

Interview with Marcia Riefer Johnston

BY SCOTT ABEL | *Senior Member*

SA: Marcia, thanks for taking time to chat with me today. For those who don't know who you are, tell us a little about yourself and what you do for a living.

MJ: Chatting with you is a treat, Scott. Thanks for this chance to talk to my favorite professional community.

Over the last twenty-some years, I've done lots of things that qualify as technical communication, mostly writing, mostly self-employed, mostly in Upstate New York during my children's growing-up years. The Central New York STC Chapter served as a hub for networking and learning; I couldn't have sustained an independent career without them. I now live in Portland, Oregon, where I'm discovering new opportunities and am getting to know a new group of STCers through the Willamette Valley Chapter.

I couldn't have dreamed up a more satisfying career. If I had seen an ad describing it—"Work your own hours! Work from home! Get paid to write!"—I wouldn't have believed it. At its best, contracting has been an exhilarating way to work. Of course, I've seen dry spells, fearing I'd never work again. I've done a few 9-to-5 temp stints. When you work for yourself, you make the best of the choices in front of you. You also do what you can to generate choices, and you say yes to things you've never done before.

In fact, you can say yes to almost any job when you have strong writing skills. To write well is to think well. What I do for a living, really, is think.

I've created brochures, white papers, websites, online Help,

e-training modules, and loads of manuals. I've managed a tech-pubs department, taught tech writing to engineering students, led indexing workshops, participated on user-experience teams, and performed content audits (known affectionately among content strategists as *those big hairy spreadsheets*). I've used every software application I could get my hands on, from FrameMaker to Dreamweaver to XMetaL. Angle brackets and I, we're like `<i>this</i>`. My idea of a beach read is the latest book on DITA. Despite the variety in duties and deliverables, though, I do the same thing over and over: ask questions, analyze, clarify.

As one early boss put it, "I'm paying you to be a pain in my behind." I consider this skill a core competency—one that some bosses appreciate more than others.

How did you get involved in the field of technical communication?

After graduating from a liberal-arts school (Lake Forest College, just north of Chicago), I went straight into the Syracuse University Masters program in creative writing. With that fresh degree in hand, as I was wondering what kind of work people would pay me for, I received an invitation from Karen Szymanski, who was looking for a technical-writing intern to spend the summer working for a company then known as Magnavox CATV (later Philips Broadband) just outside of Syracuse.

Technical writing! I had never heard those two words together. (We're talking the pre-Dilbert era. Tina the Tech Writer—to whom other characters say hilariously

maddening things like "Your first draft was boring, so I added a bunch of exclamation points"—hadn't yet entered the collective consciousness.)

From the moment I heard the term, technical writing clicked for me. I wanted to write, and I had always been drawn to science. I liked figuring out how things work or why something is the way it is. And I liked explaining things, especially when I got to see the light go on in someone's eyes.

My unpaid summer internship with Karen launched a lifelong career. I can't thank her enough for not only opening that door but also showing me, just when I needed it, that the door existed.

You've written a book called *Word Up! How To Write Powerful Sentences and Paragraphs (And Everything You Build from Them)*. I was honored that you asked me to write the foreword.

I'm honored that you wanted to write the foreword. I can't imagine a better one. Anyone who'd like a peek can find the full text here: <http://howtowriteeverything.com/foreword-by-scott-abel>.

Before we dive in and talk about the book, why did you write one? Was it something you always wanted to do?

I've always loved books—reading them and

making them. My own books didn't always have words. I filled them with pressed leaves, with photos, with vanity plates we saw on family trips. But even though I didn't always think of myself as a writer—in college I originally planned to major in psychology or math—I always liked the idea of making a book.



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions or feedback? Email them to scottabel@mac.com.



It's magical, the way such a simple, tangible object captures powerful, intangible things: concepts, made-up characters. From my earliest years, books enlightened me, comforted me, entertained me, transported me out of my own skin. It seemed natural to want to do the same for other people. I had the impulse to create a book long before I had anything to say.

Why do we need another book about words? And what makes your book different from others?

I'm a sucker for books on writing. I have shelves full of them. Some of them I find, ironically, unreadable. The best writers bring me a smile as they teach me new things or as they tell me old things in a new way. Spend some time flipping through Bryan Garner's *Garner's Modern*

American Usage—don't let its heft intimidate you—and see if you don't find yourself smiling at his playfulness and erudition. (When's the last time you heard anyone described as both erudite and playful?) Garner turns the misuses of *of* into a page-turner. Before I read that entry (look under *o*), it never occurred to me that *of* indicates flabby writing.

There, a free tip. Eliminate most *ofs* in your writing. Conciseness. Vigor. Voilà!

Another book that enchants me is Arthur Plotnik's *Spunk and Bite*, a rollicking guide to rollicking writing. When you've loved an old Strunk and White to the point of disintegration as I have (as if your affection might someday, Velveteen Rabbit-style, transform it into a living companion),

you can't help but get a kick out of Plotnik's refreshing poke at the venerable classic.

I also admire Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*—a book dedicated to, of all things, punctuation—and Mignon Fogarty's "Grammar Girl" blog. I have too many favorites to list here. (I do list them in the book.)

So yes, books on writing abound. If you piled them all up, you'd have a precarious, weird-looking stack reaching ... way up there. But the world can't have too many writing books of the kind I like to read, the kind I set out to write. My book doesn't say the same old things in the same old ways. It follows its own advice. Practices what it preaches. Shows what it tells. It uses powerful writing to talk about powerful writing.

What do you think technical communicators will appreciate in your book?

This book addresses all writers, not just those of the technical persuasion, but it does include some topics especially near to tech writers' hearts. For example, one chapter addresses writing for the small screen. Hint: I don't say, "Keep it short."

One of my favorite chapters (don't tell the other chapters) is "How to Do How-To." Well-written procedures make the world a better place—at least for the individual who desperately wants someone to *just tell me right now how to make this darn thing work.*

Useful step-by-step instructions can save the day.

You might assume that any tech writer can write useful instructions. That's what we do, right? Not so fast. In his August 16 guest post "Core Skills for Technical Writers Often Overlooked" on Tom Johnson's *I'd Rather Be Writing* blog, Vinish Garg, Director of Operations in Technical Documentation at Vhite Systems, puts it this way: "Most of the tech comm resources ... talk about topics such as XML or DITA, single sourcing, indexing, documentation management, or usability ... However, I feel that somewhere along the way, mastery of the basics has been overlooked."

Many of the 48 (and counting) commenters said things like "I couldn't agree more."

I consider procedure-writing skills among the often-overlooked basics. Even writers who wield DITA <step> and <choice> elements all day long don't necessarily know the best way to craft what goes between the codes.

Speaking of DITA, do you agree with those who consider employers misguided when they emphasize tool knowledge over communication skills?

Glad you asked! (Okay, readers, I confess. I fed Scott that question. Hey, haven't you ever written an FAQ? You don't think all of those questions come from customers, do you?) As a matter of fact, I do agree. At a recent interview, I was asked, first thing, to take a FrameMaker test to prove that

I understood how the tool worked. Then I was grilled on the differences between old Word and new Word. So I've learned where to find the table-formatting options on the ribbon—this is a reason to hire me as a writer?

Imagine hiring a pianist based on his or her ability to identify the keys.

You seem to enjoy language and have fun with it. Your book is filled with humor and intelligently crafted wordplay. I think this is why I enjoyed it so much. It wasn't a chore to read.

That's the way I hoped readers would feel. Writing this book was a hoot.

As for humor, I don't know how to be funny, but I like to share things that I find funny. If someone asked me how to hit a reader's funny bone, I'd say, write with integrity. Convey what you find funny as truly as you can, leaving unstated whatever people will get on their own. The most satisfying laughter comes from recognition.

What role can humor play in the way technical communicators communicate with their readers? Wouldn't we all love for readers to find our technical information as engaging as a cartoon! Unfortunately, what one person finds hysterically funny may strike another as boring or confusing or offensive, especially across cultures.

Under the right circumstances, though, the risk can pay off. Some companies weave humor into their technical communications brilliantly. For example, see the demo videos for the to-do-list app TeuxDeux (pronounced *to do*) at www.teuxdeux.com. The FAQ on this website also cracks me up even as it tells me things I want to know.

Example:

Q: I really need to create recurring tasks.
A: We hear you on this. We don't use TeuxDeux this way, but we get this request a lot. We're going to spend some time thinking of the best way to implement it without injuring the overall interface. Also, not to nitpick, but that is more of a statement than a question.

Even if you've never written an FAQ, how can you not be smiling right now? On the inside? One corner of your inner mouth?

For more technical writing that tickles, look no further than the nearest T-Mobile GI "Getting Started" guide, which is downloadable, as of this writing, from <http://support.t-mobile.com/docs/DOC-1488>.

Example:

Water will damage your phone and accessories—even a small amount such as water droplets from a soda in your car cup-holder, melting snowflakes, tears of joy, squirt-gun crossfire or steam from hot water in the kitchen or bathroom.

Any writer who pulls off saying "tears of joy" in a manual has my respect.

(Thanks go to tech writers nonpareil Amy Reyes and Mark Hartz for pointing me to these examples. Note that one of them did not find the other's example all that funny. Need I say more about the risks of using humor?)

For more on humor in technical writing, see the TechWhirl page dedicated to the subject: <http://techwhirl.com/technical-writing-humor>.

Share with us some of the surprising things about language that you learned while researching the book?

One of the best things about writing this book was making discoveries. I set out to share some things I thought I knew about language usage: rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts. Turns out, you can't trust what you know. There I was, confidently telling people to put commas around name suffixes—*Joe Bob, Jr., is a regular chip off the old block*—when my editor cleared her throat (as much as a throat can be cleared in an email) and gently announced that the experts behind the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the guide we were following, had changed their minds on this point a couple editions back. When it comes to name suffixes, parenthetical commas aren't wrong, exactly, but, as of 1993, the commas are no longer recommended (see

www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/Jr.Sr.III/Jr.Sr.III02.html).

Now, some of you reading this may consider such changes piddling, and in the scheme of things, I agree. Here's the thing. One minute you're standing on solid ground. The next, you realize that the ground has moved. Where do you put your feet? So much for confidently telling people what to do.

Over and over, I dug into style guides and other references to back up my claims. I had books piled up around my feet so that my husband could hardly get to my desk to bring me the latest cup of coffee. (Every writer should be so lucky.) Over and over, I found that experts: a) often disagree with each other, and b) sometimes unanimously discount things that English teachers have said for years.

Here's another example of a surprise. Until I started doing this research, I never questioned what constitutes a part of speech. Boy, did I have a lot to learn about the modern take on nouns, verbs, and other word types. It stunned me that some linguists no longer classify certain words, like prepositions, as parts of speech at all. My grammar-loving sister ranks this news up there with the deplanetization of Pluto. I wrote a long chapter and a substantial glossary based on the insights that this surprise led to. (Yes, you can end a sentence with *to*. More on that shortly.)

Books are finite information products. They are limited by page count. Were there things you would have liked to include in the book, but could not for space or other reasons? Yes! Because my audience is so broad—anyone who writes or teaches writing—I left out a topic that usually comes up only in business circles: the question of how to define *good enough*.

When I started out as a professional writer, my workgroups placed a high value on content quality: accuracy, usefulness, clarity, conciseness, consistency. These days, more and more I hear people use the phrase *good enough*—as in *not so good*

but let's not get picky—to promote what strikes me as a shift in values.

Obviously, business is about sales, not literature. Improved efficiency keeps writers in jobs. Schedules must be met, compromises made. Even when working on a glossy annual report, a professional writer needs to draw a line between good enough and perfect.

The line that interests me more, though—the line with even more business value—is the one that customers would draw between writing that's good enough and writing that's not, writing that works for them and writing that doesn't. Unfortunately, rather than reaching out to learn where customers draw that line, some companies turn inward, defining the phrase *good enough* by drawing their own line, conveniently, at the top: *Don't make it too good*. In those cases, good enough has no discernible limit at the bottom.

In those cases, bad is the new good. The worse, the better. Doubt this? I once heard a project manager proclaim in a user-manual review meeting, "Ugly is good." It was my manual. For reasons beyond my control, it was ugly. It wasn't good. It got approved anyway.

To thrive, companies and their writers need to keep the *good* in *good enough*.

To the extent that I qualify as a change agent (this column is called "Meet the Change Agents," after all), I suppose it's in the area of encouraging companies to put more effort into evaluating content quality from a customer's point of view. Not exactly a new idea. And not easy to do. But we're a creative bunch. It can be done.

Take Amazon. According to Leo Frishberg, a user-experience pro who spoke at an STC chapter meeting in Portland earlier this year, Amazon tests its Web pages to determine the effects of sentence-level differences—a semicolon vs. a period, for example—on usability (and, of course, on sales). Remarkable. Amazon experiments with punctuation. Amazon experiments with punctuation? Amazon experiments with

punctuation! I suspect that Amazon stops tweaking when the tweaking stops improving their results.

Imagine all companies taking *good enough* that seriously.

Can you describe some of your efforts to encourage companies to evaluate content quality from a customer point of view?

Sure. Let's take product instructions, the type of content I've worked on the most. One strategy for encouraging companies to evaluate quality is to befriend the user-experience team—or get on it if possible. Ask the folks who test the products for usability to test the user documentation, too.

You may meet with resistance. Testing the documentation takes extra time and planning. Keep making your case. Smart companies want to find out how well their procedures support what users need to do—especially procedures that could reduce common support calls. Do new users invariably get stuck at Step 4? Does everyone in the test group misinterpret a certain key image? Does person after person expect to find a procedure that's missing altogether? Fixing these problems before the product ships, and before the text gets translated, could give the bottom line a boost.

The importance of testing end-user instructions was impressed on me during my internship at Magnavox CATV, a manufacturer of cable TV network equipment. My fellow intern, Tim Voorheis, and I had just finished documenting how to use a cable TV box, at that time a new contraption. Tim and I had interviewed engineers, played with the device, written and illustrated all the steps, even color-coded the user tasks. We had created a mock-up of the printed piece we envisioned, including step-tabs that invited people to jump straight to the task they needed—the print equivalent of hotlinks. We had done everything we could think of to make this document foolproof. We had created, I was sure, a thing of beauty, something better

than either of us could have created alone. A winner.

One lunch hour, our mentor, Karen, snagged a colleague for an impromptu test. I couldn't wait to see the look of delight on our tester's face. Karen handed the woman our color-coded mock-up. Tim and I watched (quietly, as instructed) from behind. With the instructions in one hand and the remote in the other, our tester dutifully pressed the correct buttons ... and wondered why the cable TV box did not respond. How could we have anticipated that anyone would point the remote at the ceiling? Yet there she was, holding the remote straight up and down, moving her gaze back and forth from our pretty pages to the uncooperative remote.

In fact, we had illustrated the remote exactly that way—straight up and down. Our illustrations were two-dimensional, floating in white space with no context. It never occurred to us to tell people to aim the remote at the box. We had been blind to our assumption. Karen instantly knew what to do: revise our cover to show the remote pointed at the cable TV box.

Success! Without that simple 15-minute test, though, we would never have known that we had an information problem to solve.

I have been known to poke fun at editors who fancy themselves members of the “grammarati.” These are the types of inflexible folks who think rules are rules and the way they were taught in school is the way it is. No matter what. Why is this not true? A thoughtful defense of rules has its place. Of course, usage inevitably changes. Yesterday's no-nos are today's just-fines. *Enormity*, which today usually means “enormousness,” once widely meant “hideousness.” Years ago, anyone who used this word in today's sense would have been universally considered wrong.

Bryan Garner has developed what he calls a Language-Change Index, which gauges, on a scale of one to five, how widely accepted a given usage has

become. I find Garner's perspective fascinating and broad-minded: he defends usage guidelines even as he describes states of change.

What is one of the most often repeated rules of grammar that actually isn't a rule at all?

The first so-called rule that comes to mind is “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” (Are you hearing a certain English teacher's voice right now?) This “rule” has been called a “durable superstition,” a “remnant of Latin grammar,” an “artificial ‘rule,’” and “one of the top ten grammar myths.” One editor reports having seen many a “tangled sentence due to reluctance to end a sentence with a preposition.”

And were you taught never to start a sentence with a conjunction, like *and*, *but*, or *or*? Never to allow passive voice to be used? Never to slip in a sentence fragment like this one? Forget about those “rules,” too.

Of course, you have to understand the rules (and the nonrules) to know when, why, and how to break them. Try breaking that rule.

What advice can you share with writers who are thinking of authoring their first book?

What better way to get your name out there than to put it on the cover of a book? Anyone can self-publish now. If you've got a book in you, go for it.

Gather a good team: readers—lots of readers—and an editor, a page designer, an illustrator, a publishing expert, a publicist. (You can do it all yourself, but you'll miss opportunities, and you might do something you'll later regret, like mistyping Shakespeare's birth date.) If you hire professionals, prepare to spend a surprising amount of money. Consider it an investment in learning, like taking a course in publishing, except that instead of getting a grade, you end up with a sellable product.

Figure out how much time you'll need to pull your book together. Double that estimate. Then add a year.

Be willing to be wrong.

Writers are often voracious readers. What are you reading right now for pleasure? And, what book has been sitting on your shelf for far too long but you still haven't managed to find time to read it.

I can't wait to get back to other authors' books. How did you know? The book that has been sitting neglected on my nightstand too long is *The Man Who Loved China* by the prolific Simon Winchester. His writing gives me chills, and his subject matter always enlarges my world.

The book I'm reading now for pleasure is Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*. I look forward to discussing it with my husband; he's been recommending it for years. I used to consider reading a purely private indulgence, but I've come to relish book conversations. You learn a lot about people from their responses to a book you've read in common, especially when their responses differ from your own.

In fact, other people's responses always differ from your own. No two people ever read the same book or the same anything. When the writer in you comes to this realization, you gulp.

Where can *Intercom* readers get a hold of your book?

Forget what I just said. I hope that all of you will read the same book: *Word Up!* Print and ebook versions will be available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Powell's, etc., on 27 April 2013, National Tell a Story Day. Mark your calendar.

If you'd like a reminder, subscribe to my blog, where I post book news: www.HowToWriteEverything.com or email me at marcia_r_johnston@me.com and I'll add you to the super-ultra-exclusive, all-the-hip-people-are-on-it alert list.

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