



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

---

## XML: Taking the Plunge

BY BILL ALBING

The topic of XML in technical documentation is receiving a lot of discussion lately. As XML (extensible markup language) gains momentum from the field of ecommerce, where transactions can be handled in an intelligently labeled and machine-independent format, its usefulness is carrying over to other areas of databased and networked content.

Shrinking publication departments and slashed budgets force documentation teams to automate more processes and to reuse more content, as they seek attractive alternatives for handling the requirements of an expanding knowledge base and an increasingly diverse global audience. [Read more.](#)

### Tools of the Trade

---

#### A Quick Look at Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA)

DITA (Darwin Information Typing Architecture) is an XML-based architecture created by IBM. At its core is a special topic DTD (Document Type Definition) designed specifically for producing technical documentation. [Read more.](#)

### Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally

---

#### Technical Writing for Tots

My wife and I are currently expecting a baby, our first child. It turns out that one of the prerequisites to becoming a parent involves buying a variety of devices (or should I say technologies) that will make the infant's life more comfortable upon arrival. Such items, however, require assembly. Curiously, the design of these products is by no means intuitive. For this reason, I've recently found myself reviewing a series of instructions covering everything...[Read more.](#)

### Research

---

#### STC Research Grant Award

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is announcing a new competition for a grant award that will range from \$100,000USD to \$150,000USD. The purpose of this award is to support research that promises to contribute significantly to improving practice in the field of technical communication.

[Read more.](#)

## Content Management Forum

---

### It's a WIKI World

A new content management-based Web site, [www.keycontent.org](http://www.keycontent.org), offers a place for online publishing and collaborative authoring that is unparalleled by any related professional association. Formed by a group of communication experts, KeyContent.org is a new non-profit dedicated to sharing ideas between professionals in the front lines of technical and scientific fields. The new Web site includes a wiki-based area for collaborations of any number of authors around the world...**Read more.**

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Feature Article

---

# XML: Taking the Plunge

BY BILL ALBING

The topic of XML in technical documentation is receiving a lot of discussion lately. As XML (extensible markup language) gains momentum from the field of ecommerce, where transactions can be handled in an intelligently labeled and machine-independent format, its usefulness is carrying over to other areas of databased and networked content.

Shrinking publication departments and slashed budgets force documentation teams to automate more processes and to reuse more content, as they seek attractive alternatives for handling the requirements of an expanding knowledge base and an increasingly diverse global audience.

While some people think XML is as inevitable as networking and digitalization, others fear that XML is too arcane for technical writers and are waiting for the storm to blow over, so they can return to traditional procedures of working with human communication using the methods of old-fashioned publishing. Sorting out some of the issues may help those who need to make decisions in their own documentation projects.

## Steps to Making the Decision

First, look at your own processes and your customer's requirements. When management asks you to develop content for two different product versions and three different audience types, then you begin to see the value of modularizing the content and tagging it or categorizing it. This modularization is the hallmark of XML, and enables you to reuse the content in the different deliverables without duplicating the same work for each one.

If your entire corporation has made a commitment to interconnecting knowledge sources and has already chosen XML as the currency of content exchange, then the decision for your department is easy. If your translation department (or vendor) could speed up the process because they use machine translation for part of the effort, there is another reason to begin to look at XML.

Here is a handy checklist for considering the use of XML in your content development processes:

- Is your content redundant across deliverables?
- Do you (or could you) do a lot of machine processing of your content?
- Do you (want to) filter and sort your content?
- Are you spending a lot of time or money on supporting authoring environments and publishing systems?
- Could the cost of retraining and retooling for this new way of dealing with content be cheaper in the long run than maintaining existing systems?
- Do you have XML expertise in house (in IT or development teams)?

If you answered yes to most or all of these questions, then you may be ready to move to XML.

Second, take a closer look at your content – both your existing content as well as content being planned. Rather than looking at the format and deliverables you currently produce, focus on what the information is and who the audiences are for each module of content. Start looking at categories of the parts of the deliverables; identify who needs what information when. By labeling content based on who needs it, at what level of readership, in what context, and for which product version, you can begin to do some of the task of working with XML. XML is simply a set of tags that help define the types of content. If you presently store content in a database, you are already partitioning the content and are beginning to see the value of working with XML.

Third, examine the tools that allow you to automate as much as possible and that have the longest life without expensive upgrade paths. Some people will argue that working with XML is great theoretically, but that it's not cost effective. Though XML frees you from the constraints of proprietary systems, you still need easy-to-learn and easy-to-use applications for your writers (now content developers), and you still need those tools to interface with some form of version control system. Until more XML editors are available with easy user interfaces, many people say the market is not ready. According to them, we should just stick to proprietary front ends and save out to the "universal" presentation tagging of HTML. Some stay committed to these applications to get projects out the door on time, even though they recognize that this method is not an effective long-term solution.

### **Taking the Plunge**

From these three big steps, you can see that moving to XML is not free of risk. Most enterprise implementations begin with a small project to test the waters. There are groups working with XML – in companies such as Oracle and Cisco – where content resides completely in XML before delivery. And, the growing acceptance of standardized XML elements (listed in a DTD or document type definition) shows that XML is getting wider industry support. The latest attempt to standardize the set of XML elements for the software documentation industry is DITA (Darwinian Information Typing Architecture), which IBM is moving from an internal set of tools to an open standard through the OASIS group.

XML is not only for those large companies with large budgets. I work for a small software manufacturer that uses XML to develop its content. Regardless of a company's size, its customers care more about getting answers to their questions than how that user assistance is delivered. So, keeping the content in a more unconstrained form allows better production of more effective deliverables.

Comparisons with HTML are a good starting point. XML enables you to separate the function from the form by telling you what the content is, while HTML tells you how the content will appear, but says nothing about what it is. In other words, HTML is a limited set of tags that is only useful for displaying in a Web browser, and is not good for helping you categorize the content for more intensive sorting and filtering. While transforming XML into the many forms of deliverables sounds daunting, we were able to create our own transforms and processes with a very limited staff.

### **Conclusion**

XML is not for everyone; it is not the easy technical fix to solve all problems faced by the networked enterprise. However, it is not necessarily cost prohibitive either, though some will spend millions on incorrect implementation, costly consultants, and badly planned technological introductions. The question is not whether XML is the appropriate tool for communicating technical and scientific information, but whether XML can be used productively to move that content to an online and intelligently tagged repository both for content reuse and for on-demand publishing for a growing set of customer needs, without destroying your limited budget.

Perhaps the question is not whether to take the plunge with XML, but when to take the plunge. Or, perhaps you can slowly work your way into using XML. You can develop an affordable and reasonable solution for reusing XML-based content. Just be aware of the business reasons for investing time and effort now.

Admittedly, technical documentation is different from numerical data queried from a database, but some aspects of database logic apply in content development using XML. Because XML requires a culture change, use a small project to test how XML will work for you.

**Bill Albing** is editor-in-chief of KeyContent.org and a senior tech writer at FarPoint Technologies. Both positions allow him to be a proponent of XML in content development. He has also served on the board of IEEE PCS and as president of the STC Carolina Chapter.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Tools of the Trade

---

# A Quick Look at Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA)

BY BRIAN STILL

DITA (Darwin Information Typing Architecture) is an XML-based architecture created by IBM. At its core is a special topic DTD (Document Type Definition) designed specifically for producing technical documentation.

Although DITA is too complex to cover in depth here, we can at least take a quick look at how it works. For more details, refer to the DITA resources provided at the end of this article.

## The “Topic” and DITA

To understand DITA, you have to understand topic-oriented content management. Topics are flexible modules containing technical content, and they serve as the building blocks of DITA’s architecture.

There are three specializations of the base topic type in DITA. Each topic type is designed to hold technical information, and each contains the necessary structural elements that allow it to be used alone or combined with other topic types to create a variety of technical documents, including printed guides, online help systems, or other web-based deliverables.

- Concept Topic—contains information for those users who require more background on what something is or how it works.
- Reference Topic—contains reference information.
- Task Topic—contains instructions for how specific tasks should be carried out.

## DITA Processing

A topic’s formatting is determined by the user who requests it. In this way, DITA separates content from formatting, which makes the information produced using DITA more reusable. Here’s a very simple overview of how DITA processes information via topics:

1. Visitors to the website of a medical software company request information. This information can

be in any format--DITA's architecture will make it compatible.

2. DITA takes the information—let's say it is for help installing software--and it converts it to the appropriate typed topic. In this case, information on how to install the software goes in a task topic, and help terms for defining somewhat technical terms regarding the software are placed in the reference topic.

Now the visitor may have conducted a search or followed a particular link, and so the task topic, after processing via HTML, XHTML, XSLT, etc., may be immediately outputted to the visitor in the format requested. Topics can be produced and distributed as stand-alone units or bundled with other topics to create a variety of technical documents.

3. If the topic isn't stand-alone and the user wants to see the task and reference topics together as part of an online help guide interface that includes links to a glossary as well all other guide information, then the reference, task, and other topics now holding the information requested are transformed to domains.

Domains are basically vocabulary elements that add special meaning to topics. Four domains are built into DITA that include elements for highlighting, programming, software, and user interface. Topics can draw on elements from one or all four of these domains. If the four base domains aren't enough, developers can create additional domains.

4. Once the topics and domain are in place, the information is placed into the document delivery format requested and then returned to the visitor.

DITA can continue to make requests of the original information until the document is completed, just as it can modify that request based on user needs. At the same time, multiple requests for the same original information can occur simultaneously or different users can request that the same information be packaged differently, either with different information topics or in different delivery formats.

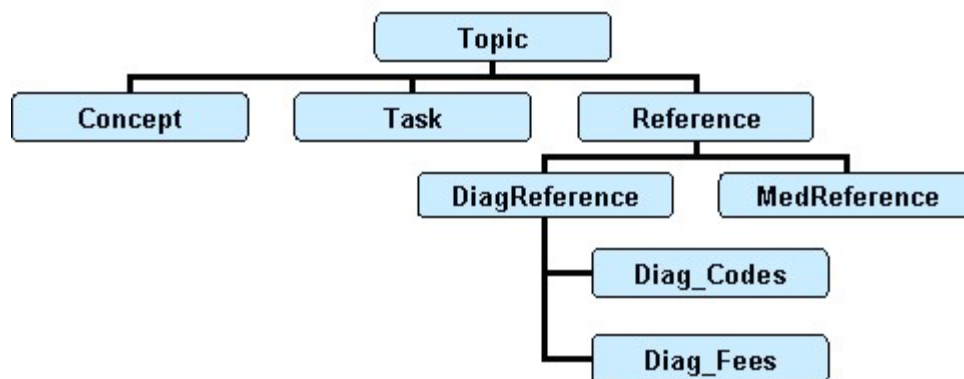
All of this makes DITA an ideal single-source solution for technical documentation.

### **Topic Specialization**

Developers can create extensions of existing information types to meet their needs. These new, specialized topic types are defined by their own DTD modules, and they inherit by default the common structures of the typed topics they're mapped to. This structure creates flexibility and increases information compatibility.

For example, as the illustration below shows, medical software company developers create new reference topic types for medical and diagnostic reference content, specializing the reference topic type into new DiagReference and MedReference topics. Not finished there, they also extend the "DiagReference" topic, creating two more specialized topics that identify different diagnoses and a

schedule of diagnostic fees.



**Figure 1: Topic Specialization in DITA**

## Using DITA

DITA leverages existing tags and language sets, making it pretty easy to adopt for users with XML coding experience.

If you want to start building using DITA, you'll need the following tools:

- XML editor
- XSLT processor
- DITA package, a free download from [http://www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/xml/library/x-dita6/x-dita\\_downloads.html](http://www-106.ibm.com/developerworks/xml/library/x-dita6/x-dita_downloads.html)

## DITA Advantages over HTML

In many ways, DITA is a better solution for web authoring than HTML, with the following advantages:

- Open standards
- Separation of content from formatting
- Extensibility, including code and content reuse
- Easy global changes
- Stand-Alone Content—bundling content in meaningful topics allows information to be understandable out of context, even if it's found from a search or by following a link.

## The Bottom Line

DITA extends generic XML. Its architecture is flexible, topic-oriented, and enables technical information to be used, reused, and single-sourced for the web and other delivery environments.

Admittedly, we've covered a lot of material quickly here. Perhaps in future columns, we can dedicate more time to exploring DITA, even constructing a technical document using its architecture. In the meantime, take a look at the additional resources I've included below if you want to learn more about DITA.

#### Additional Resources

- **[Introduction to Darwin Information Typing Architecture](#)** (roadmap to DITA written by its creators at IBM—also a technical document produced using DITA)
- **[Why Use DITA to Produce HTML Deliverables](#)**
- **[DITA—The Mechanics of a Single Sourcing Project](#)**
- **[OASIS DITA Site](#)** (OASIS now oversees and promotes DITA as an open standard)
- **[DITA Frequently Asked Questions](#)**
- **[DITA Forum](#)**
- Specializing **[Topic Types](#)** & **[Domains](#)** in DITA

**Brian Still** is an information technology consultant and lecturer teaching technical communications at Texas Tech University.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 1 • February 2005

## Society News: Events

---

# B'Gorra! 'Tis Time to Register for the IPCC Conference

BY IPCC 2005 CONFERENCE COMMITTEE

The IPCC conference is being held in lovely Limerick, Ireland on 10-13 July 2005.

### Register Now

IEEE Professional Communication Society invites you to register now to attend IPCC 2005. Link directly to the registration page: <https://www.iccbookings.com/ipcc/registration.php>

### See Featured Speakers

Dr. Reinhard Schäler, a noted localization expert, will deliver the keynote address. A number of outstanding invited speakers are on the program, together with more than a hundred others whose presentation proposals passed the selection process. You will see a broader range of communication-related topics than ever before at IPCC!

See the conference program preview (<http://ieeepcs.org/limerick/conference.htm>).

A list of all the presenters and their affiliations will be posted on the web site this week.

### Meet International Colleagues

The presenters are from all over the world, and represent a broad cross-section of engineers, managers, professional communicators, practitioners and academics. IEEE Engineering Management Society, INTECOM, ATTW, CPTSC, tekcom, and others will be represented.

### Become a Sponsor

Want to sponsor or co-sponsor the conference to draw attention to your company's services and products, or to your university's academic offerings? Link to <http://ieeepcs.org/limerick/conference.htm#sponsors>.

### Make Your Travel Plans

Shannon Airport is an easy destination from anywhere! Ireland is a beautiful, hospitable country to visit!

Limerick Travel will be happy to help you discover it. Here's their link: <http://www.letsgotravel.ie/>.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



---

IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

---

## Society News: Members

---

### February 2005 Senior Members Announced

Congratulations to these Professional Communication Society members who achieved IEEE Senior Member status in February 2005:

- Alfredo Herrera, Ottawa
- Carol Ann Long, U.K.& Rep Of Ireland

If you have 10 years or more of professional communication experience you can apply for IEEE Senior Member status. The forms are available on the Web:

<http://www.ieee.org/organizations/rab/md/smforms.htm>. For more information or help in completing the forms, contact PCS.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Society News

# Highlights of January 2005 AdCom Meeting

BY MURIEL ZIMMERMAN

Thanks to Luke Maki (PCS vice president) and Boeing (Luke's employer), the AdCom was again able to meet without leaving home on 29-30 January 2005. Since 2001, our January meetings have been computer-supported, and since 2002, they have also been teleconferences. The January 2001 meeting was held via NetMeeting, with shared visual displays on the Web. Subsequent January meetings were held via teleconference, as well as with shared visual displays. Tom Orr signed on at 3 a.m. in Japan, Michael Steehouder signed on after dinner in the Netherlands, and for U.S. members, the meeting times were a bit less unconventional. I think I speak for the rest of the AdCom when I say that this way of meeting is efficient and cost-effective, particularly in the month of January, when travel is often so difficult.

## Conferences

IPCC 2005 is scheduled for 10-13 July 2005 in Limerick, Ireland. The theme of the conference is Ceangail, Gaelic for tying or connecting together. This theme emphasizes the importance of technical communication in connecting engineers, educators, managers, and communicators in a global community. The conference will be broadly international, with presenters from many countries. Conference chair is Marj Davis, and program chair is Helen Grady. Registration and program information is now available on the [conference web site](#).

IPCC 2006 is scheduled for 23-25 October at the Gideon Putnam Hotel and Conference Center, Saratoga Springs, New York. Beth Moeller is conference chair, and Roger Grice is program chair. The conference theme is Racing to the Future, and issues related to the convergence of technology and professional communication will be explored from a range of perspectives.

IPCC 2007 is scheduled for 1-3 October at the Crowne Plaza in Seattle, Washington. Mark Haselkorn is conference chair, and David Farkas is program chair. The conference theme is Engineering the Future of Human Communication, and IPCC 2007 will also be an occasion to celebrate the 50th anniversary of PCS.

Montreal has been selected as the location of IPCC 2008, and Kirk St. Amant will be conference chair.

## **Publications**

The December 2004 special issue of *PCS Transactions*, "Case Studies for Teaching Technical Communication" (guest editors Julia Williams and Judy Strother) has attracted a good deal of interest. Based on its success, *Transactions* editor, Kim Campbell, has developed a Call for Submissions for a new section of the journal. The section will publish tutorials and case studies related to engineering communication pedagogy, in both academic and professional domains. Case study and tutorial support will be added to the PECom section of the **PCS web site**.

Future issues of *PCS Transactions* include "Expanding the Boundaries of E-Collaboration" (guest editors Ned Kock and John Nosek), scheduled for March 2005; "Research Reality Check: Changing Goals, Changing Needs" (guest editor Laurel Grove), scheduled for September 2005; and "Communication Issues in User-Database Interaction" (guest editors Hock Chuan Chan and Keng Siau), with a tentative publication date of March 2006. The September 2006 issue, "Insights from Corpus Linguistics for Professional Communication" (guest edited by Tom Orr), is also in the planning stages.

## **Electronic Newsletter**

Newsletter editor, Kit Brown, has launched a successful first issue of the electronic newsletter, and she presented her plans for regular monthly columns, columns that appear periodically, and for special theme issues. Kit will be actively involved in the planning for the PCS 50th anniversary, and the electronic newsletter will be a key element in the year-long focus on PCS past, present, and future.

Muriel Zimmerman is PCS secretary.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Content Management Forum

---

### It's a WIKI World

BY SHERRY STEWARD

A new content management-based Web site, [www.keycontent.org](http://www.keycontent.org), offers a place for online publishing and collaborative authoring that is unparalleled by any related professional association. Formed by a group of communication experts, KeyContent.org is a new non-profit dedicated to sharing ideas between professionals in the front lines of technical and scientific fields. The new Web site includes a wiki-based area for collaborations of any number of authors around the world, with as little as a Web browser to gain access. Mainly a repository of ideas about content engineering and technical communication, the site offers an area for professionals to immediately publish and share articles while still maintaining their copyrights to intellectual material. The collaborative area, where several authors can work together on a draft, makes use of the Creative Commons license for shared material. Another innovation is the databasing of links to other sites to allow reference throughout the site and categorization of links as another resource available on the site.

"We hope that professionals will make the most of this new way of sharing ideas," says Editor-in-chief Bill Albing. "It provides a superb mechanism that is superior to emails or online forums by allowing the articles and collaborative works to be posted immediately and cross-indexed using the automated content management system of the site." Articles about real-world topics and reviews of products can be shared more quickly than traditional publishing, which can take weeks to months. Albing continues, "With the workplace changing so quickly, professionals need a way to immediately publish and share ideas about the most dynamic aspects of their profession." The organization promises a way to share ideas globally while only requiring a limited volunteer staff using a largely automated site.

Content developers and engineers who work with technical documentation are invited to submit articles; editors willing to keep the level of professionalism high are also invited to get involved. The site is for and by professionals who want to keep up with the important issues in the transformation of technical communication, content management, scientific publishing, and collaborative authoring. "It is a site with more advanced treatments of the subject matter than the others that we have found," states Managing Editor, Sherry Steward. "And by using open-source software and making access to the site free, we feel there are no barriers to anyone in the workforce. We're really open to a wide range of professional specialties." Professionals can access the site with a conventional Web browser. By submitting an email

address, anyone can submit articles or participate in collaborative authoring. This could lead the way for professional associations that want to use the latest tools to promote the articulation of ideas about their profession.

### **About KeyContent.org**

KeyContent.org is a non-profit professional association based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, that is dedicated to unlocking communication and sharing ideas concerning engineering and technical communication, content management, collaborative and Web-based authoring, and new forms of professional communication. Members include content developers, Web content managers, information architects, technical writers, and those who work with large amounts of technical content. The organization's Web site, [www.keycontent.org](http://www.keycontent.org), has more information. **Sherry Steward** is the Managing Editor.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

---

## Reviews

---

### XML Resources

BY KIT BROWN

Rather than reviewing a single book or web site this month, I would like to provide you with a list of resources that you might find useful as you use XML. These resources have been compiled from a variety of sources, but the list is by no means exhaustive:

- *XML Internationalization and Localization* by Yves Savourel. This book is the definitive work on coding XML in such a way as to make the localization process more efficient. XML itself is Unicode compliant, but if you don't structure your DTDs correctly and ensure that all translatable text is clearly identified as such, you could have problems. This book helps you avoid such issues.
- *XML: Weekend Crash Course* by Kay Ethier and Alan Houser. This book comes with a CD and walks you through the basics of learning XML. By the end of the tutorial, you will be able to understand how XML works and to use the code correctly.
- **DITA** by IBM. This architecture has the potential to enable even small companies to use the power of XML.
- **XML Editor Comparison** by XML Software. This site provides a fairly comprehensive list of XML editors and their respective capabilities.
- **Adobe Framemaker XML Cookbook**. If you are converting to XML using Framemaker, this site might be useful to you.
- **W3C.org**. This standards organization governs the development of XML and ensures consistency. The standards for XML are still in draft stage.

If you have other resources you've found useful, please **email** them to me and I will ensure that they appear in the next newsletter.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

---

## Editor's Column

---

### Version 1.0

BY KIT BROWN

For the most part, the first electronic issue went well. There were, of course, a few glitches, particularly with the Netscape version. We are still working on that problem. It appears that a server setting is preventing Netscape users from seeing the beautiful layout that Tudor Vedeanu designed for us. Once we migrate to a new server in the next few weeks, this problem should be resolved.

The print version was apparently cutting off some of the text when sent to an A4 printer. Before printing an article, do the following:

1. Check your browser's page settings ( File>>Page Setup).
2. Make sure that your paper size is set to the correct size (A4 or Letter).
3. Set your margin to 2.54cm (1 inch).
4. Click OK.

We had about 100 bounced emails, so if you did not receive an email notification of the last issue, please check your spam filters. In the next week or so, I will be sending subscription instructions to those members for whom we do not have email addresses and for whom we have received bounced email addresses.

On the brighter side, several people provided excellent constructive and positive feedback. We've added buttons to the bottom of each page to help with navigation, have added a link to a complete printable PDF version, and will continue looking for ways to improve the readability and quality of the newsletter.

Thank you for your support and for your comments!



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Thinking Globally, Teaching Locally

# Technical Writing for Tots

BY KIRK ST. AMANT

My wife and I are currently expecting a baby, our first child. It turns out that one of the prerequisites to becoming a parent involves buying a variety of devices (or should I say technologies) that will make the infant's life more comfortable upon arrival. Such items, however, require assembly.

Curiously, the design of these products is by no means intuitive. For this reason, I've recently found myself reviewing a series of instructions covering everything from the assembly of a high chair to the installation of an infant car seat. While the bulk of this work is now complete, I've noted a few key patterns that might be of interest to technical communicators or to individuals who are expecting.

Things to expect when you're expecting (a technical communicator's point of view):

1. All infant-related devices (e.g., car seats, high chairs, etc.) were created based on the assumption that you have an advanced degree in mechanical engineering.
2. The instruction manual that accompanies your product was designed to for a model other than the one you have just purchased.
3. The phrase "snap together parts" really means that one must use a sledgehammer to insert "Part A" into "Part B".
4. The use of profanity is a pre-requisite for getting "Part A" to insert into "Part B".
5. You will always insert "Part A" in to the wrong "Part B".
6. Every item has three "Part As" but only two "Part Bs".
7. All packages are missing one – and only one – screw, bolt, or nut needed to assemble the product.
8. If a set of instructions contains the line "See Figure 1," that figure will not appear in those instructions.
9. Instructions for installing infant car seats are predicated on the assumption that you own a minivan with two sliding side doors and an overall cargo space the size of Nevada.
10. Upon assembling the product, your spouse/significant other will note that you have assembled it upside down or inside out.

When teaching students how to write instructions, such poorly written instructions can provide useful

examples of mistakes to avoid.

**Kirk St.Amant** is an Assistant Professor with the Department of English at Texas Tech University.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

---

## Research

---

### STC Research Grant Award

FROM THE STC OFFICE

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is announcing a new competition for a grant award that will range from \$100,000USD to \$150,000USD. The purpose of this award is to support research that promises to contribute significantly to improving practice in the field of technical communication.

For the first stage of this competition, STC is requesting letters of intent for three \$10,000 awards to support preparation, in the form of eight-month pilot projects. These pilots would lead to major research on one (or a combination) of three important topics in the field of technical communication: (a) making content usable, (b) communicating with many audiences, or (c) achieving Return on Investment (ROI).

For more details about the research grants program and the full RFP, go to [www.stc.org/grantsResearch.asp](http://www.stc.org/grantsResearch.asp). The deadline for letters of intent is **30 May 2005**.

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Tidbits

---

### Consequences of Poor Communication

FROM THE SCIENCE AND DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

David Dickson's article, "Tsunami disaster: A Failure in Science Communication", describes the painful and expensive (in lives as well as in cost) consequences of poor communication.

He says, "At the heart of the devastation caused by the Indian Ocean tsunamis lies a failure to communicate scientific information adequately to either decision-makers or the community. Important lessons are to be learnt about the need for professional skills." [Read more...](#)

### A Rose By Any Other Name...

FROM NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (NPR)

NPR recently reviewed *In Other Words: A Language Lover's Guide to the Most Intriguing Words Around the World* by Christopher J. Moore. In the book, Moore talks about words that have no equivalents in other languages, and therefore, are untranslatable.

The NPR article shows some examples of how language dictates our thinking and our ideas. Single words in one language sometimes require a paragraph of explanation in another language that doesn't contain precisely the same concept. This has interesting implications for all our communication efforts.

[Read more...](#)

### Textonyms

QUOTED FROM WORLD WIDE WORDS (4 DEC 2004)

Last week, the Feedback column of *New Scientist* introduced us to yet another new word ending in "-nym" (from Greek "onuma", a name). Not only do we have such well-established terms as synonym, antonym, eponym and pseudonym, a rush of creative energy in recent years has given us contronym, a word that means its own opposite, such as "cleave"; retronym, a term invented to clarify another word whose meaning has become ambiguous through cultural or technical evolution, such as "acoustic guitar" or "two-parent family"; and aptonym, the name of an individual that matches his occupation, such as a Mr Butcher who is a surgeon or a dentist named Payne. (*New Scientist* calls this form nominative determinism. But I digress.)

When you text a message on a mobile phone, textonyms are the words generated by a set of key presses when the phone is in predictive mode, guessing what word you want. For example, 7-4-6-6-3-7 brings up the words phones, simmer, and sinner. New Scientist says: "The random nature of the groupings produces some eerie resonances when you consider the words together. What about apron arson, for example? Can a barge be described as acrid? Has an anode ever cooed? Can you debug death? Does the study of maths result in oaths? If the bane of the band was acne, would they be cured if a cane came?"

Special thanks to Brenda Huettner and to Rudy Joenk for their contributions!

---

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

## Guidelines

---

# Newsletter Article Submission Guidelines

BY KIT BROWN

Submit articles by the 15th day the month before you want the article to appear. The newsletter is published monthly around the 1st of the month. The **editorial schedule** provides the proposed themes for each month. Additional suggestions are always welcome.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact **Kit Brown**.

**Copyright Statement:**"The Newsletter is copyrighted as a whole and does not require authors to transfer their copyright ownership to the IEEE. Permission to copy without fee all or part of any material without a copyright notice is granted, provided that the copies are not made or distributed for commercial advantage and the title of this publication and its date appear on each copy. To copy material with a copyright notice requires specific permission; direct inquiries or requests to the copyright holder as indicated in the article."

**Guidelines:** Moving the newsletter from a print to an electronic format has necessitated some changes in the submission guidelines. Please review the following information when submitting articles or regular columns to the newsletter:

- **Submit articles electronically in MSWord or RTF format to [pcsnews.editor@ieee.org](mailto:pcsnews.editor@ieee.org).** These formats are more easily available to me than other word processing applications.
- **Provide articles that are 200-700 words in length.** People tend to scan rather than read in an online environment. Short, well-written and relevant articles will be more beneficial to the audience than longer ones.
- **Provide a short bio (~25 words) and contact information.** Readers want to know about you. At a minimum, write a bio that tells your name, company, primary job title, email address and why this topic is of interest to you or what experience you have in the area you wrote about. (This doesn't count as part of your word count.)
- **Indicate whether the article is time sensitive.** Because of size considerations and editorial schedule, newsletter articles may not be published immediately upon submission, unless it is date critical (e.g., information about the upcoming conference or an article about a current event that

relates to technical communication.)

- **Indicate copyright information if applicable.** If you own the copyright for an article, indicate this with your submission so that we can provide appropriate attribution. If you don't own the copyright, but think an article is interesting, provide the article, along with the contact information for the copyright holder and the name of the publication where it was originally published.
- **Insert the URL into the text so that I can easily create the link.** For example, if you want to reference the w3c, you would say "refer to the W3C (<http://www.w3c.org>) guidelines". Don't create the hyperlink in Word.
- **Provide complete bibliographic information for references.** Include author(s), title, date of publication, publisher, page numbers, or URL.
- **Use a friendly, casual tone.** We want to invite people to read and to make the information as accessible as possible.
- **Use 1-inch (2.54 cm) margins; don't indent paragraphs.** I have to reformat the text so it's better to minimize the formatting you include. Instead of indenting, put an extra line between paragraphs
- **Avoid using lots of formatting within the text.** I will have to format the articles for the online environment, so don't put lots of bold and italic in the text.
- **Use subheadings generously.** Subheadings help the reader identify the information that is important to them. Subheads are especially helpful in orienting the reader in the online environment.
- **Use active voice and short sentences.** At least 40% of our audience is outside of N. America. For many members, English is their second (or third) language. Short sentences and active voice are easier to absorb and understand than complex sentence structures.
- **Avoid jargon and "big" words when a simpler term will work.** Approximately 90% of our audience is engineers who need to write effectively on the job. Avoid using writer's jargon, or explain the term in the context. By "big" words, I mean complicated, less commonly used words that may have the same or similar meaning to other, more commonly used words (e.g., instead of "obfuscate", just say "confuse").
- **Avoid idioms.** Idiomatic phrases are those colorful sayings we use to mean something else. For example, "once in a blue moon", "jump right in", "on the fly". Unfortunately, these sayings often have no equivalent in other languages, and can be difficult for non-native English speakers to interpret.
- **Submit graphics as JPGs or GIFs.** Web graphics need to be in one of these formats for most browsers. SVGs and PNGs are not yet universally accepted. If you want graphics included in your article, you need to give me the JPG. Don't just embed it in Word.



IEEE Professional Communication Society Newsletter • ISSN 1539-3593 • Volume 49, Number 2 • March 2005

[« Back](#) [Next »](#)

## Guidelines

# Editorial Schedule for 2005

BY KIT BROWN

The following table shows the proposed themes for each issue through January 2006. If something particularly timely occurs during the year, these themes may change.

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions, please contact [Kit Brown](#).

**Editorial Schedule for 2005**

Month	Theme
February	Electronic Publications
March	XML
April	Multi-site, Multicultural Project Management
May	Usability
June	Content Management
July	Caengail (KANG-guhl): Making Connections
August	Internationalization
September	Content Modeling
October	Writing and Editing in English
November	Working with SMEs
December	Proposals
January 2006	Trends

Copyright ©2005 IEEE Professional Society. All rights Reserved.