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## From the President

by Dr. Russell Willerton, Snake River Chapter President

Our summer break is not too far in the distance. Soon we will, via e-mail and the web, ask for nominations for our elected offices and then conduct voting online. Please consider how you might get involved for next year. Recession or no recession, we will press on!



Scott Wolff, who is a consultant specializing in content management systems, recently gave the chapter an excellent overview of DITA—the Darwin Information Typing Architecture. As Scott explained it, writing in a DITA environment involves creating topics instead of traditional, discrete documents. There are three main types of topics: a concept, or conceptual, explanatory information; a task, which provide procedures; and a reference, which provides reference information that doesn't fit in the other two categories. DITA allows you to set up special instances of each of these types of topics, and you can establish the rules that govern the types of information you can include in each topic.

Scott also explained that in DITA, each element of textual data can be used many times, in many ways. This reuse of content can save an organization time and money. You may go online to see Scott's slides: <http://english.boisestate.edu/willerton/Wolff-DITA-for-STC-031809.pdf>.

We will work on setting up a DITA workshop with Scott in the late summer or early fall. If you have access to a room or training facility that we could use, please let me know.

Our next meeting will be Tuesday, April 21. This will be an online lunchtime event co-hosted with the Treasure Valley chapter of the International Institute of Business Analysts. I will give a presentation about writing white papers. More information about how and when to log into the presentation will be forthcoming.

### *April Meeting*

The meeting will be an online meeting co-hosted with the Treasure Valley chapter of the International Institute of Business Analysts. (<http://treasurevalley.theiiba.org/>) The topic will be writing white papers, and the speaker will be Dr. Russell Willerton. Further information about logging into the meeting will be sent out by our programs manager, Amaya Berriochoa, closer to the date of the event (April 21, 2009).

### *May Meeting*

Instead of a May chapter meeting, we have traditionally sent a member of the chapter to the national STC conference. This year we hope to send two.

Event: Summit, the Annual STC Conference

Location: Atlanta, Georgia

Dates: May 3-6, 2009

Costs: (subsidized for two chapter members)

Chapter coverage: \$1195.00 (registration & \$400.00 travel/lodging)

STC scholarship: \$400.00 (for those who qualify)\*

Out-of-pocket: airfare & per-diem expenses (approximate)

\*If you have been laid off from your job or have taken a 10 percent cut in pay (pay lost to unpaid furloughs would count), you might qualify for an additional \$400 in a discount "scholarship" from STC. See <http://conference.stc.org/register/scholarships.asp>.

If you are interested in attending the conference with chapter support, please write a memo and attach it to an e-mail to Dr. Russell Willerton by April 4, 2009. This memo (appx. one page) should state how you would benefit from attending the conference, how your work/employment will benefit from your attendance, and how you would share your knowledge gained from the conference with members of the chapter.

This opportunity is reserved for STC-SRC chapter members whose dues are current/paid in full. For more information about the conference, please visit <http://conference.stc.org/>.



## Suggestions and Contributions

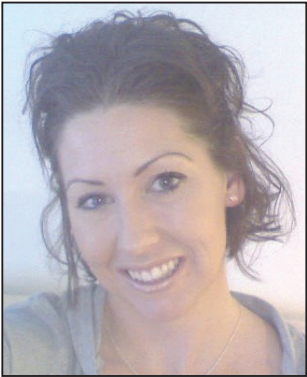
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If you would like to be a speaker or would like to suggest one for one of our chapter meetings, please get in touch with Amaya Berriochoa at [programs@stc-src.org](mailto:programs@stc-src.org). Also, if you have any ideas, suggestions, or profound announcements to make on the subject of meetings, feel free to make them known to Amaya.

We want to make meetings worth your time by providing knowledgeable speakers who will discuss important topics of technical communication with chapter members.

# Defining Value Through Department Values

by Danica Rhoades, Member of the Snake River Chapter



Danica Rhoades

*It's Friday night and you are attending a dinner party with other exciting professionals. A fellow diner, hoping to make conversation, asks, "So...what do you do for a living?" Happy to oblige and further the exchange, you respond, "I am a procedure specialist (or insert your job title here)." Inevitably, you are met with a blank stare and eventually a bewildered stab at understanding—"Oh. So what is that exactly? Do you assist doctors or something?"*

If this or something similar has ever happened to you, it is obvious that your job title neither conveys your function or your value to anyone outside our profession. And in the worst case, it may not even convey anything to practitioners within our profession!

Conveying our value has always been an important initiative for technical communicators, but it is even more critical as a result of today's economic situation. Many practitioners argue that what we call ourselves is much less important than what we do for the companies we work for.

Unfortunately, many of us are too far removed from the decision makers for that to be a viable argument. We need to convey our purpose and value to those who may not have an opportunity to see what we do on a daily basis or how well we do it. In addition, as companies continue to scale back, many of us are being moved from single-purpose departments into increasingly diverse departments that include a range of functions, such as marketing, corporate communications, business communications, documentation, and so forth.

So how do we come up with a title that can be versatile enough to continue to be meaningful as our responsibilities and personnel change, and that also means "hard to get rid of" in decision makers' minds? To effectively communicate with decision makers, we must first think in terms of deliverables. An effective department title would pin down the relative value to the company in the name. In other words, we need to manage the message that decision makers receive about how necessary our job functions are.

Just like the companies we work for, we need to "brand" our departments. When it comes to branding, we must remember that it is important to put a function and purpose into the title. Otherwise, when managers review line items for necessity, we'll be the first to go. We need to make the value of our departments as clear as possible to avoid any potential for decision makers to strike out a line—eliminating said department. To effectively brand, we must know our audience—a fundamental for all of us in the technical communication realm. In this case, we are the product and decision makers are the audience. If our audience doesn't know what our value is, there is serious trouble ahead.

The Management SIG has suggested some department titles, listed below. Relevance depends on specific department/company roles and needs, but this can serve as a starting point for those who may be in a position to consider a name change.

- Product Communications
- Technical and Marketing Communications
- Technical and Marketing Product Communications
- Information Design and Development
- Communication and Information Design
- Communication, Information Design, and Media Development
- Business and Marketing Communication
- Business, Marketing, and Product Communications
- Customer Documentation Team
- Authoring Services

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## Defining Value, Cont'd...

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Regardless of our department titles, as practitioners, we can no longer afford to be detached from the management and business goals of the companies we serve. It's essential to communicate with decision makers and to ensure that they understand how our work contributes to the bottom line. In some cases, we may need to rethink what we've been doing so that our jobs align with our organizations' goals.

And, if nothing else works, you can just tell people you've decided to go over to "The Doc Side"!

*Danica has been a member of STC for two years and has worked as a technical communicator for five years. Currently, Danica is pursuing an M.A. in Technical Communication at Boise State University. While completing this coursework, Danica also works full-time as a proposal specialist for Lionbridge Technologies, Inc. and recently established her own editing/writing company, Write Rhetoric ([www.writerhetoric.com](http://www.writerhetoric.com)).*

*In recent years, Danica's writing has been featured in several transportation engineering publications: Streetwise, the Florida Institute of Transportation Engineers' newsletter, and the Gold Coast chapter of the Institute of Transportation Engineers newsletter. In addition, she serves as 2nd Vice President (membership) of the Snake River chapter and as a volunteer copy editor for STC's Technical Editing SIG.*

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## ARTICLE 2

## Expand Your Writing Through Awareness of Learning Styles

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by William Pacino, Member of the STC Boston chapter

Paying attention to the different ways people learn helps meet the needs of your audience. Each person has his or her own mix of learning styles. Some people may find that they have a dominant style of learning and use fewer of the other styles. Others may find that they use different styles in different circumstances. There is no right mix; nor are the ways people learn fixed over time.

Acknowledging the many ways people bring their intelligence into a learning situation is a powerful way to get the appropriate information to the audience of your technical documentation.

Traditional schooling uses—and continues to use—mainly verbal (linguistic) and logical teaching methods. Many schools still rely on classroom and book-based teaching, repetition, and exams for reinforcement and review. But the delivery of technical information does not have to be restricted to linguistic and logical methods.

By recognizing and understanding the learning styles of your audience, you can improve the speed at which your information is absorbed and increase the quality (more information in a smaller package) of information delivery.

Seven learning styles are featured in this article. These learning styles are discussed from the point of view of the writer and suggest ways and techniques that the writer can use to meet the needs of the audience.

The seven learning styles featured here are:

- Visual uses pictures, images, and spatial understanding.
- Aural includes sound and music.
- Physical is missing.
- Solitary is working alone and using self-study and analysis methods.
- Social involves learning in groups or with another person.
- Verbal means words, both in speech and writing.
- Logical includes logic and reasoning.

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### **Visual (Spatial) Learning Style**

If your audience favors the visual style, focus on providing images, pictures, colors, and maps to organize and communicate the information. Your audience can easily visualize objects, plans, and outcomes. In this learning style, your audience also has a good spatial sense, which leads to a good sense of direction and the ability to navigate easily using your visual directions.

Apply this style by adding elements of visual art, photography, video or film, and navigation to your writing.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience consists of visual learners, use images, pictures, color, and other visual media to help them learn.

You may find that creating pictures out of written descriptions, especially with vivid language, comes easily to this audience. This also means that you, as the writer, have to make your descriptions stand out even more to make new material obvious to the audience.

Use color, layout, and spatial organization in your descriptions, and use many "visual words" in your writing, such as "see," "picture," "perspective," "visual," and "map."

Use "mind maps." A mind map is a diagram used to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged radially around a central key word or idea. A mind map is used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas, and as an aid in study, organization, problem solving, and decision making.

Use color and pictures in place of text, wherever possible.

Diagrams of the hierarchy of systems and subsystems can help the audience visualize the links between parts of a system. Replace words with pictures, and use color to highlight major and minor links.

### **Aural (Auditory-Musical-Rhythmic) Learning Style**

If your audience favors the aural style, focus on providing information through sound and music. Your audience will respond positively to information delivered in a way that asks them to take advantage of their listening abilities and rhythm.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience consists of aural learners, use sound, rhyme, and music in your presentation. Focus on using aural content in your examples and descriptions.

Use sound recordings to provide a background and help the audience get into what is being described. For example, use a recording of the sound of wind and water when describing sailing maneuvers.

### **Verbal (Linguistic) Learning Style**

The verbal style involves both the written and spoken word. If your audience favors this style, focus on full descriptions via written and verbal expression. This style is most often featured in public speaking and debating.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience has verbal learners, find ways to incorporate more speaking and writing by the audience. For example, have the audience talk itself through procedures, or use recordings of dictation or discussions with others as a way of prewriting.

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Use rhyme and rhythm wherever you can and suggest that the audience read important points aloud.

Suggest that your audience work with others and use role-playing to learn verbal exchanges such as negotiations or sales calls.

### **Physical (Bodily-Kinesthetic) Learning Style**

If the physical style is more suited for your audience, focus on ways to use the body and a sense of touch.

In this learning style, your audience is much more in tune with the physical world. They will notice and appreciate textures; for example in clothes or furniture. They also favor hands-on work; "getting their hands dirty," making models, or working out puzzles.

When teaching this audience a new skill or topic, emphasize "hands-on" actions and permit the audience to play with the physical parts. For example, this type of audience would prefer to pull a physical system apart and put it back together, rather than reading or looking at diagrams about how it works.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience uses a physical learning style, suggest touch, action, movement, and hands-on work in your writing. For descriptions, focus on the sensations to be expected in each instance being described.

Focus on the physical reactions that come out of your writing. For example, a physical learning style would prompt a pilot to write about an experience ("learning a skill") as follows: "I feel the resistance as I push the throttle forward to start my takeoff run. The controls start to move around more actively as I check the airspeed, oil pressure, and temperature. At takeoff speed, I pull back slightly, and I feel the vibrations of the wheels stop as the plane leaves the ground."

Promote your audience to use physical objects as much as possible. Suggest that your audience physically touch objects as they learn about what these objects do.

Keep in mind as well that writing and drawing diagrams are physical activities, so do not neglect these techniques. Suggest that your audience use big sheets of paper and large color markers for reproducing the diagrams in your writing.

### **Logical (Mathematical) Learning Style**

If your audience favors the logical style, present the information via rationality and mathematical reasoning. Your audience will recognize patterns easily, as well as connections between seemingly meaningless content. Classify and group information to help your audience learn or understand it.

Present your information so that your audience can systematically work through problems and issues, set numerical targets and budgets, and, create agendas, itineraries, and to-do lists. This scientific approach to thinking means supporting the points of the presentation with logical examples or statistics.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience is a logical learner, aim to demonstrate the reasons behind your writing and presentation. Promote the exploration of the links between various systems and have your audience note them. In your writing, highlight logical thoughts and behaviors. Make use of diagrams of systems and subsystems to help your audience understand the links between various parts of a system.

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### **Social (Interpersonal) Learning Style**

If your audience favors social learning, focus on providing information both verbally and nonverbally. Provide group exercises, discussion topics, and other ways in which your audience can interact among themselves and with others outside of the group. Present the overall concepts and let the group teach itself the subprinciples and procedures.

*How the audience learns in this style*

If your audience favors social learning, aim to have your audience work with others as much as possible. Role-playing is a technique that works well with others, whether it is one-on-one or with a group of people. Have your audience review checklists and planning goals with others. By listening to how others solve their issues, your audience may get more ideas on how to solve their own issues.

Mind maps and diagrams of systems are great to work on in a group. Have one person draw the ideas, while the rest of the group works through material and suggests ideas. Working in groups to practice behaviors or procedures will help your audience understand how to deal with variations. Seeing the mistakes or errors that others make can help your audience avoid the same types of mistakes or errors later.

### **Solitary (Personal) Learning Style**

If your audience favors a solitary style, focus on ways to present your information in ways that are more private, introspective, and independent. Your audience may prefer to work on problems by retreating to somewhere quiet and working through possible solutions. Give this audience the facts and challenge them to find a solution.

*How the audience learns in this style*

It is necessary to have your audience follow a few fixed steps in working successfully with the information they are presented:

- Specify that your audience set goals, objectives, and plans.
- Suggest that your audience keep a log or journal so that they have a written record of their progress.
- Promote modeling as a technique to understand the new information learned in terms of information they already know. Use patterns, behaviors and appearances in order to understand the new in terms of the old.

*This article was originally published in the Boston Broadside, the newsletter for the Boston chapter of the STC. William Pacino currently works as a technical writer at Guardium, Inc. in Waltham, MA. He is a senior member of the Boston and Northern New England STC chapters and lives in Chelmsford, MA. He can be reached at [william.pacino@verizon.net](mailto:william.pacino@verizon.net).*

## Upcoming Elections

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Do you know the candidates? Visit the Candidates' Page on the STC website. You can review the candidates' biographies, ask them questions, and view their responses to questions posed by other members.

The 2009 election will be held from March 10, 2009 through April 9, 2009. Voting information will be sent to you prior to the election. Thank you for doing your part to make STC a vibrant, growing organization.

## ABOUT THE SNAKE RIVER CHAPTER

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### Elected Council Members



Dr. Russell Willerton  
Current President  
president@stc-src.org



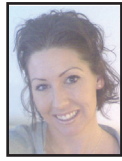
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Ryan Martin  
Immediate Past President  
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Danica Rhoades  
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Angela Fleischmann  
Treasurer  
treasurer@stc-src.org

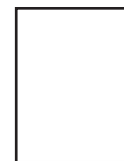
### Appointed Council Members



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Darla Scott  
Employment Liaison  
employment@stc-src.org



Jeff Carter  
Webmaster  
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## ABOUT THE SIDEBAR NEWSLETTER

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*The Sidebar* is the official publication of the Snake River Chapter (SRC) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). Issues are published monthly from September to May. The design and layout of this newsletter are ©2009 STC.

#### *Publication Policies*

The *Sidebar* invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication. We welcome contributions, book and product reviews, letters, and articles that are relevant to the field of technical communication. Content is due the 26th of every month. Your text may be edited to conform to the style guidelines and space restrictions of the newsletter.

#### *Copyright Statement*

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