

APRIL MEETING

*It's More Than a Technicality:
How to Write How-to Manuals*

BY DAVID EPSTEIN

When Boeing tried to assemble the first 787 Dreamliner, workers found that the wiring circuits of two major sections preassembled by different suppliers didn't quite match up. Probably some production team hadn't read the technical manual. Or the manual was poorly written. If they'd had a skilled technical engineering writer like George Becht on their team, they could have saved months and millions of dollars in rework and penalties.

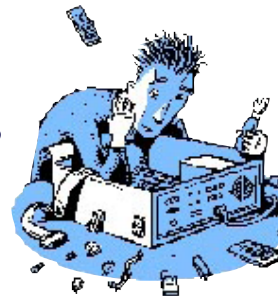
From jetliners to computer software to DVD recorders to tricycles, our world is full of devices that would be really useful—if only we knew how to push the right buttons, program their memory functions, or even just put the (expletive deleted) things together! All of us have gnashed teeth over manuals that read like anagrams in a foreign language. On the other hand, a well-written manual can save a company millions in product liability claims, lost productivity, returns, and customer satisfaction.

That's why the world—and especially marketing and product managers, engineering departments, manufacturers, and design firms—need more good technical writers. At our next

IWOC meeting, George Becht, who parlayed his engineering expertise into success as a technical writer, will explain how to get into this stimulating and well-paid field, how to get clients, and how to do the work.

Becht will describe the complex and challenging role of the technical writer as a vital and integral member of a product development team. The tech writer is in large part a traffic controller, coordinating elements of sales literature, sales and service manuals, training manuals, parts lists, engineering drawings and specifications, and graphics. It takes a lot of writing skill to translate technical language and jargon accurately into clear instructions for nontechnical product users or production and maintenance technicians. At the same time, the writer can help engineers and research-and-development professionals to view a new product or process from the perspective of real-life users, helping them make it easier to explain—and maybe even improving aspects of design.

From his many years of experience both as a mechanical engineer and a technical writer, Becht will describe



the whole process, starting in the early stages of product development, from document design through gathering infor-

mation about the product and the intended users, through outlining, planning for visuals, to editing and final delivery.

If you're interested in exploring this as a new area for your writing business, you'll learn how to identify the people in companies and design firms who hire technical writers and how to establish contact and credibility with them, whether they are in publications, advertising, marketing, or product management.

Becht launched his own career as a self-employed technical writer in 1995, two years before he joined IWOC. He had graduated from Villanova University with a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering, then served four years as an officer in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserve. After completing military service, he worked as an engineer and project manager in industries including food processing, industrial pumps, metal

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN/ROGER RUEFF

A Karmic End to the Rehab

Last Friday afternoon at 4:52 p.m., I finished remodeling the kitchen. Earlier in the week, I had tackled the job of tiling and grouting the backsplash. So on Friday all that remained was to caulk the small gap between the backsplash and countertop; cut, stain, and install a short piece of gap-masking quarter round above the sink lights; and mount a double-gang wall plate to cover the outlet/switch combination on the left side of the stove. (I'll admit to indulging a bit in the home-improvement lingo here. I'm hardly the expert, but I enjoy using small pieces of any language I pick up along the way in an adventure—which this has been.) The caulking went smoothly, the quarter round fit freakishly well, and the wall plate succumbed nicely to the bit of sanding required to fit it into place (a long story that I'll reveal only to those who know the secret password).

When I finished tightening the last of the four small, white screws that secure the stove-side wall plate, I looked at the clock on the new microwave. It read 4:52. I noted the date and time... my moment of small home-improvement victory.

So much has happened since I started the project in mid-January. Barack Obama took the oath of office as U.S. president. Pat Quinn took the oath as Illinois governor, supplanting Rod Blagojevich after his ouster. Natasha Richardson died from head injuries suffered while skiing in Canada. My son turned 20. Three of my close friends turned... well, a year older. And six billion people whose names never make the news experienced milestones,

heartaches, joys, tragedies, and small victories of their own all over the world.

As for me, I acquired a whole new set of practical household skills—from dry-wall repair to cabinet and countertop installation to light plumbing and electrical know-how to a modicum of tiling and grouting expertise (neither of which I'd ever done before).

And the results look even better than I had imagined.

I was thinking of using this month's column to highlight a few of the similarities between kitchen remodeling and freelance writing. And there are many, believe me. The importance of planning—of carefully thinking through what the task requires and evaluating what likely can and cannot be done before you start... and of working up a good and accurate cost estimate. The necessity of research—of being open to picking up new information and skills and of seeking help from experts where and when it becomes available (thank you, Pete the Pro, for your one-hour workshops at Century Tile). The effect of selection, layout, and juxtaposition of the elements that make up the work—whether in the color and texture of cabinet doors, wall paint, countertop color, and tile... or in the choice and arrangement of words, sentences, and paragraphs in a document. The wisdom of revision when required and possible... and when to say "stet." And the need to forgive yourself for the small, embarrassing errors you notice when the project is finished, and they cannot be fixed—when the thinset concrete is dry on the wall or



the article is sent off and circulating among the client's reviewers.

But then something strange happened on Sunday that sent me in a different direction... and made me think of the project in karmic terms. Specifically, I received an out-of-the-blue visit from the guy who owned the condo before me—the same guy I publicly chastised at the outset of the project (and privately for years) for the shoddiness of his handiwork... in the kitchen and everywhere else.

The door buzzer rang in the late afternoon, just as I had finished reorganizing the laundry room—a task the need for which grew out of the kitchen remodel—and startled me, because I never get buzzed except by UPS or FedEx... and even then never on Sunday. I figured it must be one of the three other people who live in my building and that someone had forgotten his or her keys. Either that or someone had accidentally pressed the wrong button outside.

Regardless, I opened the door and looked down from the top of the staircase into the entryway. My downstairs neighbor had already answered the door and called up to me, "This man says he used to live in your unit." Beside her stood a tall, dark-skinned Indian man with a gentle expression, a well-dressed teen-aged boy whom I took to be his son, and a middle-aged Caucasian woman, who was shortly thereafter introduced to me as the son's former

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To Pound the Pavement or Tap the Keys: Adventures in Research

BY ANDREW LEWELLEN

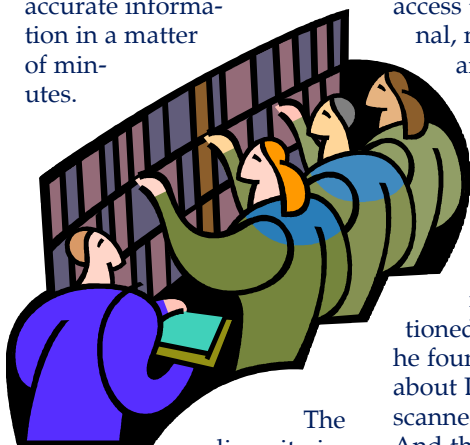
How much research is required to determine what year a building burned? For journalist Robert Loerzel, the answer was seven years—or four minutes.

While writing his 2003 true-crime book, *Alchemy of Bones* (University of Illinois Press), about the 1897 murder trial of Adolph Leutgert, who was charged with murdering his wife (and possibly disposing of her body in a vat of chemicals in his Chicago sausage factory), Loerzel needed to determine a crucial piece of information: when and if the Leutgert factory burned down. Eventually, the information only occupied about a paragraph of the 352-page book. But after initially finding conflicting information—some sources said the factory burned down in 1902, others 1904—Loerzel realized he needed to do more research to determine the correct information. So he began his search the “old-fashioned way,” primarily relying on libraries and other institutions.

Loerzel explained in great detail his quest to discover the true fate of the Leutgert factory during his presentation, “Enrich Your Writing with Research,” at the March IWOC meeting. He talked of seven years of pounding the pavement, scanning microfilm (including an entire year of the *Chicago Tribune*), contacting descendants of Leutgert, even studying turn-of-the-century maps of Chicago fire routes, and

frequently finding more conflicting information. In the end, he determined that the majority of sources had been wrong: a fire burned the factory in 1902, but the factory was not destroyed.

Several years after he ended his original search, Loerzel used Google Book Search to look for the same information. He found the accurate information in a matter of minutes.



The disparity in time and effort

of Loerzel’s two searches for the same bit of information highlights the drastic way the internet has changed the way people can conduct research. Literally, what once took years now takes minutes.

Loerzel said you might have different reasons to do research—you might need to determine an essential fact, or you may just want a lively anecdote. Whatever your reason, good research is essential to great writing.

Of course, the key to successful research on the internet is finding good search engines and web sites. Loerzel mentioned a few in particular:

(1) Google Book Search allows you to search the contents of all books scanned into the Google archives. The search is free, but you may have to pay to read a book in its entirety. (2) Newspaper archive.org contains archives of most prominent newspapers. Charges an annual fee of \$99.

ProQuest.org provides access to newspaper, journal, magazine and other articles. Charges are per article.

Although these technologies provide efficient access to vast resources, users should be aware of shortcomings. Loerzel mentioned one instance when he found a page from a book about Leutgert mistakenly scanned into a botany book. And though newspaperarchive.org provides access to archives of most prominent papers, it does not include all papers, such as some of the turn-of-the-century Chicago papers.

Along with using these search engines, Loerzel mentioned some other excellent ways to use the internet for research. One good source of information is Wikipedia—not the entries, which can be unreliable, but the links to sources at the end of the entries, which do provide accurate information. To find people who might be relevant to your research, use Google or White Pages, or look for genealogy sites. And you can research obituaries to find other informa-

tion about subjects or their descendants.

Another strategy to gather information is to create an actual website for your project, which might attract people who are looking to share information they have.

But even with the convenience of the internet, it’s important to keep in mind that a successful internet search might refer you to a book or periodical you need to get at a library. Or you still may yearn to pound the pavement, touch old archives with your own hands, or scan microfilm.

In these instances, Loerzel suggested the following libraries and institutions: the Chicago Public Library—particularly the extensive microfilm collection on the 9th floor of the Harold Washington Library; the Newberry Library; university libraries, such as the ones at the University of Chicago or Northwestern (though university library policies regarding public access to their libraries can vary); the library at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has the papers of people like Louis Sullivan; the Cook County Law Library; the Daley Center; the National Archives; and even the Illinois State Archives, which has documents of legal cases that advanced to the Illinois State Supreme Court.

If you do conduct research at libraries or institutions, photographing documents, taking good notes, and making photocopies are ideal

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Freelancer's Union Now Offers 401(k) Plans to Independent Contractors

BY JOEN KINNAN

Some months back, *Stet* featured an article about the Freelancers Union. To refresh your memories, The Freelancers Union was started by a woman in New York with the express purpose of offering insurance to independent contractors of all sorts. If you get 1099s instead of W-2s, you're eligible if you're a Freelancers Union member. Naturally, this is a big draw since lack of affordable insurance is a nasty problem for freelance writers.

The organization has really taken off in New York, to the point that Freelancers Union is now its own insurance carrier. Because insurance plans need large memberships to offer good rates, and coverages varies by state, the Union needs more members in Illinois to give the same good deals, but now the Union is offering something to its members that we can all take advantage of: retirement plans—401(k)s.

The Union has partnered with Charles Schwab Trust Company and Milliman to offer a pretty enticing plan. Unlike many other plans, there's no minimum contribution, and the fees are quite reasonable: a \$40 set-up fee and just \$11 per month. That's about the cost of two cups of coffee.

You can make automatic

contributions, or if your monthly income is a bit dicey, you can choose to write a check when you want to contribute.

Go to **Freelancers Union Retirement** for more details. There's a nice chart there that compares their plan with others. Also, you'll see a schedule for two retirement "events." These are online seminars with more information. (One of the neat things about Freelancers Union is that all of their "events" are online.)

Even neater is the fact that membership in Freelancers Union is absolutely free. And they have a lot to offer. There's a job site, advocacy opportunities to work for the betterment of freelancers,

and on the insurance front, they offer health, dental, disability, and life insurance.

Which brings me back to insurance in Illinois. Because there aren't enough Union members here, the insurance is through an affiliated carrier, and it's only so-so. What if every member of IWOC joined the Union? The more members, the greater the likelihood that the Union could become its own insurance carrier as in New York. It costs nothing to join, and IWOCers who need insurance would get a better deal. (We might even be able to get IWOC some publicity by having 100 percent membership.) Let's go for it! I joined the other day, and already I feel like a better, richer, smarter person. Drop me a note if you decide to join.✌



Features of the Freelancers Union 401(k) Plan

- **Flexible, automatic monthly contributions**
- **High contribution limits and significant tax advantages**
- **No minimums and low fees**
- **Target-date model investing**
- **An investment fund portfolio that can be customized at any time**

IWOC Welcomes New Members

Michelle Beuscher

Don Talend

Stewart Truelsen

*March Recap
Continued from page 3.*

ways to create hard copies of your efforts.

Of course, once you've gathered information, you need to organize it in a way that makes it easily accessible. For hard materials, accurately labeled and well-organized manila folders work well. For electronic materials, most operating systems have good quality organizing software, and you can always pay more to upgrade to better filing software.

Loerzel also suggested a few ways to make historical stories relevant to current readers. One strategy is to time the publication of an article or book with the anniversary of an event you're writing about. Another approach is to connect a historical story to a current issue, which Loerzel did when he published "The Smoking Gun," an article about Lucy Page Gaston, who nearly achieved banning cigarettes in Illinois a hundred years ago, in the January 2008 issue of *Chicago* magazine, when a smoking ban was taking place in Chicago.

Whatever the topic or information you're researching, be ready to dig deep and think critically. As Loerzel's laborious search for one small piece of information illustrates, when searching for the proverbial needle in the haystack, even the most bright and shining bit of information may turn out to be just one more piece of flimsy straw.✌

*Editor's note: Robert Loerzel has kindly provided us with a list of links to online research sites. The list is too long for inclusion in *Stet*, but look for a link to it online in the March recap on the Coming Events page.*

President's Column *Continued from page 2.*

physical therapist—or as the man put it, “The woman who put my son up on his feet.” (I remembered at that moment my realtor’s suggesting that the boy had problems walking. He was four years old at the time... and now is driving.)

The man introduced himself as Jetinder, a name I remembered from the contracts I signed when I bought the place in 1997. He told me that he and his son were in town from Kansas City, where they had moved after Jetinder completed his medical internship at a hospital in Minnesota. The son plays trombone and was in town to take part in a high school music competition associated with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. While they were here, they wanted to see the place where they once lived and had walked around the outside of the building taking pictures. Jetinder thought I’d seen them doing so and wanted to assure me that nothing was up.

I invited them in.

The encounter was brief and fascinating in a this-is-so-bizarre kind of way. They walked through the place like respectful explorers visiting an ancient temple—reconstructing from memory the life they once lived here. They visited my office, which used to be the boy’s bedroom, and glanced into my son’s room, which used to house Jetinder’s parents. They walked through and admired the kitchen, complimenting the colors.

Jetinder gazed with the awe of fond remembrance at the ceramic tile in the foyer and the oak parquet in the dining area—the only home improvements done well before I arrived... and both of them his handiwork. They took pictures—some of the place itself and some of Jetinder and me. We exchanged information. He invited me to visit him in Kansas City and offered to grill me a steak. We chatted about the real estate market in Naperville.

And just like that, they were gone. Living, breathing ghosts from the past life of this condominium... called here by weird coincidence just two days after I had finished its first major remodeling work since its ownership passed into my hands. I had never met Jetinder before and might never see or hear from him again... only time will tell.

Beyond the mere strangeness of its timing, though, the encounter has punctuated the end of the whole kitchen-remodeling project in a karmic sort of way. Here in the living room on Sunday afternoon stood the flesh-and-blood human whose handiwork I had decried as frustratingly shoddy and made the butt of many jokes—the man whose presence put a face to the object of my joking insults and whose gentle and friendly manner made me rethink them... not in substance (some of the work was really poorly done) but in tone, since implicit in all such joking is a sense of superiority in the teller.

And he was accompanied by his respectful and well-mannered son, who had overcome a physical handicap just to walk in the way the rest of us do.

It’s safe to say I feel somewhat... tempered, now, and prepared to move on. The story of the kitchen when I tell it will no longer focus on how bad it was then, but simply how good it is now. The contrasts will still be drawn in the telling, to be sure, but they won’t be sharpened like pointed sticks and jabbed into the anonymous figure “who used to own the place.” He’s not so anonymous, anymore.

The tale of the kitchen has been spiritually cleansed.

And now I am ready to cook. 🍳

Calendar

April 14

IWOC Monthly Meeting. IWOC’s own George Becht will tell us all about writing how-to manuals and give us some tips on finding the appropriate clients Tuesday, April 14 at National-Louis University, Room 5008, 122 S. Michigan Ave., Chicago. Program 6 p.m. Networking 5 p.m. Nonmembers, \$15; IWOC members free. Buy-your-own dinner follows. Nonmembers welcome. For more information, call 847-855-6670 or visit www.iwoc.org.

The monthly food and networking get-togethers listed below meet at the same time and place each month unless otherwise noted, but call ahead in case of cancellation. The groups welcome nonmembers. If there’s no group in your area, why not start one? Contact webmaster@iwoc.org.

April 23 (4th Thursday)

IWOOP Monthly Lunch. Join near-west suburbanites for a noon lunch at Poor Phil’s, 139 S. Marion St., Oak Park. For more info, call Barb Dillard at 312/642-3065. We’ll meet in March if the weather warms up. Check before you come. This lunch is monthly only if there are enough people who can attend.

May 7 (1st Thursday)

IWORP Monthly Breakfast. Join the Rogers Park IWOC contingent for breakfast at 9 AM at the A&T Grill, 7036 N. Clark St., Chicago. For more info, call Esther Manewith at 773/274-6215.

April Meeting *Continued from page 1.*

stampings, and railroad freight cars and related equipment.

When his employer decided to leave the line of business his department handled, Becht started writing articles for an industry trade magazine while representing various companies as a commissioned sales engineer. Fairly soon, he was getting so many writing assignments that he gave up sales engineering and has since concentrated entirely on freelance technical writing.

Networking with snacks and beverages begins at 5 p.m. and the meeting at 6. Nonmembers are cordially invited. The meeting is free for IWOC members and \$15 for nonmembers. Plan to stay for a buy-your-own dinner at a nearby restaurant after the meeting. Remember: the location is National-Louis University, 122 South Michigan, Room 5008. This is now our permanent room. National-Louis U. is across the street from the Art Institute. See you there! 🍷