First, the pediatrics manual. Can you believe it had no index? We flipped through the contents, but it wasn't organized in a logical manner (not logical to us, that is) and we couldn't find an entry for vomiting. Could that be true? We found references to vomiting, but only in the context of diarrhea, so did it apply? There were only bits of information—how could we get the big picture?

Outside Resource to the Rescue

After checking some other references, I fetched my favorite book: *Take Care of Yourself*, a health manual provided by an employer. We'd always joked that they hoped to keep insurance costs down by minimizing our trips to the doctor. This book was very well structured: a deep, deep index to get you precisely to the relevant information; rich, uniform articles on each illness topic; complete cross-referencing; well-designed pages and graphics to make locating information mercifully easy. Best of all, each article ended with a graphical decision tree: it asked you questions

Documentation—it *does* matter

that branched to subsequent questions that led to explicit advice (See doctor today; Make appointment this week; Apply home remedy).

Using the information in this book, I determined that Katie was not seriously dehydrated at this point and should be fine until her wound-check the following day. That's what I needed.
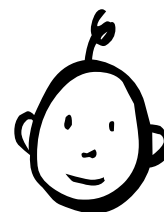
And that's my point: that this wonderful manual is wonderful precisely because it supports its users so appropriately. People turn to such a book when in distress, and finding information quickly and getting concrete advice are two paramount needs. It suppresses technical detail and discussions that aren't relevant for the layman, yet it never condescends or trivializes. The mark of a great reference: you feel smarter after using it!

I can't think of a documentation project I've been on in which the triumphs of this manual could not have been applied with great benefit. Each project could have used a richer index, a friendlier layout, a user-focused and empowering tone. Each could have thrilled users by offering the equivalent of decision trees, of explicit advice rather than endless lists of caveats for users to struggle through to make application decisions. Each could have done a better job of understanding when a user might bother to crack open the book and what he or she needs to accomplish by doing so.

Does the user ask, "I wonder what this field means?" No, it's almost always "Do I need to enable that option? What are the implications of taking the defaults?" So why do we continue to write manuals more targeted to the former? Because it's easier. But it isn't better, and we know it—just as we know that a cheaper binding system is going to make some user miserable, trying to prop up his or her book while working with an application.

My experience with finding medical information under duress has only strengthened my resolve to focus on my user's needs as never before, by summoning a deep sense of empathy with the other person. I've spent this horrible, long weekend being the needy user, and I'm going to take this lesson to heart.

STC chapter news

## Members compete to build nonprofit Web sites

The AIR-Austin Rally is an annual event in which professional Web designers compete to produce Web sites for over 20 nonprofit organizations in one day. In addition to enhancing these organizations' visibility on the Web, the sites are also designed so they can be accessed with assistive devices designed for disabled users.The rally is organized by Knowbility, Inc. Knowbility promotes educational and employment opportunities in information technology for youth and adults with disabilities.

After a rocking kickoff party on October 12, teams from companies such as Dell, IBM, frogdesign, Catapult Systems, and Cyberplex participated in the rally on October 14. Each team had eight hours to design and build an accessible site that would meet the needs of the team's partner nonprofit organization.

The STC team consisted of Kathy Flories, Shannon Kreiger, Beth Schrader, and Deb Zippe. The team had a fantastic time building a Web site for the Highland Lakes Family Crisis Center and won third place in the Stock Car division. In addition, the STC chapter increased its visibility among participants and sponsors.

You can view all the competition sites at **www.knowbility.org/ AIR-Austin/Annual/results.html**.

Please consider participating with your coworkers or fellow STC members next year. Visit the Knowbility Web site at **www.knowbility.org/AIR-Austin** for more information.
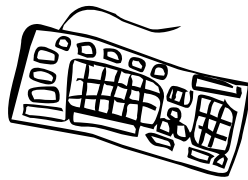
Local companies help fund student writing contest

In December, the Austin Chapter Student Writing Contest received pledges of $300 each from Compaq Computers and BMC Software. These contributions, in addition to funds from the Melody Colby Fund, will provide funding for cash prizes awarded to the winners of the college-level competition.

"Raising the money to pay for the prizes is one of the biggest jobs for the committee," Competitions Committee manager Kay Robart said. "We're thrilled, and we appreciate the support and encouragement for students who are considering careers in writing for industry."

"BMC Software and its employees are dedicated to making a difference in the communities in which we operate," said Max Watson, BMC Software's chairman, president and CEO. "We pride ourselves in helping our neighbors through supporting numerous charitable programs and philanthropic activities. As a result, we have focused our community relations efforts in those areas where we believe we can have a meaningful impact on the community and BMC's employees."

"Compaq has a unique tool for supporting community activities in the Grass Roots Program," said Olga Wise, a representative for Compaq's Grass Roots Program. "Any employee can propose a contribution to a nonprofit organization he or she is involved in. We feel that this connection encourages individual employees to contribute their time and energy to worthwhile community causes while providing an avenue for Compaq to support specific projects that employees really care about."

Students in Region 5 who are enrolled in a college or university during the 2000-2001 academic year are eligible to enter the technical writing competition. For more information on the competition, visit the chapter Web site.

Why Web sites need better planning

Kay Robart, Competitions Committee Co-Manager

Over the last few weeks, committee co-manager Ginny Gilstorf and I had the "pleasure" of preparing a bulk mailing for the STC competitions committee. This project required us to become more familiar with the U.S. Postal Service Web site (located at **www.usps.gov**) than we cared to be. The result is this article, which is not meant to be a comprehensive look at Web navigation or an evaluation of the complete site, but simply a few of my observations from trying to find information we needed.

I tried to locate information on one topic: how to prepare bulk mail. The postal service has a great deal of useful information to convey, and it can be a challenge to design a site that makes that much information easy to access. But the purpose of a Web site is an important consideration. I believe that users who access the Web for entertainment have a lot more patience for exploring a Web site than users who are trying to find information needed to complete a task.

At the top level of the postal service site, no content or links related to bulk mail were immediately apparent. I did not see the site's search engine the first time I accessed the home page. The field that looked like a search mechanism was for tracking packages. I finally found a link to the real search engine at the bottom of the page—a link that consisted of just the underlined word "Search."

After poking around for 10 or 15 minutes, I decided that a link called **Service Guides** looked the most promising for the information I needed. The link brought me to a page called **Postal Explorer** where you had to select documents you wanted to search from a list of about 20 choices and then enter a search item. I selected some likely candidates and received links to 22 documents, none of which contained the information I needed. It took me about 20 minutes to find the pages related to our bulk mailing situation.

Now that I am more familiar with the site, I know that I could have found the document I needed through two different links on that page: a page in

Postal Explorer called "Preparing Standard Mail (A)," and a menu on the left side of the page with a link called **Business Mail 101**. Being a complete neophyte in mailing practices, however, I did not know that bulk mail is called Standard Mail (A), and although "Business Mail 101" is a cute title, it was not immediately obvious to me that I would find the information there. Instead I returned to the home page and eventually found Business Mail 101 when I tried a link called **Info**.
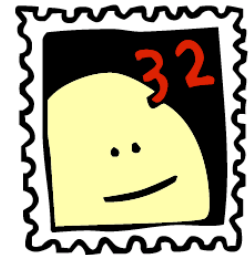
My point should be fairly obvious by now. When it comes to labeling interfaces, more is better. Although short descriptions of the links might have cluttered the attractive site design, they would have made the site more helpful. Had the Web site contained descriptions of its pages, on my second or third click I probably would have found "Preparing Standard Mail (A)."

A link called "Info" on a site that is devoted completely to providing information is not an intuitive, descriptive link.

Ginny and I experienced further frustration after a few more minutes of navigating in the Business Mail 101 section, when we finally found the information we needed. The information itself was very useful, with pictures demonstrating what we needed to do. But the structure of that information needed more careful thought. In this case, the Web authors were link-happy.

If you think about how someone putting together bulk mail is going to use this information, you can more readily understand my point. We were in a room full of boxes of mail and supplies that we obtained after reading the first step, "Get supplies." The process for preparing bulk mail includes about 20 steps that were explained on a series of linked pages—one step per page. At this point,

Why Web sites need better planning

a printable PDF would have been ideal for our needs. Instead we faced the choice of either following the steps on each page as we clicked through the procedure on the Web, or printing each page before we started our work.

We chose the click-through-as-we-work approach, dashing back and forth between the computer desk and the tables where we were preparing the bulk mailing. This tactic worked well during the first session (we were doing this work on successive lunch hours), but when we returned to the Web page the next day with only a few more steps to complete, we were unable to access that portion of the Web site. Luckily, Ginny had printed out the pages the day before.

Of course linking can be one of the strengths of the Web if judiciously used, but in this case it made a difficult task even more challenging. If we could have located and found a complete document to print, we would have had all the information for the entire procedure in front of us as we went through the steps.

We made three unsuccessful attempts to deliver our bulk mailing to the post office. Two of these trips could have been avoided if the Web site included complete information. Now we know, for example, that the post office does not accept metal clips on the straps around bulk mail boxes, only plastic ones.

In our first unsuccessful attempt to unload our bulk mailing, we heard about nonprofit stamps. Although they did not seem to apply to our bulk mailing situation, I thought it might be a good idea to look into them for other chapter projects. My understanding was that they were less expensive than regular postage, and if we could buy a roll of them, perhaps we could save some money on postage for ordinary letters. It took me about 15 minutes to learn that these stamps are called "precanceled" stamps. After that I spent 15 or 20 minutes trying to figure out what they were for and why they might be a good thing.

I can duly report that I still don't know the advantage of using precanceled stamps. I could not decipher the meaning of the sentence, "Mailers apply these stamps to envelopes at a lower postage rate (say, 10 cents) and pay the difference when they drop off the mail at the post office." What difference? Do you end up saving any money? A comparison might have been helpful here. The information I could find seemed to imply that these stamps were for bulk mail only, so I decided not to look into this topic further.

The bulk mailing experience helped me develop six quick and easy tips for Web sites devoted to providing information.

1. Use descriptive link names instead of overly cute or clever ones.

2. Include descriptions of the pages or documents to which you are linking, if possible.

3. Provide complete instructions on a single Web page for a given task or process.

4. Think carefully about the type of information you are imparting and how it will be used. Sometimes your users may find it more helpful to download a PDF document than to click through a series of links.

5. Enter synonyms into your search mechanism. The term "nonprofit stamps" pulled up lots of documents, but none of the ones I needed. Again, I had no way of knowing they would be called "precanceled stamps."

6. Ask a reader who is not familiar with the information on your Web site to visit the site and tell you what they don't understand. Even better, set tasks for that reader and see how long it takes them to find the information. I think most of the problems we found with the U.S. Postal Service Web site could have solved by this approach.