

# Byline



Bi-Monthly Newsletter for STC Chicago Members

## President's Message Year in Review

By Adam Evans



Last week my boss asked me to compile a number of reports, essentially a roll-up of the year's accomplishments and statistics. I used to not find value in this exercise, assuming these reports

were another stack of papers to be buried on an already cluttered desk. But as the years go on, I've grown to appreciate the reflective exercise of looking at what's occurred.

So with that, let's see a few stats from STC Chicago. In 2014, we

- ◆ hosted just over 200 attendees to our monthly programs
- ◆ received over 12,000 page views on our website
- ◆ sent 12 At-a-Glance newsletters
- ◆ added 213 subscribers to our email list
- ◆ recruited 16 new members to our chapter
- ◆ and so much more!

As you can see, our volunteers have had a very busy year! And they're busy planning next year, too. While you're making holiday plans and New Year's resolutions, the administrative council is cooking up some striking events for 2015. Here's what we have going on so far:

- ◆ **January: STC Chicago's 60th Anniversary Gala.** Our chapter is turning 60, and we want to celebrate this milestone! Read more on our webpage about how the president of STC will be speaking, and more.
- ◆ **Monthly programming.** Our Program Committee is hard at work planning out our 2015 program schedule. Keep an eye on our Programs and Events page for the latest information.
- ◆ **March: STC Chicago Awards Banquet.** The awards banquet recognizes the winners of our annual technical communication competition as well as volunteers

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### Renewal Reminder

Most of our events feature reduced pricing for STC Chicago members. Don't forget to renew!

Read about the many benefits of membership and join or renew online [here](#). Ω

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Find us online!



## December Program: Holiday Celebration and Lightning Talks

Join us on Thursday, December 11 for the always entertaining Lightning Talks and Holiday Celebration meeting.

There's never a dull moment when presenters challenge themselves to give a talk at lightning speed. A lightning talk is a 5-minute presentation with 20 slides, but the speaker doesn't control the timing of the slides—they change automatically every 15 seconds, and the speaker has to keep up. Don't miss out on the fun!

**Thursday, December 11**

**6:30 - 8:30 PM**

**California Pizza Kitchen  
Woodfield Village Green  
1550 E. Golf Rd., Schaumburg**

**\$5 Members | \$10 Non-members | \$5 Students**

[Register now.](#) 



## November Recap: DePaul Tech Comm Panel a Success

*By Adam Evans*

Last month, 25 technical communicators gathered at DePaul's Lincoln Park campus for a panel discussion on how to break into tech comm. Our panelists, Cheri Noble, Karl Gabbey, and Brad Moldofsky, shared their experiences of breaking into the industry, how they find success as technical communicators, and what keeps them going all these years later.

As the moderator, my goal was to facilitate a knowledge share between experienced technical communicators and those

looking to become technical communicators. The panel was purposely made up of writers who broke into technical communication in varying decades to give attendees an insight into how the industry has changed over time.


While the panelists kept the audience's attention during the event, at one point Brad Moldofsky turned the tables and pitched a few questions to the attendees. That began an interesting back-and-forth between audience and panelist that made my job as moderator very easy.

At the end of the evening, our panelists had shared some tips and tricks for breaking into the industry and then how to stay relevant. Audience members had asked questions. And almost everyone got the chance to meet someone new.

Here's what some attendees had to say:

*I'm surprised at how interesting I found the panel to be although I am already a practitioner. I've always been fascinated in the myriad ways people get into the field.*

*The panelists were great. Funny, engaging, entertaining, and smart. For contrast, it would've been nice to have someone on the panel who found tech comm through another avenue, but all the panelists clearly take their careers seriously and had something to share with everyone, regardless of experience level.*

*DePaul was an excellent location for a panel like this—very relevant topic that anyone could benefit from!* 



*Panelists discuss how their tech comm careers began.*

## Celebrate STC Chicago's 60th Anniversary in Style!

We've planned a very special celebration in honor of STC Chicago's diamond anniversary. Join us at the Metropolitan Club on the 66th floor of the iconic Willis Tower on Thursday, January 15 for our biggest bash of the decade!



Enjoy a fabulous view of our city as you dine on mixed green salad with garlic crostini and your choice of entrée:

- ◆ Pan-Seared Chicken Breast with Saffron Tomato Concasse
- ◆ Grilled Pork Tenderloin with Merlot Mushroom Pan Sauce
- ◆ Grilled Vegetable Napoleon with Couscous and Red Pepper Coulis
- ◆ Smoked Paprika Crusted Salmon with Dill Beurre Blanc

And of course there will be cake. A cash bar will also be available.

After dinner, we'll hear from our distinguished guests:

- ◆ Kit Brown-Hoekstra, President of STC
- ◆ Ken Cook, President, CEO, and Chairman of Ken Cook Co.
- ◆ Bill Leavitt, STC Chicago's longest tenured member

We'll also recognize any long-time members in attendance. You'll even get a souvenir of the evening to take home.

This event is a party, so we encourage you to invite your spouse, significant other, family member, or friend to join us!

**Thursday, January 15**

**6:30 - 10:00 PM**

**The Metropolitan Club on the 66th Floor of Willis Tower  
233 S. Wacker Dr., Chicago**

**Registration: \$40**

(Note that the actual per-person cost of this meeting is \$70; however, due to the special nature of this event, STC Chicago is subsidizing the cost of each ticket.)

**Register now for the 60th Anniversary Gala!** [Ω](#)

## October Recap: Sharing on SharePoint

*By Cheri Noble*

My employer is just starting to use SharePoint so it was a perfect time to attend an STC meeting focused on what SharePoint is. Speaker Jack Fruh wasn't sure about the technical or non-technical knowledge of the people attending the meeting, but he quickly found that we were much more technical than he expected.

SharePoint is a document sharing tool that can do much more. Jack took us through the history of SharePoint and why it was created. Sometimes it helps to understand how something was created to try and understand where it might be going.

He explained that one of the biggest competitors of SharePoint is GoogleDocs. Much of the technology of the future is cloud-based so people can access any document or file from anywhere and on almost any device. He briefly mentioned that Microsoft is no longer offering MS Office as a software package to load to your laptop but is selling subscriptions to Office 365, which is cloud-based, can be accessed from most devices, and stores your files in the "cloud." Microsoft is even working on a version of Office 365 for business use.

Jack said it was important to have a team of experienced SharePoint administrators to assist in implementing this into a company. SharePoint can be very powerful and does much more than make documents available and provide the ability to version control each one. Before data is loaded, it should be current and not out-of-date when you migrate from an existing server or system to SharePoint. When files are added to SharePoint, they are "tagged" with metadata to aid in the display of the information and make it easier to search for them. Anyone can tag a document, once it is added to SharePoint, to make it easier for them to find the document in the future. There are different ways to view information in SharePoint (lists, views, columns, metadata, etc.). SharePoint offers workflows for documents. If your document must go through an approval or review process, it can be set up in SharePoint.

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# Lessons Learned as a Novice API Writer

*By Mary Linderman*

*Reprinted with permission from the September 2014 issue of Intercom.*

In this article, I will share some of the lessons that I have learned working as an API writer for the past two years. I stumbled into this role by accident when my employer decided to encourage the customization of its software by offering a comprehensive API to third-party developers. While our documentation team had several good writers, I was the only one at the time who had taken any basic programming classes and I had a strong interest in the backend technology used in our software product.

Holding on to my limited knowledge of Java as a lifesaver, I plunged into the depths of API writing. My mission was to support our API team by writing comments for the class libraries, general descriptions of the API's underlying concepts, and tutorials illustrating how to use the API. I also worked on adding code samples provided by the development team to our website. With the help of another writer, we pulled off the impossible and posted our first version of the site in time for the release.

Since the first version of the site, we have revisited its content and presentation several times. Each version has involved long, hard hours of work during which I have reassessed my skills and abilities as a novice API writer. Here are some of the lessons that I learned as I have ventured out into the field of API writing.

## Talk the Talk

When I started working on this project, the only documentation that existed was a few awkwardly constructed PDFs and some sparsely commented class libraries. My programming courses may not have made me a developer, but they had exposed me to the appropriate technical terminology that I would need to use when describing the programming constructs developed by my team. My familiarity with object-oriented terminology helped me gather information from my development teams since I could formulate focused and

clear questions about classes, methods, properties, and other programming elements. I could talk the same talk as my developers, so I required less of their time for background information.

I also believed that the resulting documents had an authoritative and knowledgeable voice that communicated in language familiar to my developer community. Since the text served as the voice of the API, it needed to include the appropriate terms for the target audience. Familiarity with programming terminology also helped me to eliminate slang terms from the documentation, which might not be clear to third-party developers even though this secret language was second nature to my internal development team.

## Embed Yourself in the Development Team

While developing our API documentation, my support system was a team of hardworking and technically savvy developers. Although I already had worked to develop rapport with my software engineers, the importance of having a strong and, sometimes, humorous relationship with the team was pivotal to documenting the API features that they built.

I made sure to attend team meetings, participate in team activities, ask questions, and actively listen to their implementation plans. Finding ways to complement or facilitate the development efforts of the team was a constant preoccupation for me during our release cycles. I reviewed specifications and researched technologies used by the team so that I could ask better questions and save the team time by focusing on their current development efforts. Since our organization uses an Agile programming methodology, I made sure to add documentation tasks for the team during sprint planning. I was like gum on the bottom of their shoes.

Whenever possible, I tried to underscore the importance of clear and accurate documentation as a way of showcasing their development work and increasing the accessibility of the API to third-party developers. I knew these efforts were really paying off when the team started coming to me with items that needed documenting and pointing out that we needed to add tasks for documentation during sprint planning.

## Play with the Technology

One of the most difficult challenges that I have confronted was obtaining the resources and knowledge to play with the API. I have come to view documenting the API in the same light as writing about UI features. I needed to work with the API by running simple code samples to gain better insights about the user experience. As an actual consumer of the API, I felt that I could ask better questions about the code samples that were provided, and then write better descriptions of them.

Not everyone initially understood that providing the writer with the ability to consume the API would lead to better documentation. After all, the consumers of the API are developers, so the writer only needed to add the code samples to the documentation and provide descriptions. I sometimes found these assumptions slowly eroding the confidence that I had in my role, because I really didn't have the same level of technical expertise as our developer community.

However, I continued to develop my knowledge of the programming language used for our API, and the integrated development environment (IDE) used by our developers. I eventually obtained a development environment where I could use the API as well as help set it up so that I could run code samples. While I still spend more time reading the code samples sent to me than playing with them, I do have the tools that I need and I'm looking forward to writing some of my own code samples. Perseverance really does pay off.

## Learn About Class Libraries

My experience with the API class libraries posed similar challenges to those that I faced when trying to consume the API. Developers use class libraries as a primary source of reference information about the classes, methods, and other features of an API. To create these libraries, developers and API writers add tagged comments to source code describing how to use the API, and then they pull these comments from the source by running automated tools over it.

I had used class libraries as a student in my Java classes, but I had never given much thought to the logistics of writing them, so I was only marginally familiar with the tools used for this purpose. Consequently, I was unable to provide

much insight about how API writers collaborated with developers to add comments to the source, or about differences in tools available for this process. Since we were just beginning to create the class libraries, this knowledge would have been invaluable.

I recommend learning as much as you can about the content and organization of class libraries, as well as the tools used to generate them. I would suggest browsing through class libraries to observe the conventions that other writers use in their comments. Since some organizations only reluctantly allow API writers to comment on the source code, I have found that becoming familiar with the processes and tools used to create class libraries has fostered confidence in my abilities to contribute to this development effort.

## Understand Your Stakeholder and Users

My role as an API writer had its genesis in the corporate goals set for the adoption of the API. I found that understanding these goals and their stakeholders has helped me adapt the documentation to meet the needs of my readers. Initially, the documentation was designed to educate external third-party developers about the API, but it also evolved into training material used for on-boarding new developers.

I have collaborated with product managers, instructional designers, and other stakeholders to learn about the community of users for this content. In addition, our documentation team has gained insights about the usability of our API documentation by gathering comments from on-boarding developers. We have asked them for feedback and invited them to participate in simple usability testing, so that we could gather insights about missing content, navigational issues, and others enhancements to improve the user experience.

## Survey the API Scene

Everyone has an opinion about what makes a good API website. I have checked out websites for other APIs to compare different approaches to documenting this content. I have talked to our developers about API documentation that they found useful, including what they liked about it, and how they would improve it. I have gleaned useful information

about different ways that developers consume our content from these discussions.

I have also found that not all developers learn the same way. Some like to start by reviewing the code samples, while others might look over conceptual information or diagrams. In the end, while I found some great ideas by reviewing different API sites, I concluded that the best approach to documenting the API is what made sense for my organization and readers. I also found that we have continually needed to evolve our site as the size and adoption of our API has grown, since we now have readers with even more varied skill sets and expectations about the information that we provide.

## Trust Your Gut

One of the most important lessons that I have learned is to trust my own instincts as a technical writer. I currently rely on my development teams to provide code samples included in our developer's website. Occasionally, I come across a code sample or sample application that doesn't seem exactly right. It may not exemplify our best practices or it may be confusing to read. Clear code samples offer a great opportunity to demonstrate how third-party developers can effectively use the API.

I have reviewed code samples that would be helpful for an advanced user but may overwhelm a new developer just learning the API. Not all code samples are good teaching tools, so I have worked on providing my development teams with suggestions or standards for the code samples added to the documentation. My recommendation for these situations is to trust your gut by following up with the development team when you think a code sample doesn't work. While my technical persona has sometimes been intimidated by questioning the code samples, my writer persona has spurred me on in the search for clarity.

## Cultivate Your Writing and Technical Skills

Since transitioning as an API writer, I have had the opportunity to interview other candidates for this position. Some candidates tend to emphasize their technical knowledge over their writing skills. The best candidates have paired strong writing skills with their technical knowledge, and they have demonstrated these abilities with samples in their writing portfolios.

In my role as an API writer, I have been required to write a wide range of content in addition to short comments found in class libraries. I have continued to cultivate my writing skills even as I work to expand my technical knowledge. This versatility has come in handy when I needed to create a high-level presentation about the API, standards for code comments, or use cases for specific features.

In addition, I have tried to stay current with new technologies that my organization may want to use in the future. I regret that I don't always have enough time to research and learn about new technologies, and I continually struggle with finding time for improving my skill sets.

When I first started working on the API, I would sometimes worry about how my technical background might hinder my ability to produce good documentation. I have learned that while I continually need to sharpen my technical skills, I shouldn't minimize the importance of the communication skills that I bring to this role. API writing offers a unique opportunity to balance technical knowledge with strong communication skills. Ω

*Mary Linderman is a technical writer at kCura Corporation in Chicago. With over 10 years of technical writing experience, she explores new ways to communicate complex information to readers with a range of technical expertise. Mary's current interests focus on how corporations can leverage the strategic role that documentation plays in the adoption of APIs by third-party developers.*

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## October Recap

*Continued from page 3*

There are many ways to learn SharePoint if your company does not provide training. The Lynda.com and Microsoft websites offer many how-to videos. Jack was an excellent presenter, using humor and audience participation during his presentation. Because there is so much Jack could have presented to us, we'd like to bring him back next year to go into more detail about the software.

Thank you to those who completed the survey we sent out after the meeting. This was one of the highest rated speakers and topics we've had in a long time! Ω

## Member Spotlight: Steve Napora

*Steve Napora is STC Chicago's Nominating Committee Manager.*



### **What are you working on now?**

I'm making the final edits to a set of documents as part of an upcoming software release. Most of companies I've worked with have been small, so it's been interesting to work onsite at a major corporation.

### **How long have you been working in tech comm?**

I landed my first project in 2007. I've been an independent contractor ever since.

### **When and how did you first get involved with STC?**

When I went back to school to learn the fundamentals of technical communication, my professor, Judy Rosenberg, suggested I join. Judy is also a past president of the chapter.

### **What is your most common role as a technical communicator? Do you play any additional roles?**

Lately, it's been editing and updating existing documents. But I also write blogs and manage website content for another company.

### **What advice would you give someone who is thinking about joining STC?**

Join. It's the best way to learn what other tech writers in the area are doing.

### **How long have you lived in Chicago?**

I've lived in the Chicago area my entire life. Let's just say the years are adding up.

### **What do you like most (and least!) about the city?**

My least favorite things are tornado warnings and snowstorms. The thing I like most is the diversity. And, the fact that we don't have severe earthquakes or typhoons

### **What are you currently reading?**

I have over a dozen audio books in various stages of completion on my phone. The one I've been listening to lately is *Living with a Wild God*, by Barbara Ehrenreich.

### **What's your favorite place to visit?**

I'd really like to go back to London. I liked it a lot more than I expected. But, I'm happy visiting anywhere with either natural beauty or interesting architecture.

### **What would be your ideal vacation?**

Flying direct on a private plane to someplace that otherwise takes a long time to get to. Like the Great Barrier Reef or Palawan.

### **What do you like to do on weekends?**

Something I don't have time for during the week: dilly-dally.

### **Where would you like to be 10 years from now?**

Like they say, life is a journey, not a destination. I hope I'll be doing something I enjoy. Ω

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## President's Message

*Continued from page 1*

from STC Chicago who've made an impact this year. Next year's banquet takes place Thursday, March 19.

- ♦ April: A joint event with Alliance organizations. Stay tuned for more news!
- ♦ June: STC International Summit. This year's summit takes place June 21-24 in Columbus, OH, and registration is open now.

I hope you'll be able to join us for one of these events next year!

I wish you and your family the happiest of holidays. I trust you'll have the opportunity to spend time with those you love the most. And on a personal note, I'm grateful for each of you who volunteer for STC Chicago. I know it often comes with personal sacrifice and time away from family. Use this time during the holidays to appreciate your loved ones and recharge for the year to come. Ω

## STC Chicago Chapter Leaders | 2014-2015

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**News guidelines:** Send articles to [byline@stc-chicago.com](mailto:byline@stc-chicago.com). Preferred format is a Microsoft® Word document file via email. We reserve the right to edit for style and space.

**Advertising:** We encourage advertising that follows STC guidelines and promotes services to STC Chicago members.

Half page (7.5"x4.5"): \$300 (1 issue)

Whole page (7.5"x9"): \$500 (1 issue)

Discounts for multiple issues

The advertisement and payment must be received by the 20th of the month before the next published issue of the newsletter.

(Byline is published in February, April, June, August, October, and December.) We will not run your ad until payment is received.

Submit ad files in electronic copy only in .tif, .gif, or .jpg format to [byline@stc-chicago.com](mailto:byline@stc-chicago.com).

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