society for technical communication

the Exchange

Vol. 8, No. 1
March 2001

The newsletter of STC's Scientific Communication Special Interest Group

Developing a review process

By K. Anna Marshall (ANNAM@pro-west.org)

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Last spring I queried the SciSIG mailing list [see page 8 for details—Geoff] about review forms. I was wondering what tools other writers and editors used to document reviews and the decisions made during revision. I received only a few responses to my query, which surprised me because the group is usually so responsive. Considering the relative silence, I formed possible explanations: Perhaps sciSIGgers consider their review forms proprietary or business-sensitive? Or perhaps sciSIGgers lack standard review processes and associated forms, as my company once did?

In writing this article, I bet on that second explanation. I know from experience that the company I currently work for is not the only one that has relied on relationships and informal processes to get things done. So in the spirit of sharing and encouraging others to standardize their review processes, this article describes my company's recently developed draft review process and its benefits.

Background

About the company

I work as a communications specialist for PRO-West, a not-for-profit company that works to improve health care. The company employs about 175 people in one main office and two branch offices, and offers a variety of services to the medical and public health communities, including performing epidemiological studies and developing and executing activities to improve health care systems. The materials we develop range from technical reports for researchers, doctors, and nurses to posters and brochures for low-literacy audiences.

I've worked for PRO-West for only one year, but from what I've gathered, we have grown substantially in the past couple of years. As PRO-West grew, so did the list of reviewers for communications documents.

Need for a review process

For any document I developed or edited, I had too many reviewers and too many reviews—and especially too many *conflicting* reviews. Every reviewer, no matter their area of expertise, commented on all aspects of every document. Because no standard process provided guidance, I often had no way to weigh the value of individual comments. In a dispute over the color of a report cover, whose preferences count more—the desktop publisher's or the project manager's? When comments on a data issue conflict, who has "final say"—the department head or the epidemiologist she manages?

"For any document I developed or edited, I had too many reviewers and too many reviews."

In addition to receiving too many comments on too many aspects of every document, I received comments in so many different forms that deciphering the feedback was laborious. Comments ranged from very general to very specific. They came via e-mail, in the margins of hard copy, as Word documents, or verbally. Some reviewers preferred to drop by my office and casually go over something with me, and I ended up simultaneously trying to understand the comments, respond to them,

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Editorial: New faces

by Geoff Hart

Welcome to the first issue planned for 2001! I've modified the newsletter slightly from the previous format to fix a few things that have been bugging me since my original design (e.g., the lack of room to three-hole-punch the newsletter), so please feel free to provide additional feedback and requests. I think it's basically a functional design, but there's certainly room for improvement. (Before you ask: No, we don't currently have the budget for two-color printing.) My theme in this editorial ties together aspects of the idea of "new faces": the hidden faces behind *the Exchange*, my previous editorial on evangelism, and the upcoming STC conference.

Probably the most important hidden face is that of Anita Dosik at STC headquarters; Anita's the one who ensures that the newsletter gets printed and mailed in a timely manner, and I couldn't possibly publish it without her. Belated thanks, Anita! The person voted most likely to become most important new face is Amy Burdan, our new SIG manager. Amy wasn't able to provide any material for the current issue of the newsletter, but I'm expecting at least a brief introduction for the next issue. I've also identified two brave souls willing to help out with graphics (Judith Harroun-Lord and Steve Mercer), and promise to take advantage of their talents in future issues.

At the upcoming STC conference in Chicago this May, we'll be holding the traditional SIG business meeting. (Details at www.stc-va.org if you haven't yet received your conference information from STC.) The meeting is your chance to express your goals for the SIG in the coming year, or to volunteer for various roles in the SIG. Come join us Sunday at 4 (location to appear in the final program), and meet some new faces as well as the old ones. If you arrive too late on Sunday or are participating in another SIG's business meeting, you can also join us at the SIG networking luncheon on Tuesday at 12:15. I'd hoped to participate in the scientific communication progression on Wednesday at 8:30, but a scheduling conflict made that impossible. I hope you can make it in my place; if so, contact Amy (BURDAN_AMY@LILLY.COM) and discuss details.

The last aspect is that of membership. We'd love to have more members of the SIG, and thus more people to contribute to the e-mail discussion group (see page 8 for details) and write for the newsletter. So if you should happen to have a friend or colleague at the convention who's at a loss for something to do, drag them along with you to one of our meetings or one of the presentations on scientific communication. **Ω**

***the Exchange*, Vol. 8 No. 1, March 2001.**

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and take notes—all while carefully judging the conviction behind the comments, because sometimes reviewers who gave me informal comments expected them to carry the same weight as comments from someone who formally re-wrote whole sections of text.

Although sifting through comments in many forms from many reviewers and brokering compromises among conflicting reviewers was often possible, it frequently wasn't very efficient—especially as my work load increased. Because other communications specialists reported similar difficulties, we decided to develop a formal policy and procedure that would help us determine, for each document, when and how and from whom we should solicit feedback and how we should incorporate that feedback.

Development of a review process

We communications specialists worked with our managing editor to develop the process. Developing the process entailed:

- comparing notes about how we each accomplished reviews,
- identifying goals for the review process,
- coming up with several ideas,
- consulting with other members of the Communications Department—the department head, desktop publishers, and production staff,
- consulting with internal clients of the Communications Department—project managers and project team members,
- working with our corporate writer of policies and procedures to document the process,
- working with our designers to create review forms,
- getting buy-in from Senior Management,
- explaining the process to the rest of the company,
- getting in the habit of using the process and its associated forms.

Along the way, we wrestled with several difficult questions:

- How much does the company value quality communication and the people who create it?
- Should the Communications Department be a service department, a quality-control department, or both?
- What role should various stakeholders or team members play in developing various communications?
- What is the difference between "reviewing" and "editing"?
- Who has "final say" on which aspects of each kind of document?
- What is our development process?

"Along the way, we wrestled with several difficult questions..."

We are still considering some of these questions. Meanwhile, we have developed a draft review process that we will fine-tune. The process consists of two separate reviews: one rather informal and a second, more formal review.

The process

Working-draft review

Once a document has been developed by a project team member—with editing from the communications specialist—or by a communications specialist, it undergoes a "working-draft review". This review is a fairly informal free-for-all: anyone can review a document and comment on any aspect.

In this review, the communications specialist distributes the document to team members and other interested parties (including managers) as an e-mail attachment, a hard copy of a Word document, or a draft layout, depending on the document, the timeline, and the desktop publisher's schedule. At the same time, the communications specialist also sends an e-mail or attaches a short note to the document, providing background and setting a due date for comments. Reviewers can comment on any aspect of the document,

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"Review process..." (continued from page 3)

but must trust the communications specialist to consolidate the comments and make appropriate revisions.

Final review

Each document also goes through one or more rounds of "final review", a more formal examination than the working-draft review. Fewer reviewers participate, and each reviewer performs a specific type of review. (Types of review always include a content review; an editorial review; and a publications, or policy, review. When appropriate, documents also receive clinical and statistical reviews.) In addition, a standard review sheet accompanies the draft, and reviewers must either sign off on the document or ask to re-review it after revision.

In the final review, the communications specialist provides a printed layout to the three to five reviewers:

- the content reviewer (usually the project manager);
- the editorial reviewer (either the communications specialist assigned to the team or a qualified peer);
- the publications, or policy, reviewer (the managing editor, unless she delegates the task);
- the clinical reviewer (a physician); and
- the statistical reviewer (an epidemiologist).

Each final reviewer also receives a review sheet and a checklist that corresponds to the type of review requested (for example, content, clinical, or statistical).

Review sheet

The review sheet contains the following items:

- the document's title,
- the date and time the draft was sent out for review,
- a list of each type of review followed by space for the reviewer's name (or "not applicable" as the case may be),
- the due date for the marked-up copy and the checklist,
- the name of communications specialist to whom the review must be returned,
- a note to the reviewer.

"The benefits of our two-pronged review process are many."

Note to the reviewer

The note to the reviewer:

- thanks the reviewer and explains how their expertise will contribute to the success of the document,
- points the reviewer to an attached checklist,
- asks the reviewer to explain concerns rather than simply marking the text,
- reminds the reviewer not to review for grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

Checklist

The attached checklist contains a list of questions specific to the type of review and boxes for checking either *yes*, *no*, *not sure*, or *not applicable*. Each checklist also contains space for written comments, a signature, and a final verdict:

- OK as is,
- OK with the indicated changes, or
- Requires another review after changes have been made.

Final steps

After final review, a document undergoes revision, receives an approval stamp from the communications specialist, and moves to production. If reviewers have indicated that they want to see another draft, the document goes through another final review. Very occasionally, reviewers request substantial revision, and the document returns to the working-draft stage.

Benefits of the standardized process

The benefits of our two-pronged review process are many. The working-draft review promotes positive feelings of teamwork within project teams and the Communications

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"Review process..." (continued from page 4)

Department. It gives many people a chance to speak their minds. Epidemiologists do have opinions about the colors of report covers, and they feel most satisfied when they get to state those opinions. The working-draft review is a service to our internal clients, and provides us with an opportunity to receive feedback from many people relatively early in a project.

The formal review provides these benefits:

- It limits the number of reviewers while ensuring that appropriate reviews occur. This makes our job much easier, and minimizes duplication of effort.
- It provides reviewers with guidelines and checklists that explain exactly what we need from them.
- It provides us with ways to weigh comments (for instance, all else being equal, the clinical reviewer's interpretation of the medical literature outweighs the content reviewer's).
- It allows each reviewer to identify the other reviewers, thereby encouraging discussion among reviewers.
- It empowers reviewers and defines their responsibilities by asking them to sign off a document or request further revision.
- It helps us to distinguish between suggestions and "show-stopping" comments.
- It limits variability in how we work so that project teams know what to expect no matter whom they're working with.
- It ensures that each document fits the established corporate image and contains appropriate "branding", graphical elements associated with certain kinds of information.
- It creates a record of comments and revisions.

In addition, the review process has helped PRO-West better explain the status of a document. Instead of being "with Communications", documents are now, for example, "in development" or "in working-draft review".

As lengthy as the review process is, it is still more efficient and reliable than the informal process we used before. It minimizes the time spent reviewing and incorporating comments while maximizing the quality of the individual reviews by empowering individual reviewers with specific responsibilities.

"The formal review... limits the number of reviewers while ensuring that appropriate reviews occur."

Without diminishing the importance of interpersonal relationships, the standardized process smoothes the flow of work where such relationships have not yet been established. In this way, it institutes trust. Project teams can trust us to manage their documents. Team members know that they have a chance to give input and that appropriate reviews and sign-offs will occur. For our part, we can trust reviewers to take responsibility for specific aspects of documents such as the accuracy of clinical information. Finally, managers can trust that the process yields quality documents that are clinically accurate, statistically sound, user-friendly, and identity-appropriate (i.e., they match our corporate image and branding).

Conclusions

Different situations may require slightly different processes, but each of the points I've raised should have its counterpart in other organizations. Moreover, I feel that this approach is something that even freelancers can adopt to help them develop a more cooperative, mutually respectful relationship with their clients. Because we are still in the process of refining our review process, I look forward to hearing from others about their own versions of these processes, and especially about any tools they've developed to help them apply the processes. **Ω**

"As lengthy as the review process is, it is still more efficient and reliable than the informal process we used before."

Conference: Image and meaning: envisioning and communicating science and technology

MIT (Cambridge, Mass.), June 13 - 16, 2001

Program and registration information at http://web.mit.edu/i-m/

A conference to promote new collaborations among researchers, imaging experts and science writers. Explore and discover powerful new ways of communicating science and technology through the visual expression of information within the science community and to the public.

Speakers include visionaries from all fields of science, imaging technology, photography, science writing, information architecture, graphic arts and publishing. Special Free public evening events:

- "Science as Spectacle," including Hollywood special effects studios: Industrial Light and Magic, Sony Imageworks and Digital Domain, 8:30 pm, June 14, MIT's Kresge Auditorium
- A conversation with Roger Penrose, Susan Sontag and E.O. Wilson, hosted by Alan Lightman. "Images in science that have changed the way we see ourselves", 8:00 pm, June 15, MIT's Kresge Auditorium

Sponsored by The National Science Foundation, Eastman Kodak Company, American Chemical Society, The Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation, Polaroid Corporation, Hewlett-Packard Laboratories, Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Lynch Family Foundation, Research Corporation, Boston Museum of Science. **Ω**

"My argument was always that if my edit changed the meaning, the passage wasn't clear to begin with."

The "C" family

By Dan Wise, Associate Fellow, Birmingham Chapter

A short time ago, I sent e-mail to our editor in which I mentioned the "five Cs of technical communication." The response I got back was "Five? I thought there were only four." Originally, there might have been only four, but today, in my book, there are five. And here they are.

First C, ***clear.*** Pretty obvious, right? But a lot of scientists (and engineers and SMEs and…) believe that if *they* can understand what they have written, it should be perfectly obvious to you as well. In my career I have run into some of these monumental egos who demanded that I put their prose back exactly the way they had it, insisting that I had destroyed their meaning, disrupted the flow of their scientific argument, caused catastrophic confusion, and was on the verge of instigating World War III.

My argument was always that if my edit changed the meaning, the passage wasn't clear to begin with. However, in some cases, I had no choice. I was obliged to put it back in its original form. In others, I had the backing of management and was able to push through some, if not all, of the changes I deemed necessary. And wherever possible, I attempted to treat the author with courtesy and diplomacy. Many times I was able to ask enough "dumb" questions to get the message across that this turgid prose really was rather opaque.

Second C, ***complete.*** This one is often easier to achieve than clarity because an editor usually can show an author "where the holes are" in a manuscript. Most authors welcome an editor's questions and comments along these lines. They are not interested in having their readers give them feedback pointing out those holes.

Third C, ***concise.*** This is a toughie. In many instances a scientist will use far too many words to get his message across. This is particularly

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true when the author is writing in the "academic" style—you know, third-person sterile, er, passive. And the editor must struggle to make sense of the passive, often convoluted, constructions before reducing them to straightforward active voice.

In my current position I have to deal with input from three organizations that have joined forces to form one unified voice in the field of building codes. The largest of the three organizations years ago adopted certain wording in their documents that has come to be set in concrete in the minds of their publications staff. One example of this is their use of "it is permitted to be" in code sections to indicate that a certain practice is not prohibited.

The first time I saw this, my red pen slashed forth with blinding speed and reduced "permitted to be" to the (to my mind) simple and straightforward "may." When I got the document back from review, my change had been reversed. The marginal note read "permissive language is not acceptable." Go figure.

Fourth C, *correct.* Every company and government agency I have ever worked for or supported on contract has had a style manual. Some organizations were sticklers for making sure certain documents were done in strict conformance with this company style. Others were less rigid, but nonetheless desirous of having the words flowing out their door accurately portray the corporate image.

However, in some instances, those same companies had written into their style manuals some rather odd or outdated requirements. I think many of us may have had reason to joke about "there doesn't have to be a reason for it; it's company style". What's an editor to do? Conform and quietly go about trying to get the oddity changed. Frontal assault is seldom successful. Time and patience are required if we are to have any chance of success. In one instance, we had to wait for an executive to retire before we were able to modify his pet requirement.

Four Cs. That is where most people stop. Hey, if it's clear, complete, concise, and correct, it's a good technical document. Right? Not necessarily. Back in the mid- to late 1970s, the U.S. Navy mandated that technical manuals be written at a 5th grade level. They, like many government agencies, issued a mandate without being able to establish the criteria for determining what the desired outcome was to be. When asked to define what they meant by "5th grade level", the Navy brass responded: "We are not quite sure, but we'll know it when we see it".

An STC colleague was lamenting in the hallway at an Annual Conference that his company had submitted their first set of manuals three times before the Navy accepted them. Then the manuals were sent back from the field with the comment that the technicians *could not understand them.*

Fifth C, *comprehensibility.* The contractor had sweated blood to bring the reading level of the manuals down to the mandated 5th grade level. All of the readability indexes said they had done their work well. The Navy finally agreed that they were satisfied the text was indeed so simple that even a 5th grader could understand it. However, in simplifying the prose, they had eliminated most, if not all, of the technical terms and jargon essential to successful completion of the maintenance tasks being performed.

The manuals did not match the training the technicians had received. The familiar words were missing. The procedures were incomprehensible. Thus, the fifth C was added to the formula for effective technical communication. It makes no difference how clear you are; how complete your discussion; how concise your argument; or how correct your grammar, syntax, and spelling might be. If your audience is unable to comprehend your meaning, your document fails to communicate. **Ω**

"If your audience is unable to comprehend your meaning, your document fails to communicate."

Join us on STC's Scientific Communication SIG mailing list!

STC runs an Internet-based e-mail discussion group for the Science SIG. It's a quiet, friendly place to turn for help if you've got questions concerning scientific communication. If you'd like to join, point your Web browser to http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcscsig-l

There's no cost to join, and you can expect a very low volume of mail. Of course, the more people join, the more traffic there'll be, so please join. It's a great way to make the SIG work for you.

Two other mailing lists of interest to Science SIG members:

Copyediting-l: discussions of editing in all its various forms. To subscribe, send the message "subscribe copyediting-l Your name" (with no quotes, and with your actual name instead of "Your name") to Listserv@listserv.indiana.edu

Techwr-l: discussions of the tools and travails of the technical writer. To subscribe, send the message "subscribe techwr-l Your name" (with no quotes, and with your actual name instead of "Your name") to Lyris@lists.raycomm.com

STC telephone seminar: "Getting started with usability testing"

STC plans to offer a two-part telephone seminar on "Getting started with usability testing". Part 1 will be held on March 7th, and part 2 will follow on March 14th. Conducted by Carol M. Barnum, a professor of technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University and award-winning author, the seminar will answer questions about one of the most talked-about issues in business today. For details, including an explanation of how telephone seminars work, please visit www.stc-va.org/usabilitytest.html. For more information about STC, please visit www.stc-va.org or call (703) 522-4114. **Ω**

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