



SOCIETY FOR  
TECHNICAL  
COMMUNICATION

# Newsbrief

Monthly Publication of the Mid-South Chapter

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## **PUSHING THE PDA TO ITS LIMIT**

*Issues and Challenges for the Personal Digital Assistant  
by Nell Johnson*

The Mid-South chapter of the STC is pleased to announce the February program, which will address issues and considerations regarding PDA information delivery. Dr. Mike Albers of the University of Memphis will make the presentation (see biography at the end of this article).

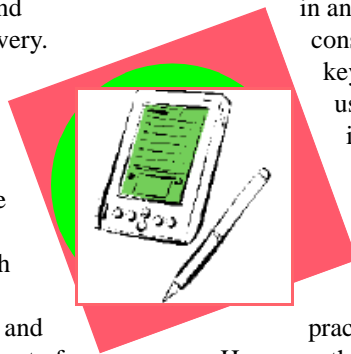
Personal digital assistants (PDAs) have become a normal accessory for many people, and technical communicators have been tasked with adding the PDA as a potential output for their information products. However, both technical and cognitive issues confound the effective movement of this information. Albers will address some of those issues and considers how to communicate information via a PDA. This presentation views PDAs as Palm and WinCE devices, but does not explicitly consider cell phones; however, many of the same principles apply to both device categories.

The presentation will focus on moving information from a PDA to the user, not on PDA technology. Through the use of scenarios, Albers will discuss PDA use for obtaining information in an on-demand information anywhere environment. Beginning with desktop design and an overview of design guidelines for the current procedure-based or forms-based PDA information, Albers will then explore how we can go beyond linear procedures and forms to effectively provide access to larger informational topics. Achieving that goal requires a reevaluation of how we write and chunk information and development of new writing guidelines.

Throughout the presentation, Albers will discuss research into searching for text on the PDA and how writing research and cognitive theory helps explain some the limitations and difficulties seem in different designs. Some of the specific design and writing aspects that will be covered are described below.

## **Interface Differences in PDA and Desktop Web**

While both use a basic hypertext interface, the much smaller size and lower resolution of the PDA imposes a different user interaction which must be accounted for. There is also the loss of environmental control. A desktop top monitor, whether in an office or at home, exists within a relatively consistent environment with respect to lighting, keyboard position, sound, etc. But the PDA can be used in a wide range of environments and lacks the input/output options of a desktop computer.



## **Difficulties of Communication via PDA**

Writing by chunking information into short self-contained topics has become standard writing practice, especially in the single sourcing community. However, the need to limit scrolling forces the chunks to be smaller than for desktops. Also, display issues of low resolution, lack of installed fonts and rendering of bold and italics typefaces limits how the writer can format text. All of these require careful attention since the small screen size severely limits the amount of information displayed, thus increasing the amount of information a user must keep in memory.

## **Writing and Design Implications**

Effective design for a PDA requires a thorough analysis of users, tasks, and environments, an analysis which is too often partially neglected in current practice. With the results of the analysis, the writer can make good design and context

*Continued on page 2*

## **CONTENTS**

<b>Pushing the PDA to Its Limit</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Meeting Notes</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Joe's a Wizard!</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>February Meeting Announcement</b> .....	<b>4</b>

judgments about the size and content of information chunks, what types and sizes of graphics to include, and how the user expects to navigate the information. The consistent navigation areas we take for granted in web design cannot be displayed because of lack of space. Thus, the navigation structure must be more clearly explicit in the text itself. Also, the writing must be more concise while still providing access to sufficient information to understand the topic.

While no previous experience with writing for a PDA is assumed, the presentation does assume the audience has web design experience and is familiar with PDA operation.

Michael J. Albers is an assistant professor at the University of Memphis, where he teaches in the professional writing program. In 1999, he completed his Ph.D. in Technical Communication and Rhetoric from Texas Tech University. He has worked for 10 years as a technical communicator writing software documentation and performing interface design. His research interests include designing documentation focused on answering real-world questions and on-line presentation of complex information.

## MEETING NOTES

### December Meeting

by Alison Joyner Masilak

As demonstrated again at the December meeting, technical communication can be a vital player in a remote field, this time, construction. Dr. Brad McAdon of the University of Memphis shared with the 21 in attendance the nuts and bolts of technical communication in the construction industry.



McAdon's experience with technical communication came up in a roundabout manner. Coming from a family of contractors, he spent some time in graduate school before running his own custom building business. Finally, he returned to graduate school and earned a doctorate in classics.

While his primary research interests include classical rhetoric and Aristotle, McAdon's background in construction was called upon during his time in the English department at Texas A&M University.

The School of Construction Science needed a class geared towards its students to fulfill an English requirement. Finally, he and colleagues developed a technical writing program

*Continued on page 3*



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**The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is an individual membership organization dedicated to advancing the arts and sciences of technical communication. It is the largest organization of its type in the world. The Society's 25,000 members include technical writers, editors, graphic designers, videographers, multimedia artists, Web and Intranet page information designers, translators, and others whose work involves making technical information available to those who need it.**

**Membership in STC offers opportunities to learn new job skills, network with other technical communicators, and broaden your professional horizons.**

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for the School, balancing the School's needs with the English department's requirements.

In addition to essays and reports on construction science topics, class projects included practical applications such as resumes and letters. A central focus of the class was to convince the construction science students how important it is to have good technical communication skills.

To give us an idea of the overwhelming amount of paperwork required in the construction industry, McAdon provided a two-page list of various documents needed to take a project from start to finish. Using battle stories from his days in the construction industry, he illustrated the importance of keeping and maintaining these documents for legal purposes.

Among the communications a contractor would need to put together: advertisements, bids (including highly detailed job specifications), contracts, lending documents, paperwork for permits, preliminary liens, change orders, correspondence, daily logs, and more.

## January Meeting

by Elizabeth Boone

Tammy teWinkle, Vice President of Interaction Design at Quarry Integrated Communications, presented the program "Minding the Mantra: Know Your Audience" to the 19 attendees of January's meeting. The focus of her talk was persona development. teWinkle, who heads a group with expertise in design and product development, explained that personas enable writers, designers, and anyone else creating a product to put a framework around their audience. A quick survey of those at the meeting revealed that few had the opportunity to talk to, much less get ideas from, their audience before beginning a project. That's where personas come in.

Personas give specific and precise descriptions about an audience's goals, characteristics, and behaviors. They are useful when the audience is vague because they help identify the audience and its needs and preferences. Further, they help those creating the product to avoid falling into the trap of designing for themselves in the absence of good information about their audience. teWinkle illustrated her presentation with a set of personas that her company

*Continued on page 4*

## 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.

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- The text portion of the article as a text (TXT) or Microsoft Word (DOC) file, or as text incorporated within the body of an e-mail.
- 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.

To ensure that we publish articles within a timely fashion, we ask that you submit your articles by the tenth of each month for the coming month's issue. Send all submissions to the editor of Newsbrief.

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*Tammy teWinkle and Leanne Logan unveiled the concept of personas for the purposes audience identification and on-target product development at the January meeting.*

had developed for one of its clients. These personas not only had names and faces but also had detailed descriptions about their education and personality



***“Take them [personas] to meetings and refer to them by name.”***

characteristics, which in theory would influence how they would respond as an audience. Therefore, key principles in the development of personas include specificity (provide relevant details) and precision (avoid averages and approximations).

The three types of personas are primary--the person who will not be satisfied with a product designed for someone else, secondary--the person who will be satisfied with a product designed for someone else, and the anti--the person who is not being explicitly designed for. Unsurprisingly, the design should meet the needs and wants of the primary persona, accommodate the secondary persona, and forget about the anti-persona.

Persona development is a research process that begins with talking to subject matter experts in order to develop a hypothesis about the audience. Next the audience is interviewed, with them serving as the master and the interviewer, apprentice. Queries should be made about goals and distractions, and emphasis should be placed on talking to people about people, not tools. In this process, the interviewer has to be open to hearing and learning from the audience.

Once collected, information about the audience is reviewed, with an eye out for patterns and themes. From the data, a master list of facts can be made, and items can be clustered in categories based on theme. The organized research is then drafted as a narrative for the primary, secondary, anti personas. The persona narratives must be compelling and detailed. (teWinkle pointed out that the use of detail cannot be underestimated in the development of personas.)

When fully developed, the personas can be put to work. To be effective, they should be visible, i.e. take them to meetings and refer to them by name. In

planning a help strategy, for example, the personas can answer questions about how help users learn and how they feel about needing help. Personas aid those creating the product by ending opinion wars and establishing priorities about the product.

### **JOE’S A WIZARD!**

*by Nell Johnson*

Our Mid-South STC webmaster, Joe Lakey, recently had a comprehensive technical article published online on the Quadralay website:

[http://www.quadralay.com/products/wwp\\_pro/wizards/lakey/default.asp](http://www.quadralay.com/products/wwp_pro/wizards/lakey/default.asp)

Joe Lakey’s article, “Macro Wizardry — Generating a Two-Column Contents Page,” explains how to use WebWorks to generate a two-column table of contents from a FrameMaker document.

As Lakey explains, “I work in a documentation department that produces policy & procedures, best practices, ISO compliance manuals, training manuals, etc. for our largest division, U.S. Operations. We are a group of five writers, and we maintain over 2,000 pages of material, some of which changes almost monthly. All of our documentation is distributed both in print and online.”

“We have been a FrameMaker shop for many years, and discovered WebWorks Publisher almost five years ago (version 3.0, I think). I have had primary responsibility for developing our WWP conversion projects, so I’ve come across

quite a few “challenges,” including conversion of dynamic information to create javascript and ColdFusion code. However, one bit of wizardry that I’m particularly proud of does the seemingly mundane task of producing a two column Contents page from a run-of-the-mill FrameMaker TOC file.”

Lakey goes into great detail about how to create the Contents page, even showing the code and demonstrating what the pitfalls can be. If you are using WebWorks to create a Contents page, you will want to visit this valuable resource.

To introduce you to Joe Lakey, our Mid-South STC webmaster, and my esteemed colleague at FedEx, I’ll use his own eloquent words:



*Joe Lakey*

“Joe Lakey is a full-time technical writer and intranet developer at FedEx Express, as well as a part-time, freelance document design contractor. He lives in Memphis, TN with his lovely wife (public compliment =

major points; watch and learn, youngsters), two rowdy boys, and two big, rowdy dogs. After waving his B.A. in International Relations at employers proved futile, he tested the waters of a legal career as a paralegal and nearly fell into the murky depths of law school. He was pulled from the brink of ignoble wealth by the noble profession of technical writing, where he found his niche and secured his position in the ranks of corporate cube dwellers.”

**FEBRUARY MEETING  
REMINDER**

What: February program meeting

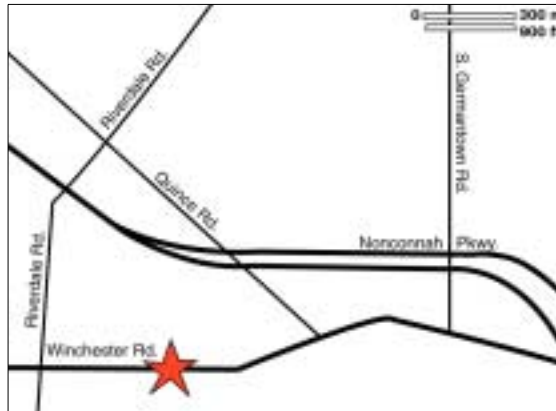
When: Monday, February 3, 6:00 p.m.  
Networking dinner starts at 6:00,  
program starts at 6:30.

Program: Pushing the PDA to Its Limit  
(see article on page 1)

Where: Pig'n'Whistle Restaurant  
7144 Winchester Road  
901.754.4400

Menu: Barbeque buffet with all the  
trimmings

Cost: \$10, includes tax and gratuity



*Newsbrief*

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