Creating Policies and Procedures, continued from page 7

completing the other sections of the manual was already defined within the policy.

No matter how long I have been a writer, I find it always is essential to identify the audience before writing a single word. Too often I start writing without asking that all-important question. Not until others in the SIG discussion group helped me refocus was I able to understand the policy's intent. The project was completed in less than a day.

Robert Nimchuk has been a technical writer for 10 years. As a freelance writer, he founded Written Word in 1992, a company specializing in user documentation and training materials. He is employed by Northwest Airlines Inc. as a technical writer in the Information Services Department and is a member of the Twin Cities chapter of STC

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conducting business; procedures for completing forms; procedures for writing and submitting reports; procedures for processing paperwork; procedures for preparing and revising engineering drawings and specifications; procedures for preparing purchase orders and evaluating bids—you name it.

We had four-inch-thick post binders crammed to capacity with procedures. At one company I served nearly 40 years ago, the corporate administrative procedures manual was titled *How to Get Things Done.* It was filled with forms and instructions for completing those forms. It also included step-by-step procedures for all the myriad administrative tasks required to run the company. And it included a thick section stating corporate policies on all those issues.

No, procedures writing **outside** the user-doc arena is hardly a new thing. I'm just glad some few people are beginning to realize that there is still a thriving market for writing and editing skills outside that arena.

Daniel E. Wise
Associate Fellow
Birmingham Chapter

Dan Wise is a technical editor for the Southern Building Codes Congress International in Birmingham, Alabama, and has been a member of STC and its predecessor organizations since 1959.

The mission of the Policies and Procedures special interest group is to assist STC members in developing, implementing, and managing policies and procedures communication through educational and networking opportunities, STC conference sessions and publications, and communication with other STC SIGs and professional organizations in areas of common interest.

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The newsletter of the STC Policies and Procedures Special Interest Group

STC Society for Technical Communication

Poll Results Provide Tips for Creating Well-Written Procedures

By Thomas Quine

Procedure writing is at the heart of technical writing. People sometimes read technical publications for detailed specifications, for product descriptions or for other nuggets of information, but most commonly people read manuals for one reason alone—to answer the question: "How do I do what I have to do?" A well-written procedure answers that question.

Two years ago, I polled technical writers about what they considered to be the essential features of a well-written procedure. Since that time, I have taught what I have learned about writing procedures to dozens of technical writers and received a lot of valuable feedback. Here are a few tips that working writers in the field tell me will contribute to the creation of a well-written, easy-to-follow procedure:

Keep it short

Remember that your readers are people in a hurry. They have a job to get done—right away.

Early studies by Bell Telephone showed that people have enough short-term memory to handle telephone numbers of up to seven digits but that retention drops off with eight or more digits. (With the increasing use of 10-digit numbers in North America, many of us are learning this firsthand.)

For this reason, many technical writers keep to the "seven plus or minus two" rule when determining how many steps should go into a written procedure. Of course, it's not always possible to fit a complex procedure into five or seven steps, and a good writer will never sacrifice clarity in favor of an arbitrary rule—but keep in mind that the longer the procedure, the more your reader's attention will wander. Where possible, break down a long procedure into two or more shorter procedures.

Make it clear

Use simple language and short sentences. Avoid idioms that may not translate well. Never introduce a new technical term or jargon without explaining it first. Base any assumptions you have about your readership on careful audience analysis. Be concise.

Use the active voice

Address the reader directly. Use the imperative. Don't be shy about telling your readers what to do—that's why they're reading.

One of the telltale features of the passive voice is that it's hard to tell who the actor is. Here's a real-life example from a manual I read recently: "The OK button must be clicked before returning to the Customer Address page."

Instead of leaving the reader to guess who should be doing the clicking, why not engage the reader and address him directly: "Click the OK button to return to the Customer Address page."

Use the title to define the task

Procedures are supposed to tell the reader how to perform a task or series of tasks. Unless these tasks are clearly defined up front, the reader may not be motivated to complete the steps.

The task at hand can be defined in an introductory paragraph, such as: "Follow the steps below to change

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In This Issue:

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From the Editor's Desk

By Kathy Craddock

Steps & Specs is the primary means of communication for the Policies and Procedures SIG. As editor, I am always looking for ways to get our members involved in this quarterly publication. In this issue, I am pleased to introduce some new contributors. The response to contribute to *Steps & Specs* was good, and I am very pleased to pass along their expertise to the membership.

In "Listserv Posts Offer Insight into Policy Behind Creating Policies and Procedures," Robert Nimchuk shares the knowledge he gained while creating a policy for writing policy and procedure manuals.

The member profile this quarter is Raymond Urgo. Urgo was one of the early members of the P&P SIG and has continued to be actively involved each year. I encourage you to read this profile and get to know a little more about one of the SIG's founding members.

Inside you also will find the quarterly manager's report, the membership report and, as always, opportunities to become involved in the SIG through volunteer leadership. There are many possibilities from which to choose.

Finally, I am excited to continue working on *Steps & Specs* and to hear more from you about what you would like to see in this newsletter and how it can become a better publication.

Enjoy your fall and this issue of *Steps & Specs*.

Kathy Craddock

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor,

I read with interest the summary of the Annual Conference panel discussion Audrey C. Kessler wrote (*Steps & Specs*, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 5). Of particular interest was the second paragraph which stated, in part: "The panelists agreed also that P&P communication should be defined broadly to include more than just computer hardware and software manuals and instead should encompass an array of business sectors—from hospitals and universities to banking and transportation."

Believe me, before there **was** computer hardware **or** computer software, procedures existed in abundance—procedures for everything, from assembling structures and machinery to the operation of the machinery and maintenance of these systems. As a procedures writer and editor, I go back over 45 years, and I have yet to write any kind of procedures pertaining to computer hardware or software.

Also believe me that before there were computers and computer software, there were procedures for

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at regional and international STC conferences and served as judge in regional and international publications competitions.

I see the demographics of STC changing to a membership that is younger and gradually becoming more global. I see the SIGs becoming more of a reason why people join and maintain membership. The topics of interest within STC are changing from writing and editing for print to information design, usability and online communication. There is a greater focus on the technology and techniques for developing and managing information.

***S&S*:** What do you like to do outside of P&P?

***RU*:** I like to visit museums and galleries and attend lectures mostly on modern and contemporary art. I have a collection of picture post cards on several favorite subjects. I enjoy working out or exercising daily. I also enjoy traveling and prefer warm weather. My favorite getaway place is Palm Springs for the desert.

Urgo can be reached at 323/957-9317 or rurgo@urgoconsulting.com.

Opportunities

Interested in becoming involved with the ***Steps & Specs*** Newsletter team? Here are three ways to be involved: Review a book on policy and procedure communication, submit your favorite policy and procedure Web sites or solicit hints and tips for policy and procedure documentation.

For more information, contact:

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Listserv Posts Offer Insight into Policy Behind Creating Policies and Procedures

By Robert Nimchuk

In my position as a technical writer in the Information Services Department at Northwest Airlines Inc., my focus normally is system- and user-related manuals. Like all writers, I am sometimes asked to step out of my comfort zone. This time I was asked to write the policy and procedures for the Methodology Department within Information Services.

Even through it had been several years since I wrote my last set of policies and procedures, I did not foresee any difficulties. I knew that creating procedures would not be a problem. I created procedures every day for user manuals. Policies on the other hand, while not always as clear cut, could be written around the existing procedures. One thing, though, did stump me: the policy and procedure for the policy and procedure manual itself. After wrestling with it off and on for several days, I turned to the STC Policies and Procedures SIG Listserv discussion group.

Sending an e-mail to the Listserv, I asked if anyone could offer me a short policy statement on why policies and procedures are required. By the end of the day, I had several responses, including actual examples of what others had used in their organizations.

The replies from the discussion group helped me realize a misconception I had regarding the content of the policy. I had been thinking solely in terms of a policy that establishes the need for the other policies within the manual. I was looking for a verbal club to enforce policies. What I needed to write was a policy that established the requirements for creating policies and procedures.

To do this, I first defined the overall policy. This is simply an explanation of the reasons for maintaining the manual. The Methodology policy states: ". . . to ensure that all Methodology policies are formally approved, printed in a consistent format, and centrally maintained. They are required to be kept current and distributed in a timely manner in order to assure compliance. The individuals responsible for writing, updating, and distributing these policies must comply with the conditions and procedures outlined in this policy."

This statement defines the policy's purpose, but it is incomplete. It does not define the content requirements for a policy and/or a procedure. By defining sections used within a policy and procedure template, the guidelines for revisions and creation of new policies are established. The guidelines also provide the reader with a road map for finding information within the policy and procedure. For example, the policy and procedure template for the Methodology policy contains a section called Required Forms. The policy states: "This section identifies any forms, templates, or applications that are required for completing the associated procedures for each policy."

In addition to defining the content for each section, any additional required information also is noted. The Procedure section of the policy contains three required components:

- Title of the procedure
- Party responsible for completing the corresponding step (i.e., action item)
- Description of the step to be completed by the responsible party.

After the overall policy was defined, the rest of the document fell into place. The information for

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leading-edge ways. We can assess, plan and help improve an organization's existing practices in developing and managing its policies and procedures documentation.

Through our information development services, we can plan, develop, manage and evaluate an organization's procedures documentation projects for training, ongoing reference, auditing and performance improvement. Using leading-edge methods in documentation and instructional design, we can simplify the communication of complex practices to reduce errors, interruptions, and the need for training and support.

Through our training and mentoring services, we can develop, deliver or recommend presentations, seminars, and programs about policies and procedures documentation.

***S&S*:** When someone asks you, "What do you do?" what do you say?

RU: I assist organizations in analyzing and simplifying the documentation of their work practices for such purposes as training, ongoing reference, auditing and performance improvement. I also teach others the same.

***S&S*:** How do you define P&P?

***RU*:** My formal definitions that I use in one of my policies and procedures courses are as follows: *Policies and procedures* is the generic name used to describe the various principles and methods for how a group operates and interacts in a predictable and consistent manner. *Policies and procedures communication* is the study of how information about the principles and methods for how an organization operates and interacts in a predicable and consistent manner is designed, developed, delivered, managed and used.

***S&S*:** What makes you a good P&P communicator?

***RU*:** Years of experience applying formal documentation methods, techniques and tricks of the trade in analyzing, organizing, and communicating complex business practices; understanding the dynamics of organizational work practices in various industries; and the ability to learn and understand new subject matter quickly at least twice: once for myself and then for documenting it for others to understand and practice.

***S&S*:** What are the key talents, interests, education and personality characteristics of a successful P&P communicator?

***RU*:** Talents: good language arts and information-development skills; good information gathering skills (especially interviewing); good organization skills for simplifying information; an eye and mind for detail in the midst of the big picture. Interests: in developing the recommended talents and in developing information on whatever P&P subject matter needs to be communicated. Education: any education that develops good research (fact finding), analytical, organizational and communication abilities. This might include journalism, technical communication, business systems and organizational development. Personality: patience with uncertainty and human/organizational interactions; likes working with details and helping people in organizations figure out and understand what they do so that it can be communicated easily to others.

***S&S*:** What advice would you give someone who wanted to get into P&P documentation?

***RU*:** I advise assessing two aspects: the P&P work opportunity and the individual's interests and talents for the opportunity.

Know whether you are entering a position as a leader or follower of the P&P documentation effort.

Consider the current state or maturity level of the organization's or project's investment with P&P. This should include any formal methods, techniques, tools and processes for developing P&P information. It should include the reporting relationship of P&P documentation within the organization and the role and talents of others involved in documentation development. It should also include the degree of respect, interest, and expectations that management and users have with or about P&P documentation.

To succeed, I advise that you must like the details of writing and editing and the dynamics of an organization's work flows and practices. Also, you must have the patience, perseverance, and a knack to motivate people to come to agreement with their operating practices and response to your documentation. You must enjoy working with complex situations and communicating them in simplified ways. I often tell my students that much of P&P work is about helping an organization communicate information from its gray zone (vague and unconscious) into black and white (clear and conscious).

***S&S*:** Tell us about your role in STC and how that has changed in the last few years.

***RU*:** I joined STC in 1992. I served in several leadership positions on the council with the Los Angeles chapter and was awarded the distinguished chapter service award. I founded and was the first manager of the P&P SIG. I served on the STC board for two years as the assistant to the president for special interest groups. I have presented

Member Profile, continued on page 7

Manager's Report

Teleconference Links SIG Managers, STC Office for Talk on SIG-Related Issues

By Audrey C. Kessler

As a means of creating a communication link among SIG managers and three members of the STC office—Executive Director Bill Stolgitis, Deputy Director Peter Herbst and Public Relations Director John Nash—the first of perhaps several conference calls was convened on August 21.

Agenda items included SIG budgets, (general questions), SIG board reports, problems SIGs may be facing, suggestions for improving SIG operations and ways STC can be helpful to SIGs.

The meeting, however, was not without a slight glitch that resulted in two of the SIG managers—myself included—being hooked up to a separate conference call. Apparently the problem lay with the conference-call service, though what exactly happened, no one knows for sure. In any case, the other manager and I had an interesting conference call of our own, touching on many of the same issues with many of the same comments as the "real" conference call.

One topic of discussion was the SIG Listservs. Call participants noted that people have been having problems registering for or accessing the lists. It was recommended that the problems be documented and sent to Nash. Returned e-mails was a problem as well. In response, the STC office is developing a procedure for periodically comparing returned e-mails with mailing addresses. The intent is to reduce the number of returned e-mails with.

Reimbursement issues were discussed also, including a review of the process for requesting payment and a note that reimbursements typically are completed within 48 hours.

A final topic covered during the call was SIG recruitment, with SIG managers asking for ways to encourage participation by the members of their SIG. The STC office responded by noting that surveys will be sent to chapters to see if they have any local SIGs and that an article about the value and needs of the SIGs will be published in *Tieline* and *Intercom.*

The conference call idea is a good one. It's a way for SIG managers to exchange ideas about what works and what doesn't work and to brainstorm possible solutions to common problems during the time between the SIG managers meeting at the annual conference. If you have any ideas or concerns you would like future SIG conference calls to cover, contact me at audck@aol.com or 330/677-8598.

Audrey Cielinski Kessler is the owner of The Write Hand of Ohio, a writing, editing, desktop publishing and Web site design company in Kent, Ohio; a senior member of the Northeast Ohio chapter of STC; and manager of the Policies and Procedures SIG.

P&P SIG Nets 100 New Members from Across the Globe

By Candie McKee

In the last year, membership in the Policies and Procedures SIG has grown rapidly. As usual, the total membership dipped slightly as some members did not renew their P&P SIG membership. Even so, the P&P SIG still has more than 870 members.

Since April, approximately 100 new members have joined. Of this number, eight are from Canada, with one each from Australia, Israel, Qatar, Belgium and the United Kingdom, which gives the SIG a more prevalent international flavor.

Membership in the P&P SIG gives you access to the SIG on-line discussion group. It's here that you can post a question or issue and get feedback quickly. If you have not subscribed, I urge you to do so. It's easy. Just send an e-mail to:

subscribe-stcppsig-l@lists.stc.org

Note that the character before the @ is a lowercase letter *L*—not the number one.

Another benefit of membership is the SIG's quarterly newsletter, *Steps & Specs*. Not only does the publication give you a variety of interesting articles on P&P but it also gives you a chance to share your knowledge with others by contributing a bylined article of your own.

Articles don't have to be lengthy. They can be as short as few tips, for example, on ways to get the job done more quickly or more efficiently. Whatever you contribute, it will be appreciated.

Number of New P&P SIG Members
Since April 2001, by Country

Member Profile: Raymond E. Urgo

Compiled by Kathy Craddock

Editor's Note: This quarter's member profile introduces Raymond E. Urgo, a longtime P&P SIG member. Urgo has been active in STC for several years and was instrumental in getting the P&P SIG off the ground.

***S&S*:** Can you briefly describe your background for our readers?

***RU*:** I am the founder and principal of Urgo & Associates and a recognized leader in policies and procedures documentation. My 25 years of experience in this specialty include writer, analyst, project manager, supervisor, recruiter, mentor, instructor, educator, researcher, author, speaker, publications judge and consultant. I serve on boards and committees of professional associations concerned with technical communication, organizational development and consulting. I also am an instructor on policies and procedures in the technical communication program at UCLA Extension and a certified instructor for Information Mapping's policies and procedures seminar.

***S&S*:** What are some of your major achievements in P&P communication?

***RU*:** Some of my major achievements in policies and procedures communication include being the founder of STC's Policies and Procedures SIG in 1993. This group has grown to more than 800 members. It is the largest and longest-lasting group of its type focusing on P&P. It also has the longest-lasting newsletter on P&P and the most members of any P&P Listserv. Another achievement is that I designed and deliver the first known, university Web-based course on P&P communication available to participants internationally.

***S&S*:** How did you become involved in P&P communication? Was it by design or by default (by accident)?

***RU*:** By default. Educationally I hold degrees in sociology and in urban and regional planning with emphasis on demography, research, systems and administration.

My first position after graduate school was as a researcher monitoring internal and external trends for an international association of organizations. In this position, I found myself writing lots of instructions and designing forms for collecting data from the member organizations. I also designed and wrote reports on trends for the board of directors.

Because I enjoyed the detail associated with documentation, I found my next position as a methods analyst with New York Telephone. Here I documented procedures on payroll operations involving more than 80,000 employees and seven labor unions. I later worked as a methods analyst with pension payroll, information systems, purchasing and product evaluation.

After a successful seven-year career in New York City, I moved to Los Angeles in 1984. My first and probably most favorite company as an employee was with a small to medium size manufacturer of high-reliability relays sold primarily to the aerospace and defense industries. I began as the sole business systems and procedures writer responsible for documenting all operating policies and procedures throughout the company. Later my responsibilities expanded to configuration management—overseeing change management of technical documentation on critical products. Then I was promoted to a supervisory position overseeing all documentation for business systems and technical products.

Next I moved on to Northrop Corp. where I was a business systems and procedures analyst specialist on manufacturing operating policies and procedures for the Aircraft Division. Here I gained experience in working with and managing a large policies and procedures publication group.

As aerospace and defense was taking a decline in the late 1980s, I was offered a position to start a procedures and training group at Farmers Insurance. The purpose of this group was to support one of the world's largest information-systems development projects at the time. Along with recruiting talent and setting up the group's operating practices, I introduced formal, leading-edge documentation and instructional design methodologies.

In 1993, I began taking steps to make one of my long-term career goals a reality: heading up my own consulting practice. In 1994, I went full time into my practice, Urgo & Associates, which specializes in policies and procedures documentation. We assist organizations in planning, developing, and managing policies and procedures documentation on their standard operating practices. Our clients use policies and procedures documentation for training, ongoing reference, auditing and performance improvement. We pride ourselves in being among the leaders who define and promote policies and procedures documentation as a technical communication specialty.

***S&S*:** And what role do you serve?

***RU*:** As principal of my consulting practice, I serve in all the key roles needed in a professional services firm: marketing, sales, administration, research and delivery of the consulting services. Our P&P consulting services include advisory, information development and training.

Through our advisory services, we keep organizations apprised of industry trends, best practices and resources for documenting business practices in

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Well-Written Procedures, continued from page 1

the oil in your car." Usually, though, it's shorter and clearer just to state the task in the procedure title: "How to change the oil in your car."

Number the steps

By definition, a procedure is a series of actions meant to be performed in sequence. This implies that the successful completion of later steps may rely on earlier steps.

If there were only a few non-sequential steps in the procedure, it might be possible to use bullets instead of numbers. Even so, numbers help the reader determine where he is on the page.

Describe one action per step

Your reader's attention is often shifting between reading a step and performing it. If you try to put in more than one action per step, you will lose a percentage of your readers. Therefore, wherever possible, break up a compound step into two separate steps.

For example, if one of your steps reads: "Enter the Customer Number in the Customer Number field, and click the "New" button," you can be sure that many readers will enter the number and move straight to the next step, missing the part about the "New" button.

Use parallel structure

The grammatical elements in every step in your procedure should match. For example:

1. Fly to Montana.
2. Drive to North Dakota.
3. Topographical maps.
4. Hike through the badlands.

Remember the Sesame Street song, "One of these things is not like the others."

Use graphics appropriately

A picture tells a thousand words, but a picture that is used for decoration only and does not explicitly support the information in the text will only distract or irritate the reader.

Write a conclusion

I have learned through direct observation during usability testing that readers love a concluding sentence that signals to them that they have successfully completed the procedure. For example: "Congratulations! You've just changed the oil in your car!" Without a conclusion, they will turn the page and ask, "Is that it?"

Don't annoy the reader

Sounds obvious, but this cardinal rule of technical writing is broken every day. Typically, when people can't figure out how to do something, their first impulse is to ask a colleague. Their next thought is to telephone someone who might know better than they do—perhaps another colleague or a technical support representative. If they can't find anyone to talk to, as a last resort they will read something on their own. But keep in mind that before they even pick up your manual, they already are annoyed that something isn't working as it should and that no one is there to tell them how to do it right.

If at this point you present the reader with something annoying, you run the risk of the person throwing up his hands in despair and cursing the documentation forever.

The writing in procedures should be transparent. That means that the reader should see right through the writing to the information behind it, just as you look through a picture window to see what the weather is like. If you notice the window, that might be only because it has grime and smudges all over it.

Some of the greasy fingerprints that annoy readers are poor spelling, typos, sexist or racist language, jargon, clichés and idioms, flowery or literary style, poor attempts at humor, and even misconceived metaphors.When in doubt—strike it out.

Summary

Remember, a well-written procedure:

- Is short
- Is clear
- Uses the active voice
- Has a title
- Clearly defines the task
- Accurately defines the outcome
- Follows a logical and sequential progression
- Describes one action per step
- Uses parallelism
- Uses graphics appropriately
- Has a conclusion
- Does nothing to annoy the reader

Thomas Quine teaches the fundamentals of technical writing at the University of British Columbia and is the principal of Documen Information Design Inc.

Reminder

The deadline for articles for the December issue of ***Steps & Specs*** is November 15.

Email your submissions to:

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