

Consider Visually Impaired when Designing Web Sites

By Guy Ball

You might wonder about the logic of designing a Web site for the blind and visually impaired. After all, Web designers seem to be moving toward visually rich sites that often embrace some sort of flash and dazzle to keep viewers interested—or at least to point them in the direction that they need on the site.

Yet, those of us who are fully sighted forget that as we make the Web our main information vehicle, we may be cutting out millions of customers or potential customers. And these millions (5 million to 10 million in the U.S. alone by some estimates) have every moral and legal right to have access to that information.

For instance, Unisys has support sites

in which we post our latest documentation. We have scores of sales and marketing sites with information on our latest products.

Are these sites accessible to an audience (blind or visually impaired) that cannot actually see the site but can only read it through the use of special software?

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New Column Defines Documents, Deliverables for Tech Writers

By Linda O'Maley

Connection is introducing a new monthly column called 2D (Document Definitions), which will define document products that we technical writers produce.



The process of defining document products can help new and experienced writers:

- produce standardized, consistent documents
- save time by building on experiences of producing documents that address specific audience needs

The 2D column will define technical

document products in terms of the document's audience, source contributors/materials, scope, purpose, use, general outline, and (when relevant) distribution aspects. In addition, the document is defined in terms of how a technical writer adds value to a company by writing the document.

Examples of general technical document products to be defined include guides, manuals, and notes. Examples of specific technical document products to be defined include application alerts and notes, board guides, data sheets, programming reference manuals, and release notes. When possible, we will provide on-line examples.

The next *Connection* will define a hardware application note. If you want
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Connection Online

The STC SV Administrative Council is considering publishing *Connection* online, which we feel is overdue. The move would save more than \$20,000 annually in printing costs, and bring the Silicon Valley chapter into the electronic publishing era, albeit belatedly. Email your opinion on the issue to Managing Editor Joe Lowell at jdlowell@yahoo.com

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About the STC

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is a nonprofit international organization of more than 20,000 members and 144 chapters worldwide. As the largest professional society devoted to technical communication, STC works toward educating and advancing the skills and knowledge of its members.

Membership

Membership includes writers, editors, artists, illustrators, printers, publishers, educators, students, engineers, and scientists in all areas of technology. Society membership is \$110 per year, plus a one-time \$15 enrollment fee. Student memberships are \$45 per year.

To join, contact the International Society office at *membership@stc-va.org*, or phone (703) 522-4114.

Chapter Meetings

Silicon Valley Chapter (SVC) meetings are held on the fourth Thursday of the month (unless otherwise determined) at the Four Points Hotel by Sheraton in Sunnyvale. For a schedule of events, directions, and a description of the meetings, refer to the chapter meeting pages within each issue of *Connection*, call (650) 961-3127, or see <http://www.stc.org/region8/svc/www>

Administrative Council Meetings

Council meetings take place on the second Thursday of the month at 6:15 p.m. Contact the president for the meeting location. All members are invited to attend.

About Connection

Connection, the newsletter of the Silicon Valley chapter of STC, is published six times a year as a benefit to all chapter members. One-year subscriptions are from June to May for \$25. Contact Joe Lowell at *jdlowell@yahoo.com* to subscribe.

Connection Reprints

Material appearing in *Connection* may be reprinted if credit is given and a copy is sent to the newsletter managing editor.

Article Submission Guidelines

We solicit your contributions on topics regarding technical communication—tools of the trade, challenges in the workplace, contracting, deadline management, and so on. We also welcome letters to the editor, reviews of meetings and workshops, and calendar entries. E-mail your contributions by the second Friday of the month to newsletter managing editor Joe Lowell at *jdlowell@yahoo.com*.

Limit articles to 400 words, and submit them in the body of an e-mail, or as an ASCII text file or Word document attached to e-mail. Include a title for your article, your name, phone number, and a brief biography.

Articles undergo editing for space and content. We welcome graphics, illustrations, and tables to illustrate stories. We also publish photos of chapter-related events as space allows in each issue.

Advertising		Advertising Rates	
You can reach more than 1,600 technical communicators by advertising in <i>Connection</i> . Contact Ivan Linderman at (408) 378-5634, or via e-mail at <i>ivan@bkbytes.com</i> for information or a contract. Send ads as line art or half-tone EPS files at 600 dpi, including all fonts, via e-mail attachment.		<i>Size (inches)</i>	<i>Member Non-member</i>
		2-1/8 x 3	\$ 80.00 \$100.00
		2-1/8 x 4 1/2	\$125.00 \$150.00
		4-1/2 x 3	\$165.00 \$200.00
		4-1/2 x 4	\$225.00 \$270.00
		2-1/8 x 9	\$225.00 \$270.00

Embedded Assistance Workshop

(Whose UI is It Anyway?) Designing Information as Software

Intermediate to advanced technical communicators experienced with designing and writing online documentation can take their skills and knowledge to the next level.

You may have noticed a trend toward interfaces with more information in them. Intuit, Microsoft, e-commerce companies ... they're all doing it. These information-rich interfaces, sometimes known as Weblications, are becoming more prevalent, spurred by application development in Web-based technologies (vs. traditional desktop and client-server languages, like C++).

Did you know that, as a technical communicator and a professional user advocate, you are in a prime position to advance your career in this direction? Join Andrea Ames as she leads you through several exercises and shows you many examples designed to provide you with lots of ideas, a few new skills, some new knowledge, and several user-interface design techniques to get you started. She'll get you thinking about ways to design information into user interfaces with *embedded assistance*—which can enhance the user experience—as well as ways to design user-interface and user-interaction into your information—which can make your traditional help systems more usable.

The workshop will help aspiring user-interface designers and those moving beyond traditional online help to embedded assistance. It also will help writers who just want to make their great content more accessible and usable by designing better organization and structure, access methods, and navigation.

Date: Saturday, Jan. 27, 2001: 9 to 4

Fees: STC Members: \$125 Nonmembers: \$150

Location: Four Points Hotel by Sheraton - Sunnyvale, 1250 Lakeside Drive, Sunnyvale 94086

To register for the workshop, do the following:

1. Tell us how to contact you:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

2. On or before Friday, Jan. 19 — *now* is good — write a check for \$40 as a deposit to hold a space for the workshop. Make your check payable to *STC-SVC*. (Your deposit is nonrefundable.)

3. Send this form and your check to the following address:

STC Workshops
P.O.Box 1224
Mountain View, CA 94042-1224

Write to smythemmah@yahoo.com if you have questions; enter *SVC workshops* in the Subject text box.

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Obviously, the implication is even greater for consumer sites like Amazon.com or Buy.com. Are they ready to ignore a few hundred thousand customers who would use their site—but can't because of poor or incomplete design? If these companies would change their site design, even slightly, they may gain 50,000, maybe 100,000, new customers: all because their site design encouraged rather than discouraged viewers with impairments. And many of these impaired viewers stay loyal once they find a site that works well for them.

PC World magazine (September 2000) compared two sites using screen-reader software. The first, Hewlett-Packard, did well. All links worked properly and were easily recognizable (Investor Information, Drivers, HP Store, for example). Then the writer visited the Gap Online.

Many of the links sounded like programming gibberish (Link, shorts_men.asp?wdid=300, Map:wdid=301, Map:gapstore/cs_returns.asp). One would suspect that Gap has lost a lot of potential customers who will never return.

The Problems

The blind and visually impaired use what are called screen readers to navigate the Web. These software programs look at the HTML file that creates a Web page on a computer. Then they synthetically speak exactly what that file tells them. The better readers will ignore or understand specialized HTML codes and speak the content that a sighted Web viewer would see. The result is content as accessible to a blind person as to a fully sighted one. At least that is the desired result.

Some problems occur when the Web designer includes graphics. If the

navigation bar has a text link to software downloads, the screen reader will speak those words in the text link. But if the navigation bar uses graphic buttons with no "alt text" description, the reader will ignore it or just speak the word graphic. If that's the case, the visitor is now lost on the page and will not know where to go next.

Poor or incomplete HTML formatting will confuse the reading software, causing it to skip content and links. Animation will cause the screen reader to jump within text on a page, pulling words from different parts of the page and making nonsensical sentences.

The Law

We're starting to see the impact of three laws: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act. More on these laws and their impact can be found at the Microsoft.com site (among others), but they are important for us all, especially when we deal with the federal government (Section 508, particularly). Companies such as AOL, H&R Block, Intuit (Quicken), and Bank of America have already been subject to government and legal action.

Text-Only Sites the Answer?

No, and neither is a duplicate page with no graphics. There are some very easy actions that we Web designers can do to make a graphics page work for the blind. Most include using the tools we have to add alternate text.

Others involve changing our habits. With a little retraining on our part, we can make an accessible page with just a little additional work.

Fixing It

Here are a few quick tips.

- **Images and animation.** Use the alt text or alt attribute function to clearly describe the function of each visual.
- **Image maps.** Use client-side Map and use alt text for hotspots.
- **Multimedia.** Provide a text description of video content.
- **Page organization.** Use consistent structure and cascading style sheets (CSS) for layout and style when possible. This allows users to modify their browser at one time to affect their site visit.
- **Formatting options.** Use heading tags with font attributes rather than calling out specific fonts in each usage. This allows visually-impaired viewers to modify styles and font sizes.
- **JavaScript, applets, and animation.** Provide alternative content in case active features are not accessible via screen-reading software.
- **Check your work!** Use validation tools, checklists, and guidelines available at <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WCAG/>

Additional Information

The following sites offer good examples and tips:

- IBM Accessibility Center (with downloadable trial version of their Home Page Reader), <http://www-3.ibm.com/able/overview.html>
- SSB Technologies (Web Site Accessibility), <http://www.ssbtechnologies.com/>

Welcome New, Transferring and Reinstated STC Members

Membership Activity for September, October, and November 2000.

New Members

Alex, Reshmi
 Allen, Julie L.
 Alonzo, Ernest M.
 Bensman, Anna M.
 Bolen, Jacqueline M.
 Boomsitter, Jan
 Bralich, Philip A.
 Breaugh, Susan M.
 Carter, Marjorie C.
 Cheng, Amy J.
 Cheng, Chungte
 Clayton, Julie R.
 Cline, Philip B.
 Cohen, Doris
 Coumou, Nancy N.
 Coutts, Paul E.
 Dang, Diane N.
 Dille, Robert H.
 Dutra, Catherine
 Gozrulak, Jessica M.
 Hanson, Linda L.
 Hiltner, Karl
 Holden, Mary R.
 Husic, Freda T.
 Jackson, Vivian I.
 Jayakumar, Indu M.
 Kanna, Olivia
 Korf, Mario T.
 Kunzman, Rebecca R.
 Lant, Kathleen Margaret
 Ledig, Karl V.
 Lehmicke, Nancy R.
 Lynch, Larry D.
 Mackin, Larry J.
 McLucas, Susan L.
 McNamara, Paul F.
 Millar, Chuck
 Miller, A. Meredith
 Miller, Ellen P.
 Miller, Sondra
 Nakamura, Joy
 Pasut, Larissa E.
 Pettyplace, Jadelynn R.
 Pyle, Jonathan H.
 Reid, Charles J.
 Roddy, Cecilia Mary

Rupel, Brenda Walker
 Schwarz, Derek M.
 Sheaffer, Carrie K.
 Silverio, Joan
 Singer, Lorna J. (McCann)
 Skillman, Frederick R.
 Snyder, Phyllis G.
 Stansbury, Alfred B.
 Steen, Janet L.
 Stein, Julie M.
 Strahl, Philip J.
 Sullivan, John
 Taylor, Dory
 Thompson, Greg
 Tressler, Susan A.
 Trujillo, Judy Hopkins
 Tuma, Tina M.
 Wall, Kimberley R.
 Watkins, Patricia A.

Reinstated Members

Ahern, Charlie
 Randall, Clayton R.
 Rouiller, Shannon
 Schwermer, Alana K.
 Skrbina, Catherine
 Town, Kyla E.
 Vandeputte, Sofie M.
 Wooten, Mira

Transferred-In Members

Ashraf, Sabahat, I.
 Benesch, Victor
 Bhatti, Akram
 Carrubba, Laura F.
 Chan, Julie
 Chase, Diana D.
 Chiu, David H.
 Clarke, Steven
 Daughton, Andrew M.
 De Luca, Louis
 Estrada, Julian A.
 Fesmire, Robert D.
 Gardner, Kristine A.
 Kang, Richard D.
 Lutz, Deborah A.
 McKean, Jane A.
 Rubert, Mysti
 Twomey, Leslie A.
 Whyman, Karen A.

Calling All Drivers: Don't Drive, Dial

By Deidre Roger

Multitasking queen that I am, I worry about cell phone usage and driving safety. Even without using a cell phone in a car, driving an automobile is extremely dangerous. We experience enough danger from drivers who drink alcohol, smoke, or eat while driving. A 1987 study by Stein, Parsegian and Allen regarding lane keeping found significant driving degradation when drivers place phone calls while driving on straight-line roads or on curves—with older drivers showing greater degradation.

Drinking and driving is not the only type of altered state we drive in. Intoxication occurs not just from common legal drugs, but from a body's chemical reaction to stress brought on by any number of topics that might be covered in a given phone interaction. A study funded by the California State Automobile Association on traffic safety in 1991 found that complex phone conversations created the greatest distraction and simple conversations the least, with tuning the radio falling in between. People who use cell phones while driving are being further distracted from the already potentially hazardous operation of a motor vehicle.

I know two safety consultants who refuse to use their cell phones while driving. One of them attended a government conference on safety issues regarding cell phones in Oakland recently. He was touched by a story from a woman who spoke about her daughter who was killed by a driver who was using a cell phone. This issue is not a popular one, however, because many government officials use cell phones while driving.

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Silicon Valley STC January 2001 Chapter Meeting

Topic: *FrameMaker 6: New Features*

Speaker: Thomas Neuburger

Abstract: Thomas will present and discuss changes and enhancements for FrameMaker 6. The discussion will cover new book features, the benefits (and drawbacks) of using WebWorks Publisher for HTML output, FrameMaker's support for PDF, and a brief discussion of FrameMaker and XML publishing. A question and discussion session will follow the presentation.

Thomas is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Portland, Ore. He has published a number of books, including *Mastering FrameMaker 5*; *Learning the Internet*, with Kenn Halliwell and others; and *Foundation: Building Sentence Skills*, a college English textbook.

He also has taught English and Communications at several Midwest and West Coast colleges. His upcoming book, *The Masters Series: FrameMaker 6*, is available from Twelfth Night Books (www.twelfthnight.com).

Menu: Mixed Green Salad, Cucumber, Tomato, Feta Cheese Salad, Grilled Lemon Chicken, Penne Pasta with Portobello Mushroom Sauce, Garlic Roasted Potatoes, Seasonal Vegetables, Bakery Fresh Rolls & Butter, Fruit Pies, Brewed Regular & Decaf Coffee and Tea.

Date: Thursday, Jan. 25, 2001

Schedule: 6:00 p.m.: Networking/Jobs Corner, beverages
 7:00 p.m.: Announcements
 7:15 p.m.: Presentation

Location: Four Points Hotel by Sheraton (formerly the Sunnyvale Hilton), 1250 Lakeside Drive

To guarantee your space for the Jan. 25 meeting, mail your reservation, paid in full, on or before Jan. 15. Your reservation is guaranteed only if payment is received by Jan. 18. A \$5 late fee will be charged for any reservation received after Jan. 18. The late fee also applies to walk-ins. We regret that scheduled speakers occasionally cancel. If that happens, we make every effort to find a suitable substitute program.

Reservation for the Jan. 25, 2001 Chapter Meeting

Name and e-mail address: _____

\$20.00 member food \$12.00 member no food

\$30.00 nonmember food \$15.00 nonmember no food

Mail form and check to:
STC Meeting Reservations
PO Box 3709
Saratoga, CA 95070-1709

Directions

From 101, going south:

1. Exit at Lawrence Expressway.
2. Get into the left lane immediately, as Oakmead is just one block and comes up quite soon.
3. Turn left onto Oakmead.
4. Go one block to Lakeside Drive.
5. Turn left on Lakeside Drive.
6. Ignore the first driveway — it leads to the Faultline Brewing Company.
7. Enter the hotel parking lot by turning right into the second driveway (across from the Toscana Apartments) or the third driveway (past the Toscana).
8. Park, and go to the main lobby. Look for a sign.

From 101, going north:

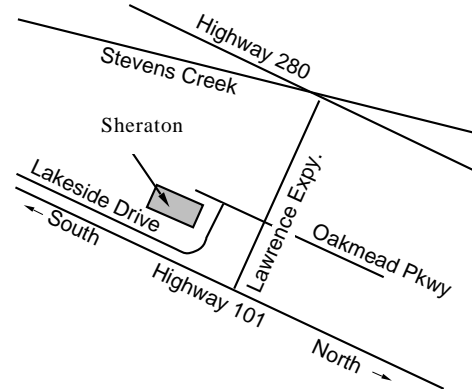
1. Exit at Bowers/Great America Parkway.
2. Turn left at the end of the offramp.
3. Cross over 101 and make the first right at Augustine Drive.
4. Turn right at the next corner, which is Lakeside Drive.
5. Follow around (paralleling 101) to the Sheraton.
6. Turn left into the parking lot just before the Toscana Apartments.
7. Park, and go to the main lobby. Look for a sign.

Extra parking:

If the hotel parking lot is full, additional parking is available behind the hotel.

1. Take Lakeside Drive to Oakmead and turn left.
2. Go down three or four buildings.
3. You will see a big sign on the left: Oakmead Village Office Park 1255 - 1263.
4. Turn left into the parking lot.

The entrance to the Sheraton is between Buildings 1259 (Widata) and 1261 (Digital Market). The walk to the Ballroom is very short and takes about two minutes. Cross over the bridge onto the Sheraton property. Turn left and walk to the last building by the pool. Turn right to enter the building and walk to the front of the lobby. The Ballroom is on the corridor on your left just before the front entrance of the lobby.



Silicon Valley STC February 2001 Chapter Meeting

Topic: *Moving Out of the Box: Shifting to HTML-based Help*

Speaker: Jason Gervich

Abstract: Two areas are seriously affecting development tools used to design and maintain online Help systems.

- The movement of applications from the desktop to the Web.
- The movement from proprietary tools and standards to open tools and standards.

Help authors are increasingly using standards- and HTML-based Help systems.

Jason's presentation also will include a discussion of how open-standards authoring tools such as Dreamweaver are replacing proprietary tools such as RoboHELP and standards like Windows Help.

Jason Gervich, B.S., has worked extensively with Windows Help and HTML-based Help systems. As a consultant, he has developed hypertext and Help systems for Sun Microsystems, 3Com, Oracle, the state of Idaho and others.

Menu: Mixed Green Salad, Roast Marinated Tri-tip of Beef with Cabernet Wild Mushroom Sauce, Penne Pasta with Tomato Basil Sauce, Garlic Roasted Potatoes, Seasonal Vegetables, Bakery Fresh Rolls & Butter, Fruit Pies, Brewed Regular & Decaf Coffee and Tea.

Date: Thursday, Feb. 22, 2001

Schedule: 6:00 p.m.: Networking/Jobs Corner, beverages
 7:00 p.m.: Announcements
 7:15 p.m.: Presentation

Location: Four Points Hotel by Sheraton (formerly the Sunnyvale Hilton), 1250 Lakeside Drive

To guarantee your space for the Feb. 22 meeting, mail your reservation, paid in full, on or before Feb. 12. Your reservation is guaranteed only if payment is received by Feb. 15. A \$5 late fee will be charged for any reservation received after Feb 15. The late fee also applies to walk-ins. We regret that scheduled speakers occasionally cancel. If that happens, we make every effort to find a suitable substitute program.

Reservation for the Feb. 22, 2001 Chapter Meeting

Name and e-mail address: _____

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$20.00 member food | <input type="checkbox"/> \$12.00 member no food |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$30.00 nonmember food | <input type="checkbox"/> \$15.00 nonmember no food |

Mail form and check to:
STC Meeting Reservations
PO Box 3709
Saratoga, CA 95070-1709

Directions

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From 101, going north:

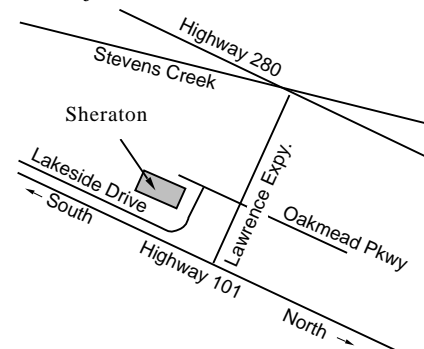
1. Exit at Bowers/Great America Parkway.
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[accessibility.php/](#)

- Adobe Access for People with Visual Disabilities (and information on PDF accessibility), <http://access.adobe.com/>
- Microsoft Accessibility (Web Guidelines), <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/dev/web/default.htm/>
- Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offering Bobby, a free program to check your site's HTML code, <http://www.cast.org/bobby/>
- Designing More Usable Web Sites (from the University of Wisconsin at Madison), <http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/>
- Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C), <http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/WAI-homeA.html/>

Guy Ball is a senior technical writer at Unisys in Mission Viejo, CA.

Medical Writers to Meet

The Pacific Southwest Chapter of the American Medical Writers Association is sponsoring its West Coast Conference at Asilomar April 1-4, 2001, on the Monterey Peninsula. Registration deadline in March 1. For more information, see: <http://www.amwa-pacsw.org/> or email: folio7@earthlink.net

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DOCUMENT DEFINITIONS
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to help define this document product or if you know the URL for a good on-line example of this document product, by Feb. 2, write to curly@best.com.

If your suggestions are used, your name will appear in *Connection*.

If after *Connection* publishes a document definition, we receive even better definitions, we will print them in the next month's issue, along with your name.

To contribute your feedback after a document product is defined, write to curly@best.com by the first Friday of the following month.

We later will store document definitions on the Silicon Valley chapter website for future reference.

Linda O'Maley has degrees in electrical engineering technology, sociology, and library science. She has been a technical writer for 15 years, a manager for one year, and has worked at nine companies. She works for VxTel.

Connection
PO Box 1224
Mountain View, CA 94042-1224

CELLULAR PHONES
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Perhaps insurance companies need to penalize us for using cell phones while driving, much like they do to motoroists who smoke while driving. Personal responsibility is the key. To avoid becoming an accident statistic:

- Don't check voicemail by cell phone while driving. Concentrating on punching numbers adds to driving stresses.
- Avoid shoulder cradling the cell phone in all situations.
- Don't eat while driving and chatting on the cell phone.

If the conversation becomes emotionally charged or requires great concentration, pull over or hang up.

We only have two eyes, two arms, two legs, and a brain, most of which we hardly use. Despite hyper-technologies, we have limitations. We are still human!

Deidre Roger, RN, BS, is working on her Master's in ergonomics and is president of ErgoVera.

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