



SOCIETY FOR  
TECHNICAL  
COMMUNICATION

# Newsbrief

Monthly Publication of the Mid-South Chapter

VOLUME 23, NUMBER 6, JUNE 2004

## June Meeting Program: Highlights from the 51st Annual STC Conference

by Alison Masilak

Technical communicators from around the globe gathered in Baltimore, MD, the second week of May to “Navigate the Future of Technical Communication” at STC’s 51st Annual Conference. On Monday, June 7, four chapter members will share insights, tips and tricks, and other items of interest from the sessions they attended at the conference, as we kick off the 2004–2005 program year, “Exploring the Future.”

The four panelists are

- Mike Albers, assistant professor, University of Memphis
- Apryl Cox, project manager, Physicians Postgraduate Press
- Leanne Logan, usability professional, Quarry Integrated Communications

- Alison Masilak, electronic communications coordinator, University of Memphis

Others who attended the conference are also welcome to share their experiences.

Join us for this event on Monday, June 7, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at the Cottage at the Four Seasons (4930 Park Ave.). For directions and more details, see page 5. ♦



Above: Leanne Logan, Apryl Cox, and Alison Masilak enjoy the reception for STC Region 3, which comprises chapters in the southeastern United States.



Left: At Baltimore’s inner harbor, which is a short walk from the convention center, conference attendees took boat tours, saw the National Aquarium, ate fresh crab, and shopped for the items that they forgot to pack.

### WANTED: EMPLOYMENT MANAGER

If you enjoy doing a little detective work and networking, being the Mid-South chapter employment manager might be the perfect opportunity for you.

Duties include researching local jobs for technical communicators and sharing them with fellow chapter members via our website and at meetings. The employment manager must be

- ✓ A Mid-South chapter member
- ✓ Currently employed
- ✓ A regular attendee of chapter meetings
- ✓ Willing to serve for one year

For more information or to volunteer, contact Glenn Sanders at glenn.sanders@fedex.com or 901.263.2554.

### Contents

June Meeting Program: Highlights from the 51st Annual STC Conference .....	1
From the Editor.....	2
Introducing the 2004–2005 Program Committee .....	2
May Meeting Notes .....	3
Upcoming Meetings.....	5

## From the Editor

by Apryl Cox

This month, I just want to remind you that the Mid-South chapter is still going to be active during the summer months. If you have a little more free time now that school is out or other organizations are taking a summer break, please

take the opportunity to join us on a Monday night to network and catch up on what's going on in the international and local technical communication communities. Your first chance is at the Cottage on Monday, June 7. ♦

### CALL FOR CLIPPINGS

If you see a meeting or activity of the Mid-South chapter advertised in a local newspaper, please cut the notice out and bring it to our publicity manager, Diana Fedinec. She sends notices to many local papers including *The Commercial Appeal*, *Memphis Business Journal*, *Shelby Sun Times*, and *Germantown News*. (For a complete list of newspapers, contact Diana at [dfedinec@memphis.edu](mailto:dfedinec@memphis.edu).) Having 2 original copies of each notice to add to our publicity notebook increases our chances of winning a publicity award during the STC chapter competitions. So bring those clippings to Diana at the next chapter meeting!

## Introducing the 2004–2005 Program Committee

The theme for the 2004–2005 chapter program year is “Exploring the Future.” The program committee has begun developing a series of meetings and field trips to showcase innovations in technical communication in the Mid-South and around the world. If you have ideas for a program, please feel free to share them with one of the members of the program committee:

- Alison Masilak, chair  
[ajoyner@memphis.edu](mailto:ajoyner@memphis.edu)
- Mike Albers  
[malbers@memphis.edu](mailto:malbers@memphis.edu)
- David Armbruster  
[darmbruster@utm.edu](mailto:darmbruster@utm.edu)

- Elizabeth Boone  
[eboone@psychiatrist.com](mailto:eboone@psychiatrist.com)
- Becky Derych  
[bbrown@psychiatrist.com](mailto:bbrown@psychiatrist.com)
- Leanne Logan  
[llogan@quarry.com](mailto:llogan@quarry.com)
- Loel Kim  
[loelkim@memphis.edu](mailto:loelkim@memphis.edu)

We look forward to hosting engaging and informative chapter meetings that cover topics with appeal to the whole gamut of technical communicators in the area, including writers, editors, Web designers, and project managers in industry and academia. ♦

### Bring in used cell phones!

After our successful drive last year, the Mid-South chapter is once again collecting used cell phones, batteries, and chargers. These items will be given to Cell Phones for Life, Inc., a nonprofit organization that programs phones to call only 911 and distributes them to shut-ins and victims of domestic violence. Help us reach our goal of 50 phones and chargers by May 2005!



*Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication*

Society President.....

Region 3

Director Sponsor ..... Beth Tanner

### Mid-South Chapter

*A sharing community creating opportunity*

#### Officers

President..... Glenn Sanders  
901.263.2554 [glenn.sanders@fedex.com](mailto:glenn.sanders@fedex.com)

Vice President ..... Alison Joyner Masilak  
901.274.0215 [ajoyner@memphis.edu](mailto:ajoyner@memphis.edu)

Secretary ..... Gail Spake  
901.216.1611 [gspake@earthlink.net](mailto:gspake@earthlink.net)

Treasurer ..... Tracy Hughes  
901.273.2740 [thughes@psychiatrist.com](mailto:thughes@psychiatrist.com)

Past President..... Mary Sue MacNealy  
901.678.4431 [macnealy@memphis.edu](mailto:macnealy@memphis.edu)

#### Managers

Program..... Alison Joyner Masilak  
901.274.0215 [ajoyner@memphis.edu](mailto:ajoyner@memphis.edu)

Academic Liaison ..... Loel Kim  
901.678.3646 [loelkim@memphis.edu](mailto:loelkim@memphis.edu)

Education ..... Jackie Walters  
901.434.8137 [jlwalters@fedex.com](mailto:jlwalters@fedex.com)

Employment..... Open

Historian..... David Armbruster  
901.448.5051 [darmbruster@utm.edu](mailto:darmbruster@utm.edu)

Hospitality and Membership..... Becky Brown Derych  
901.273.2715 [bbrown@psychiatrist.com](mailto:bbrown@psychiatrist.com)

Newsletter Editor ..... Apryl Cox  
901.273.2737 [newsletter@stc-midsouth.org](mailto:newsletter@stc-midsouth.org)

Publicity ..... Diana Fedinec  
901.678.2551 [dfedinec@memphis.edu](mailto:dfedinec@memphis.edu)

Scholarship..... Susan Popham  
901.678.2651 [spopham@memphis.edu](mailto:spopham@memphis.edu)

Webmaster..... Rachele Sanders  
[rlsanders1@memphis.edu](mailto:rlsanders1@memphis.edu)

## Newsbrief

<http://www.stc-midsouth.org>

*Newsbrief* is the monthly publication of the Mid-South chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, a nonprofit organization.

Twelve issues of *Newsbrief* are published each year. We create the publication to

- Involve members and visitors more fully in professional development and service.
- Foster a sense of community among chapter members and visitors.
- Provide a link between professors and students at local universities.
- Promote the benefits of chapter membership to attract new members.

### Submissions

If you would like to contribute an article to *Newsbrief*, submit

- The text portion of the article as a text (TXT), rich text (RTF), or Microsoft Word (DOC) file or as text incorporated within the body of an email.
- Photos as JPG or TIFF. If you choose to use a TIFF, please set the file resolution to 150 dots per inch (dpi) or higher.

Please send all submissions to the editor of *Newsbrief* by the 10th of the month to be considered for the next month's issue.

### Copyright

*Newsbrief* invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication. Please note, however, that by submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to *Newsbrief* to run your article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. You as the writer nonetheless hold the copyright. When you submit an article, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.

### Reprints

Articles published by *Newsbrief* may be reprinted in other STC publications if credit is given to the author as well as the Mid-South chapter and a copy of the reprint is sent to the *Newsbrief* editor.

### Subscription

To receive *Newsbrief* (for free) every month, give your email address to the editor.

### Advertising

*Newsbrief* accepts advertisements relevant to technical communicators. Base prices are listed below, and discounts will be given for ads that run in at least two consecutive issues. For more information on how you can reach the more than 100 readers of *Newsbrief*, contact the editor.

Full page.....	\$60
Half page.....	\$40
Quarter page.....	\$20
Business card .....	\$10

## May Meeting Notes

by Gail Spake and Loel Kim

On Monday, May 3, 2004 Sharese Willis and Loel Kim shared some of their experience in designing effective visual communication. Twenty attendees, including 15 chapter members, heard the speakers explain how individuals interpret visual material.

### Designing Age-Appropriate Graphics

Willis opened with "Designing Age-Appropriate Graphics for Patient Education Materials." She used an example of patient education material on injury prevention to demonstrate how considering user characteristics when creating graphics can increase the audience's understanding of any technical material.

According to Willis's research, literacy is important to good health because patients with low literacy levels may not be compliant or may miss follow-up appointments because they fail to understand discharge instructions or other patient instruction materials. To overcome literacy problems, graphics are often used because they are remembered longer than words and can aid in overcoming perceptual or language deficiencies. However, graphics must be carefully selected because they can be a distraction if they are too advanced for the audience.

Willis discovered some tips for creating effective graphics. Using diagrams of only a single area of an object (instead of complete pictures), line drawings, and minimal color can increase accurate cognition of graphics. Age is also a factor in perception of graphics: for instance, young children may have difficulty perceiving quantity and overestimate or underestimate proportions in pie charts.

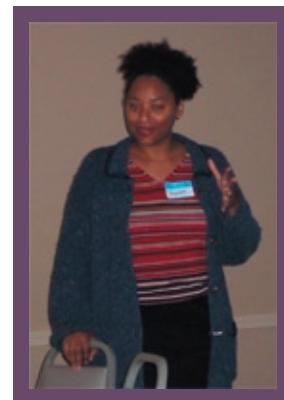
To conclude her presentation, Willis emphasized that graphs communicate in concrete, visual terms and should

be easy to interpret. She suggested that, just as we understand that there is a broad range of individuals' ability to understand written language, there may also be a broad range of ability to perceive and interpret graphics. Therefore, when designing graphics, technical communicators should consider user characteristics and the time it will take them to cognitively process the information.

### Visual Narrative in User Testing

Kim presented "Using Visual Narrative as a Framework for User-Testing." She first gave a brief background on narratives and then explained how visual narrative was used to test audience's understanding of an interactive museum show on brain science.

Kim explained that narratives are culturally pervasive formats for shaping information, perhaps most widely exemplified by the Cinderella fairy tale. Over 500 versions of this story have been identified in Europe alone, and its roots have been traced back to 9th



Sharese Willis explains how individuals' characteristics such as literacy level and age can affect their understanding of patient education material.

Meeting Notes continued on p. 4

century China. Narratives appear not only in literature, but also in dance, painting, tapestries, pottery, and design. In addition, narrative is recognized by psychologists as a cognitive framework that helps people make sense of lived experiences. Narrative framework enables us to articulate and exchange knowledge and emerges from a cultural context, is bounded by beginning and end points, and connected by a sequence of events that propels the story or action along.

Audience understanding of visual narrative was the foundation of Kim's usability testing on several parts of an interactive show on brain science, "Gray Matters: The Brain Movie," designed to be shown in the Buhl Planetarium at the Carnegie Science Museum in Pittsburgh, PA. The 3-year project, targeting middle-school-aged children and adults, was supported by the National Science Foundation and resulted from a collaborative effort including over 50 experts from neuroscience, computer science, education, and design. The goal was to portray accurate brain science in the informal educational setting of a children's museum. Thus, the show had to balance scientific accuracy with the entertainment factor—an absolute necessity for a museum installation.

The planetarium setting served as a metaphor for the human brain by representing the hemisphere of the brain, while audience members represented individual neurons. Geared with 2-button control boxes, participants replicated the collective behaviors of the brain through various entertaining, interactive scenarios. For example, the audience was led to control their individual neurons in concert with the other audience members, caus-

ing a synapse to fire and the impulse to travel through the brain.

A complex show, "Gray Matters" involved extensive usability testing. Ultimately, the cues for participants were animated, but during usability testing, time and expense constraints required the use of storyboards.

During the usability test Kim conducted, developmental storyboards of one portion of the show were shown to 31 test participants in order to "map" the narratives they perceived from the storyboards to that of the designers'. No language was attached to the graphics of the storyboards.

Members of the test audience were able to appreciate and describe movement and processes (such as reflection of light being perceived by the eye) in only non-technical language. When familiar visual reference points were present (the human eye, for example), viewers were more easily able to anchor their narratives to create a meaningful understanding of what was happening. However, the more abstract the scene, the more easily lost viewers became. Viewers tracked color, shapes, and the images' positions on the storyboards in order to follow that action.

Usability testing helped the show's designers improve audience un-



Loel Kim addresses how storyboards can be used to incorporate visual narrative into a usability test.

derstanding of the visual narrative. Originally, the designers intended to convey as much as possible through graphics to minimize cultural/linguistic differences among participants. However, testing showed that audiences would need more to gain the amount and kind of information the designers intended. Designers eventually elected to fill in perceptual gaps by adding language aids and developed a narrator to tie together action and fill in gaps.

Kim concluded that this study not only helped to develop an arresting interactive show on the brain, but also demonstrated a finding applicable to all technical communicators: that people bring an inherent understanding of narrative to bear on their interpretations of visual information. ♦



At the May meeting, the newly elected 2004–2005 chapter officers were introduced: Gail Spake, secretary; Tracy Hughes, treasurer; Alison Masilak, vice president; and Glenn Sanders, president.

---

## Upcoming Meetings

Please plan to attend the following upcoming events of the Mid-South chapter.

Unless otherwise noted, meetings cost \$10 (\$5 for students with a valid ID), and cash is requested.

### Monday, June 7, 6:00–8:00

*Topic:* Highlights from the 51st Annual STC Conference

*Speakers:* Mike Albers, Apryl Cox, Leanne Logan, and Alison Masilak

*Location:* The Cottage at the Four Seasons, located at 4930 Park Ave (see map). The Four Seasons is next door to the Buntyn Cafe and across Park Ave. from Marquette Park. A free parking lot and the entrance are in back.

### Monday, July 12, 6:00–7:30

*Program:* Tour of the University of Memphis FedEx Institute of Technology

*Location:* The lobby of the FedEx Institute of Technology, located at 365 Innovation Drive (formerly Deloach St.), which is off Central Ave. and one street east of Patterson St.

*Cost:* FREE (except for small parking fee)

*More information:* Note that this meeting is the **second** Monday in July.

For directions, a map, and parking information, see the July issue of *Newsbrief*.

Contact Alison Masilak for additional details (ajoyner@memphis.edu or 901.274.0215). ◆



## Newsbrief

Apryl Cox  
954 Chatwood  
Memphis TN 38122-5008