

# COMMENTARY

## THE STATUS WOE

by Brad Connatser  
Transcript Editor

During the 43rd Annual STC Conference in Seattle, Brad Muhlenbacher, Manager of the STC Research Advisory and Assistance Committee, distributed the Committee's draft 1996/97 research agenda. According to this agenda, the Committee will encourage research in the following nine areas:

1. Audience Analysis and Understanding
2. Designing New Documentation Processes
3. Designing for Visualization
4. Information Dissemination Tools
5. Collaboration and Team-Based Projects
6. Hardcopy and Online Evaluation
7. Settings for Writing and Internationalization
8. Professional, Social, and Environmental Trends
9. Research Models for Technical Communication

The Committee, which is composed of about half practitioners and half academics, was organized to advise the Research Grants Committee, or RGC, on what research STC should sponsor. The RGC reviews each research grant proposal submitted to STC and makes a recommendation to the STC board of directors, which votes on funding the proposals recommended for approval by the RGC.

Also during the 43rd Annual STC Conference, Stephanie Rosenbaum, who chairs the RGC, moderated an open forum called "What Research Should STC Sponsor?" Twelve attendees, including *Technical Communication* editor George Hayhoe and head of STC's Academic and Research

Programs Kenneth Rainey, discussed the nine research areas recommended by the Research Advisory and Assistance Committee, plus two more: job competencies and continuation of value-added studies.

### Issues Raised

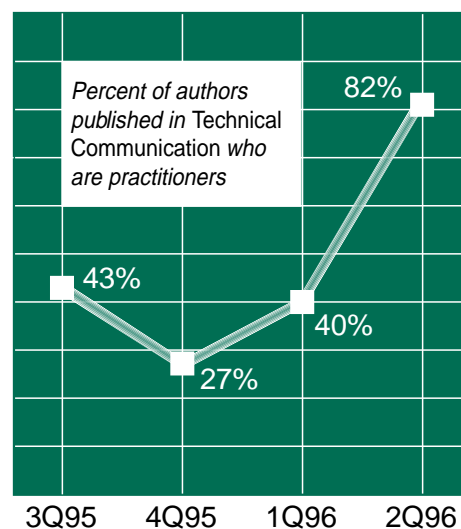
According to Rosenbaum, during the 1995/96 fiscal year, about 75 percent of the winning research grant proposals were from researchers associated with colleges or universities. Although the RGC would like to get more research proposals from independent researchers, "we [the members of the RGC] don't have a quota," Rosenbaum said. The goal of the RGC is to recommend the funding of research based upon merit—research that is valuable to technical communicators.

The low number of attendees at Rosenbaum's forum illustrates the difficulty of determining what kind of research the rank and file of STC values. Currently the STC membership is 88 percent practitioners and 12 percent educators. With such a distribution of members, one may wonder whether the values of the academy are over-represented in STC's most valuable sources of research information: the STC journal *Technical Communication* and the *Proceedings* of the annual conference. However, practitioners and independent researchers are well-represented in both sources.

Although many presenters at the 43rd Annual Conference were affiliated with colleges and universities, by far most of the presenters were practitioners—independent consultants and employees of large corporations. On the other hand, nearly 60 percent of the contributors to the 1995/96 issues of *Technical Communication* were affiliated with a college or university. However, a turn toward more contributions from practitioners is apparent,

most notably since the journal has come under the stewardship of George Hayhoe.

Even so, are the needs of the STC membership for research information being met by STC's journal and conference? Do the 11 areas of research identified by the Research Advisory and Assistance Committee reflect those needs?



In the February 1996 issue of *Intercom*, George Hayhoe, who began his stewardship of *Technical Communication* with the publication of the 2Q96 issue, said in an interview, "What I would like to see, and what members would probably like to see, is a lot more emphasis on practical application of theory" (page 27).

### Answers from Practitioners

One way to determine what kind of educational information the taciturn members of STC really want is to impose consequential questions upon them. A few inquisitive people have done just that, and their findings might surprise you.

Rebecca Brown from Memphis University asked 26 members of the Midsouth Chapter of STC, "What editing and writing knowledge or skills do you consider most important for entry-level employees in your department (whether or not you do the hiring)?" About 34 percent—by far the

highest percentage—said that grammar, spelling, and punctuation were the most important. Carolyn Rude, from Texas Tech University, conducted an on-line survey about practices in technical communication, to which 59 people responded. To the question, “What do you wish that college students would learn about technical editing?” the most frequent response was “the basics: grammar, consistency, etc.).”



Two surveyors took a look at what kind of skills technical communicators value. When asked about the importance of technical editing and writing skills, many respondents—34% in Rebecca Brown’s survey (left) and 29% in Carolyn Rude’s on-line survey—ranked basic knowledge about sentence-level composition the highest.

Both surveys reveal a concern about the ability of novice technical communicators to craft effective sentences. So is STC publishing research results that help technical communicators make sentence-level decisions? The answer is simply no. Of the 49 articles published in the last four issues of *Technical Communication*, none address issues at the sen-

tence level. Of the 238 papers published in the *Proceedings* of the 43rd Annual STC Conference, only two address these issues. (See “Nominalizations and Their Impact on Readers” by Jan H. Spyridakis and Carol S. Isakson, pages 251–254; and “Seven Discrete Principles for Content Editing” by Donald W. Bush, Jr., pages 516–519.)

### Recommendations

One way novice technical communicators can learn to write good sentences is by basing their sentence-level decisions upon an understanding of how readers read sentences. Therefore, the STC Research Advisory and Assistance Committee should add to its agenda research into the reading process. Results of this type of research can already be found in journals of behavioral sciences, cognitive psychology, and psycholinguistics. Publication of such research in the journals of technical communication will be the first step in filling the near-vacuum of information about sentence composition. The next and perhaps more difficult step will be getting educators to incorporate such information into their curricula and encouraging students to learn it. 🐾

If you have suggestions about what kind of research STC should sponsor, contact Stephanie Rosenbaum at 313-995-1010 or e-mail:

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## CAVEAT SCRIPTOR

by John Webb

East Tennessee Chapter

As a profession, technical communicators tend to be defensive about their avocation. This is a result of working with other professionals who are more technically educated, and perhaps wishing that one were more like them. We forget that we are basically, for the most part, word-smiths. There is no shame in this—in fact, it is an honor.

Take comfort from Auden, as did Brodsky, the late Russian poet, when he found these lines:

Time that is intolerant  
Of the brave and innocent,  
And indifferent in a week  
To a beautiful physique,  
Worships language and forgives  
Everyone by whom it lives;  
Pardons cowardice, conceit,  
Lays its honours at their feet. 🐾

John Webb is a co-founder and general partner of the word-smithing firm *Concurrent Communications*.

## QuickFact

Prescriptions about sentence length abound. Keep them short, most say. Some readability formulas directly correlate sentence length with the likelihood of comprehension. The shorter the sentence, the greater the readability. No doubt that Faulkner’s 1300-word serpent of a sentence in *Absolom! Absolom!* poses difficulty for the average reader, but consider that the last sentence in *The House That Jack Built*—a classic story written for pre-school children—contains 71 words, all of which are easily synthesized by the five-year-old mind. And the sentence you just read? Fifty words. Go figure.

## resources@internet.for.technical.communicators

- 🐾 [On-Line English Grammar](http://www.edunet.com/english/grammar/index.html)  
<http://www.edunet.com/english/grammar/index.html>
- 🐾 [Internet Resources for Technical Communicators](http://www.rpi.edu/~perezc2/tc/)  
<http://www.rpi.edu/~perezc2/tc/>
- 🐾 [Writer’s Block Newsletter](http://www.magi.com/~niva/writblok/index.html)  
<http://www.magi.com/~niva/writblok/index.html>
- 🐾 [Science and Technical Writers](http://www.interlog.com/~ohi/www/tech.html#assoc)  
<http://www.interlog.com/~ohi/www/tech.html#assoc>
- 🐾 [Society for Technical Communication](http://www.clark.net/pub/stc/www/)  
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