

# C O R R I G O

newsletter of the stc's technical editing sig

VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3 — September 2002

## Take a New Approach: Consider Getting Started in Contracting

If you've never considered contract work, maybe you should if you answer "yes" to one or more of these questions:

- Have you just moved to a new city with a transferred spouse?
- Do you want to determine what kind of projects you really like?
- Do you want a greater variety of challenges?
- Do you have a long-term goal of developing your own business?
- Do you like to take breaks between projects?

Contract work can offer you the opportunity to take a "try it before you buy it" approach to new companies, tasks, and more.

But how do you get started? What can you do to get calls for contract jobs?

### How Agencies Work With Client Companies

Organizations that regularly use contract or temporary workers to fill techni-

cal positions rely on a few (from two to six) recruiting agencies that have provided them good workers in previous assignments. When a new temporary position is to be filled, the client company gives the job requirements to its recruiters, and each agency competes to fill the position before the others do.

Depending on the size of a client and how many employees have been requested or placed by the agency for the client, the agency assigns an account manager, one or more account representatives, and/or apprentice reps or research associates to each account.

The account manager is the primary negotiator between the agency and the client and has the final say about which candidates are submitted to the client.

The apprentice reps or research associates review the agency's database and

resume files to locate appropriate candidates to submit to the client. These are the folks who call you and tell you that they have your resume from two years ago and wonder if you're interested in a new opportunity.

The agencies concentrate on their largest customers, because large customers give them more opportunities to earn placement commissions than do smaller clients who may hire only one or two contractors per year. And commissions are what contract agencies operate on.

### How Agencies Work With Professional Contract Personnel

The first thing a rep wants from a potential contract employee is a resume that displays the professional skills it's looking for and that its clients want to hire. Next, the rep will want to meet you,

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### ONLINE POLL

What type of capitalization style do you use in headings?

- I use initial capitalization, where I capitalize all words (e.g., Upcoming Seminars Hosted By The Technical Editing Society).
- I use sentence case, where I capitalize the first word and subsequent proper nouns (e.g., Upcoming seminars hosted by the Technical Editing Society).
- I use title case, where I capitalize all words, except for articles, prepositions, and conjunctions that are three letters or shorter (e.g., Upcoming Seminars Hosted by the Technical Editing Society).
- I use another capitalization style.

Cast your vote and submit your comments and suggestions on our Web site ([www.stcsig.org/te](http://www.stcsig.org/te)). We'll report the results in our next issue. Thanks to TE SIG member John Osborn for this issue's poll question. If you have a question you'd like to see as our online poll question, e-mail it to us at [corrigo\\_editor@hotmail.com](mailto:corrigo_editor@hotmail.com).

## Getting Started in Contracting *continued from the cover*

or at least talk with you on the phone, to verify that you look and act professionally and that your resume is genuine.

### At the Agency Interview

At the initial agency interview, you may complete an employment application and sign a contract allowing the agency to represent you in discussions with its clients. The rep may have you fill out a skills inventory form, in which you estimate your programming skills and experience level with computing systems and software packages.

You may also need to submit a text or an ASCII copy of your resume file for easy loading into the agency's data system. The agency extracts information from your resume, the skills inventory form, your application, and the interviewer's notes, using an automated database system to index and file it. The agency wants to be able to locate you when an opening requires your combination of experience, skills, education, etc.

The agency may also require copies of your driver's license, birth certificate, and college transcript(s). Because of widespread resume fraud, agencies — which are legally liable for the actions of their employees — must verify that you are who and what you claim to be. Agencies must also prove, to the government's satisfaction, that their employment policies are nondiscriminatory.

A rep who is knowledgeable about technical communication may also ask you to bring in samples of your work. An experienced rep will ask about your experience, what you liked and didn't like about your previous jobs, and when you can be scheduled for interviews with interested client companies.

Other topics discussed may include your preferences in company culture, how far you are willing to commute, and whether you prefer a traditional 8-to-5 workday or more flexible scheduling.

### Applying for a Position

If your skills are in demand, a rep will call you, give you a brief description of the opportunity, and ask for permission to submit your resume. If your skills aren't immediately in demand, you may languish in the agency's database for a while.

If you're dealing with more than one agency, ensure that the different agencies don't submit you for the same job. Try to get the client's name and as much additional information about an opening as possible. Multiple submissions usually eliminate you from consideration.

If your resume is submitted, follow up with your rep in a few days to find out if the client has responded. Offer to supply additional information, and cooperate in scheduling an interview if one is requested.

### Patience, Organization Pay Off

Remember that companies can have crises, which may delay their responses. I've taken a job as a result of a resume submitted a year or more previously. I still get calls from agencies, and I've had my current position for nearly two years.

To keep organized, develop a filing system to keep track of agency contacts, copies of all cover letters, the cards and information from job fairs, and notes from interviews.

### After You've Accepted a Contract

After you've accepted a position, tell any reps who call you when your contract expires so they can contact you if a new opportunity arises.

When you are about to finish a contract and you know that it won't be renewed, send the reps that you've dealt with an updated resume, telling them when you're available for a new position.

Each time you look for a new position, go back to your job hunting files, and touch base with your favorite reps. A great new job is just a contract away.

### Margaret Cekis

*Margaret, who considers herself a senior technical writer/editor, was hired as a "copywriter" at MediaOcean,\* an Atlanta startup company developing an innovative Internet platform for buying and selling TV and radio commercials interactively.*

*She has developed tutorials and user manuals for several releases, and she has edited other company documents and marketing materials.*

*E-mail her at [Margaret@MediaOcean.com](mailto:Margaret@MediaOcean.com).*

\*MediaOcean, Inc. is now a subsidiary of Donovan Data Systems, Inc.

## CORRIGO STAFF

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Managing Editor: Julia Byrd  
[corrigo\\_editor@hotmail.com](mailto:corrigo_editor@hotmail.com)  
Copy Editors: Fran Freiman  
Lori Buffum  
SIG Manager: Diane Feldman  
[dmfeldman@mindspring.com](mailto:dmfeldman@mindspring.com)  
TE SIG Web Site: [www.stcsig.org/te](http://www.stcsig.org/te)

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### Submission

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To become a member of the TE SIG, contact the Society office at the following address:

901 N. Stuart St., Suite 904  
Arlington, VA 22203-1822  
(703) 522-4114  
[www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)

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## HOW DO I KNOW? WHO VERSUS WHOM

Writers and editors often ask us, How do I know if I should use *who* or *whom*? Many times we just guess at which is correct, hoping the reader won't notice if it's wrong. But now we have your solution! We could tell you all about the nominative and objective cases and how to use them to determine proper usage, but we know that you'll have a hard time explaining that to your writers and actually solving their dilemma. But thankfully, we have an easy way for you to tell if it's *who* or *whom* that you should be using.

Use *who* whenever *he, she, they, I, or we* could be substituted in the *who/whom* clause. And use *whom* whenever *him, her, them, me, or us* could be substituted. If you're still in doubt, try rearranging the clause (as shown in the solutions below) and then trying the substitution.

**Another tip:** Can't remember if *he* is associated with *who* or with *whom*? Just remember that *him* and *whom* both end in *m*, and you'll be set!

### Example 1

**Question:** Who/Whom are you here to see?

**Solution:** Rewrite the clause to say: "Are you here to see he/**him**?"

**Answer:** **Whom** are you here to see?

### Example 2

**Question:** Who/Whom is arranging the meeting?

**Solution:** Rewrite the clause to say "She/her is arranging the meeting."

**Answer:** **Who** is arranging the meeting?

### Example 3

**Question:** We will elect whoever/whomever is the best candidate.

**Solution:** Rewrite the clause to say "He/Him is the best candidate."

**Answer:** We will elect **whoever** is the best candidate.

## ABOUT THE STC REGIONS AND UPCOMING CONFERENCES

The Society for Technical Communication divides its membership among eight regions, each containing approximately 20 local chapters. Each region elects a director-sponsor to represent its chapters, branches, members-at-large, and other affiliations in that region.

Under the leadership of its director-sponsor, an STC region may sponsor competitions, conferences, and seminars; offer networking opportunities; and provide other professional resources useful to technical communicators. For more information about regions and their events, visit [www.stc.org/region\\_info.html](http://www.stc.org/region_info.html). See below for detailed information on the Region 6 conference.

Other regional conferences this fall include:

- **October 4-6:** The Region 5 conference will be held at the Hilton Inn Northwest in Oklahoma City, Okla. The theme is "Geared for Success on Route 66."
- **November 7-9:** The Canada West Coast Chapter STC will host the Region 7 conference at the Sheraton Wall Centre in Vancouver, British Columbia. The theme is "ShapeShifters: New Roles, New Tools, New Challenges."

The regional conferences are a great value in terms of education, networking, and budgeting (your time and money). Attend one, and you'll likely be hooked.

### Region 6 2002 Conference: Gateway to Your Future

The 12th annual STC Region 6 Conference, hosted by the St. Louis Chapter, will be held Sunday, Oct. 13 to Tuesday, Oct. 15 at the Millennium Hotel in downtown St. Louis. Join us under the Gateway Arch, where we'll focus on helping technical communicators thrive in their careers.

#### Featured Speakers

Keynote speaker John Hedtke will present "Seeding the Clouds" to help technical communicators find more opportunities even in tough times. John is an award-winning author of 21 books. He regularly contributes articles to magazines such as *Publish!* and *Accounting Technology*. He is an associate fellow of the STC and a past president of the Puget Sound STC chapter. John lives in Seattle, writes magazine articles, plays the banjo, and sleeps late as much as possible.

Opening speaker Ron Blicq will present an eye-opening history of technical communication. Ron is president of the International Council for Technical Communication, a fellow of the STC and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, a senior life member of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and an author of several award-winning textbooks and dramatized educational videotapes.

#### Conference Contact

Sally Spahn, general manager  
P.O. Box 187  
Moline, IL 61266

[SJS08@aol.com](mailto:SJS08@aol.com) • (309)797-9604 (phone) • (309) 797-9371 (fax)

Program information is on the region's Web site ([www.stcregion.org/region6/conference/conf2002\\_General\\_Information.htm](http://www.stcregion.org/region6/conference/conf2002_General_Information.htm)) — register now!

# MAGIC METRICS: ESTIMATING TIME FOR TECHNICAL EDITING

**Editor's Note:** We received a great response to David McClintock's article in the June issue on estimating editing speed at three levels of detail. In this issue, we continue our look at estimating editing speed by adding document type (online help, messages, etc.) as another variable.

Whenever someone talks about applying metrics, measurements, or — gasp! numbers — to something as subjective, artful, and creative as writing, a heated discussion is bound to ensue. However, businesses are run “by the numbers,” and to prove our worth and our efficiency, editors can either live with the numbers or die by the numbers. I choose to live.

When I started working at a computer book publisher as a developmental editor, I started researching various metrics for determining how many pages an editor could complete in an hour. I needed to be able to schedule my time effectively and to provide reasonable dates for returning marked-up manuscripts. Few metrics were available, and nearly all the resources and editors that I consulted added caveats and hedged their bets at every turn.

The best metrics are those that are based on your own skills and abilities, so I set out to collect some metrics of my own to use in my planning and scheduling efforts. For a six-month period, I tracked my editing times for a variety of books. Each day, I entered the number of hours I spent performing the developmental edits, answering e-mail regarding my developmental edits, and attending meetings about the books in progress. Each of these activities, in addition to actually taking pen to paper, contributed to the overall developmental editing process and deserved to be measured.

\* IBM is a trademark of International Business Machines Corporation in the United States, other countries, or both.

At the end of this six-month period, I determined that I could edit six pages per hour, on average. If the material was more complex or the writer was less experienced, then it was closer to four pages per hour. If the material was simpler or the writer was more experienced, though, my pace was closer to 10 pages per hour. I then used these rates to calculate a per-day metric (based on 6.5 hours a day, allowing 1.5 hours for nonediting tasks) that I used in providing schedules to both the authors and my management.

When I left the computer book publisher and became a technical editor at a small medical software company, I began editing books and online help topics. I pulled out my metrics spreadsheet and began tracking my times on this new kind of deliverable. Instead of doing just a developmental edit, I was now doing more of a full technical edit, which sometimes focused on copy editing or on substantive editing, depending on the time in the development cycle and the quality of the deliverable. When I left the small medical software com-

pany and returned to IBM\* (where I used to work before the computer book publisher), I was responsible for editing messages, GUI screens and online help topics, and terminology. Once again, I devoted myself to tracking my time to complete various edits.

To assist me in planning and scheduling edits, I created a JavaScript project editing calculator (<http://ebailey.home.mindspring.com/mlcorbin/edit-calc.html>). This is based on another author's calculator, which in turn was based on JoAnn Hackos' Java Dependency Calculator ([www.comtech-serv.com/dependency\\_calculator.htm](http://www.comtech-serv.com/dependency_calculator.htm)). Moreover, Dr. Hackos' calculator was based on her book “Managing Your Documentation Projects.”

Currently, my calculator is programmed around my average editing speed of six pages per hour, which is hardcoded into the calculator's formula. The dependencies that I included from my metric-tracking experiences can be used to

*continued on page 5*

## Metrics for Various Deliverables and Various Levels of Editing

Deliverable	No. of Items Per Hour
Document, <sup>1</sup> light edit	15 pages
Document, regular edit	6 pages
Document, heavy edit	4 pages
Online help <sup>2</sup> (topics and the GUI screens), light edit	24 topics + GUI screens
Online help (topics and the GUI screens), regular edit	10 topics + GUI screens
Online help (topics and the GUI screens), heavy edit	7 topics + GUI screens
Messages <sup>3</sup> (text and help information), light edit	60 messages
Messages (text and help information), regular edit	24 messages
Messages (text and help information), heavy edit	16 messages
Terminology <sup>4</sup> (glossary terms and definitions)	9 terms and definitions

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I didn't calculate the number of words on each page. Most times, it averaged out across the different types of pages that I was editing.

<sup>2</sup> A topic included approximately two screens of information. A screen is a standard-sized help pane of information.

<sup>3</sup> A message included approximately one screen of information.

<sup>4</sup> Terminology included one term and one definition, which was usually no more than one paragraph.

## Estimating Editing Time *continued from page 4*

adjust this average editing speed are the following:

- Level of edit required
- How technical the material is
- How new the material is
- Experience of the writer

To improve this calculator, I need to remove the hardcoded value for the average editing speed and allow that value to be entered into the formula. For example, I need to be able to enter an average editing speed for online help topics, messages, and terminology, instead of just books (or any other type of deliverable, for that matter). Also, I need to reevaluate the list of dependencies and consider what other attributes of the deliverable affect the speed with which I can edit a deliverable.

The sidebar on page 4 summarizes the metrics that I have collected and used during the past seven years, refining and revising them as I learned new editing techniques or encountered new types of information.

Perhaps you can use this model of tracking your own editing times to generate your own set of metrics. Do you dare to live by the numbers? Better still — why not just make the numbers work for you.

**Michelle Corbin**

*Michelle is an advisory technical editor at IBM. You can e-mail her at [corbinm@us.ibm.com](mailto:corbinm@us.ibm.com).*

## RESOURCES

Want more information on editing topics? Look here.

- <http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/> — grammar answers
- [www.councilscienceeditors.org/pubs\\_guidelineseries.shtml](http://www.councilscienceeditors.org/pubs_guidelineseries.shtml) — “Levels of Edit” and other booklets by the Council of Science Editors
- <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/grammar> — Purdue University Online Writing Lab
- <http://www.brownlee.org/durk/grammar/> — more grammar quizzes

If you have a favorite link, let us know. E-mail [corrigo\\_editor@hotmail.com](mailto:corrigo_editor@hotmail.com).

## In Our Next Issue

**We need your help! Are you interested in contributing an article (big or small) to our next issue? Do you have a topic you'd like to see covered? E-mail your stories, ideas, and suggestions to [corrigo\\_editor@hotmail.com](mailto:corrigo_editor@hotmail.com) so we can continue to publish a newsletter that addresses your needs.**

## JUNE ONLINE POLL RESULTS

In our June issue, we asked if you use the serial comma before the conjunction in a simple series. Here's how you voted:

- Yes, I use the serial comma. (For example: Jenny has dogs, cats, and gerbils.) — 88% (353 votes)
- No, I don't use the serial comma. (For example: Don't hire just any Tom, Dick or Harry.) — 12% (47 votes)

### What You Said

- “Not using the serial comma confuses the reader by grouping the last two items together.”
- “I only use the serial comma when there is a risk of misunderstanding without it. Otherwise I find it just adds to the clutter.”
- “My favorite example of the need for a serial comma is quoted by Jack Lynch in his online guide to writing and style. Professor Lynch writes: A famous (and perhaps apocryphal?) dedication makes the danger clear: ‘To my parents, Ayn Rand and God.’ ”
- “The serial comma usually makes copy harder to read. Plus it's fussy.”
- “The serial comma is our friend.”
- “Has this anything to do with where you are working? In Australia we don't use the serial comma but when editing for American publications I am obliged to.”
- “I realize that the ‘serial comma’ problem results from a conflict of two rules. The first rule says that commas should separate items in a series. The second rule says that commas should be omitted before coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet) that are not joining independent clauses. I choose to add the comma because it clarifies when an item ends and I do not think that the ‘and’ can be confused with the start of an independent clause.”

For other comments, see the “Corrigo Supplement” section of the TE SIG Web site ([www.stcsig.org/te/newsletter/supplement](http://www.stcsig.org/te/newsletter/supplement)).