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Workshop Review - Five Stars!

Attending a workshop that writers really need and will use

by Shelly Duncan, Chapter Treasurer

Shelly attended the October workshop sponsored by the Phoenix Chapter, held at the Phoenix Hilton, and conducted by STC Fellow [Geoff Hart](#). Following is her review of the day.

Getting started

Her name is Thelma, and she is a 65-year-old woman eager to use her new cell phone to communicate with friends and family, but slightly uncomfortable with new technology. She uses her phone to get directions from her daughter, to call the AAA (American Automobile Association) when she has a flat tire, and to let everyone know about the great sale on asparagus. Thelma is a persona created for a cell phone user guide as part of a group exercise in Geoff Hart's "Designing documents that people really read and use" workshop.

This excellent workshop was described as a "whirlwind tour of information design." In keeping with that description, Hart whisked from task and audience analysis to the writing and organization of content and on to the effective use of layout and graphics. With each topic worthy of its own workshop, Hart highlighted the key concepts, punctuating the discussion with specific examples from his own experience. Then, to reinforce the lessons and translate theory into practice, each workshop topic was followed by a brainstorming session and a group breakout exercise.

Creating personas

In Part 1 of the workshop, Hart stressed the importance of avoiding stereotypes when creating personas. He also recommended persistent reevaluation of your target audience because a document's users and their goals change over time. For example, the class discussed older people as a viable target audience for more ergonomic cell phones and how those users might differ from other users and the impact to a user guide.

Reader behavior

After learning about users and their goals, we moved on to Part 2 of the workshop, which covered how readers read. Hart discussed research findings about typical reader behavior, including information from Karen Schriver's *Dynamics in Document Design*. Generalizing knowledge is a common reader behavior in which a reader, after learning to perform a specific task, generalizes that knowledge and uses it to perform other tasks. In our breakout session, we discussed how learning to add contacts to a cell phone would help a user with the task of sending a text message and how that could impact the document design. Hart also described some easy and efficient ways to perform document usability testing, which could be as informal as showing co-workers different versions of a document and getting their reactions.

Visual design

Part 3, "Understanding how viewers view," provided an overview of the effective use of graphics and white space in documents. Hart showed us an image of a user interface and asked us to define functional groups (white space, color, pattern, lines, etc.) to illustrate how users interpret visual cues to gain information. Hart went on to explain the idea of "degrees of abstraction" in which different levels of detail or abstraction can be used to convey the appropriate information. In the breakout session each group created a graphic image of a cell phone to emphasize specific cell phone features.

Conclusion - An A+ event

Hart concluded the workshop by tying all the parts together and leaving us with the final message that understanding how readers read, why readers read and even where readers read should drive the document design.

Like many of you, I'm an experienced technical communicator, so none of the topics were entirely new to me. I still, however, gained knowledge, insight and a lot of inspiration from the workshop. For example, I was familiar with general reader behavior, but not specifically with the idea of "generalizing knowledge." I also learned practical and specific tips for creating graphics, which I've since used to simplify a complex network diagram.

Also like many of you, I have to pay for my own training. In the past, STC has presented several workshops on topics I was very interested in, but chose not to attend because of cost. I instead bought books on the subject — most of which I still haven't read. Actually, I own *Shriver's Dynamics in Document Design* — I've read it more in the past five days than in the past five years. So for less than a $100, I received a full day of hands-on training from a well-respected professional, continental breakfast, an amazing buffet lunch, camaraderie and interaction with other colleagues AND a giant dose of professional motivation. That's not a value — that's a steal.

About Geoff Hart

Geoff Hart is an STC Fellow with more than 20 years of experience as a writer, editor, information designer, and French translator. He has published more than 300 articles, most available via his Web site (www.geoff-hart.com), as well as the book *Effective Onscreen Editing*.

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