Newsletter

IEEE Professional Communication Society

1984 PCS Conference

The 1984 PCS Conference will be held in Atlantic City, New Jersey, October 10-12 (see the call for papers on page 7). Atlantic City is one of the most visitor-oriented cities in the country with some of finest facilities for conferences and conventions of all sizes and kinds. Indeed, Leon Pickus, local arrangements chairman, found other organizations had booked their activities in the weeks preceding and following ours. Fortunately, we will have the facilities of the newest hotel (Harrah's) to be built in Atlantic City on the famous Boardwalk.

Atlantic City is easy to get to. Its modern airport has connecting flights to and from 106 cities. And Philadelphia International Airport is less than an hour away by limousine. Because so many people want to visit Atlantic City, most east coast cities have convenient direct charter bus service that is often faster from center cities than by air.

This year's theme is "The Practical Aspects of Engineering Communication." Jack Friedman will be putting together a program of papers and workshops that stresses communicating electrical engineering knowledge by techniques that are both innovative and practical with today's publishing technology. The papers

Inside

Did You Ever Hear the Wild Owl Lecture?

It can happen to anyone, anytime. There you are, writing simple, clear sentences when suddenly you write one like this:

> Corporate executives decided to reject the union's demands because they were so unreasonable.

Were the executives unreasonable? Or were the union's demands unreasonable? If you're a politician running for office during these negotiations, this is a wonderful sentence. It doesn't commit itself either way. If you're striving for clear communication, you've got a problem. The sentence is ambiguous.

Some ambiguities are so distracting that the reader forgets about the context entirely. E. B. White includes the following in his famous writing handbook, *The Elements of Style:*

> New York's first commercial human-sperm bank opened Friday with semen samples from 18 men frozen in a stainless steel tank.

White writes, ". . . the reader's heart goes out to those eighteen poor fellows frozen in a steel tank."

Ambiguity can be entertaining, but the confusion wastes time and money. Unintentional ambiguity in a legal document is a common source of lawsuits. Ambiguity can be costly to businesses. If you have to explain what you mean in another notice later, that costs money—and hurts your good relationship with your colleagues or customers.

How can you catch ambiguous sentences? Here are three common causes of ambituity to look for:

• Ambiguity often occurs when words designed to work together get separated in a sentence. Adjectives

From the editor . . .

Response to the *Transactions'* call for papers on developing the ability to communicate, or education for communication, has been nothing less than phenomenal! Twenty-eight papers have been submitted for the third-quarter issue to be published jointly with the *Transactions on Education,* and 27 of those were submitted directly to PC. It's too soon to predict the survival rate—Dave and I are recruiting a lot of reviewers—but the September *Transactions* should certainly be a healthy one.

There's no doubt the word "education" in the call was a strong stimulus: 25 of the papers (89 percent) came from universities and only two from industry and one from an independent. In the past, our emphasis on pragmatic material in small doses—and our far-reaching search for reprintable material fitting that description—resulted in about a 60-percent contribution from industry, consultants, free-lancers, etc. The table summarizes the sources of our papers for the last three years.

Sources of Transactions Papers (%)

	1981	1982	1983
Industry	26	29	27
University	20	41	41
Other	54	30	32
Original (i.e., not reprinted)	19	39	68

Here are three more communication hot lines:

- (205) 826-5749, *Writing Center Hotline* at Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama
- (316) 343-1200, *Writer's Hotline* at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas
- (804) 427-3070, *Grammar Hotline* at Tidewater Community College, Virginia Beach, Virginia

If you know of other such professional communication links, please send me the information.

. . . and the associate editor

PCC83 is over and preparations for PCC84 have begun. The conference in Atlanta was a high point for PCS this year. Much was accomplished at this conference (see page 4) and much must now be done.

In the next ten months Jack Friedman, the Technical Program Chairman, will receive and review abstracts, review drafted papers, and advise authors who are preparing their presentations. This process is kicked off with the call for papers (page 7). We asked Jack for advice for prospective presenters. He suggested that contributors focus their efforts on their oral presentations at the conference, in light of PCC84's emphasis on *practical* communication. He says,

> The ideal paper is both written well and presented well. Along with furnishing a useful input to the conference proceedings comes the responsibility to have a good presentation at the conference. Writing a professional paper and then giving a casual or poorly prepared presentation is only half a loaf to one's peers. The PCC84 committee expects authors to deliver their papers well. A paper doesn't have to be memorized or choreographed. It can even be read, as long as it is well done and coordinated with good visual aids. This requires the author to outline the talk, rehearse at home, have trial runs at work, and do whatever else is necessary to produce a rewarding experience for conference attendees.

□

Thanks from PCC83 Chairman

The 1983 IEEE PCS Conference held in Atlanta was a resounding success, exceeding last year's in all ways. Each successive conference has produced more registrants and greater profit so, now that the ball is rolling, there is no reason to expect anything but even greater success in the future.

These impressive results were made possible by the untiring efforts and cooperation of the other chairmen:

- **Jim Hill**, Technical Program
  HRB-Singer, State College, PA
- **Karen Gutzat**, Publications
  HRB-Singer, State College, PA
- **Jim Gleason**, Publicity
  IBM, Lexington, KY
- **Arch Corriher**, Local Arrangements
  Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, GA

and the support of so many others in the Society.

On behalf of PCS, thanks to all the committees and other participating members for their show of *esprit de corps.*

—*Lois K. Moore*
  General Chairman

☐

Cogent Counsel

A young cub reporter, who had just been hired straight out of journalism school, asked Adolph S. Ochs for some instructions.

"Young fellow," said the famous publisher of *The New York Times,* "all I have to say is this: In promulgating your esoteric cogitations and articulating superficial sentimental and psychological observations, beware of platitudinous ponderosity. Let your extemporaneous decantations and unpremeditated expiations have intelligibility and veracious vivacity without rodomontade and thrasonical bombast. Sedulously avoid all polysyllabic profundity, pusillanimous vacuity, pestiferous profanity, and similar transgressions.

"Or, to put it a bit differently," he concluded, "talk simply, naturally, and, above all, don't use big words!"

Transliteration

Editor:

I enjoyed the September 1983 *Transactions* article "What's in a Name?" by Juhasz, Klein, and Wood. I was disappointed, however, to see that they used the incorrect Russian-to-English transliteration for the name "Chebyshev" (page 122, second column, top). Although this is probably considered unimportant by the average *Transactions* reader, the correct transliteration is of considerable importance to those writing on the subject of electric wave filters. Because the name Chebyshev appears so frequently when discussing filters, it is important that it be presented in a correct and consistent manner.

I have enclosed copies of what I consider authoritative references* concerning the correct transliteration of Chebyshev. I am especially impressed with the explanation from N. M. Blachman that appeared in the *IEEE Spectrum.* I would be grateful if Messrs. Juhasz, Klein, and Wood would review the enclosed references, and if they agree with the preferred transliteration, I would appreciate receiving a confirmation from them. If they do not agree, I would appreciate hearing their rationale for whatever transliteration they propose as the preferred one.

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* Correspondence, *IRE Transactions,* 1955, p. 105.
  Forum, *IEEE Spectrum,* April 1974, p. 31.
  Feedback, *Microwaves,* January 1981.

—*Edward E. Wetherhold*
  Honeywell, Inc.
  P.O. Box 391
  Annapolis, MD 21404

☐

The authors reply:

We appreciate Dr. Wetherhold's interest in our paper and his comments on the spelling of the Russian numerical analyst's name which, according to his references, can be transliterated ten ways. We did not recommend a preferred transliteration but gave two examples where the initial letters are T and C, which illustrate the problem caused by different national standards. We neither agree nor disagree with Dr. Wetherhold; he proved our point.

—*S. Juhasz, T. Klein, J. Wood*

A PCC83 Scrapbook

PCC83 saw nearly 100 people in attendance at the Atlanta Sheraton. For three days during the third week in October, the Professional Communication Society banner hung from the podium in the Georgia East Ballroom and, for those three days, communication professionals and students from across the country took part in workshops, attended presentations, and took in the sights of Atlanta. Each session provoked a fresh round of animated discussion in the hallways outside the conference center. Each day of the conference provided material for more discussions lasting well into the evening.

The highlight of the conference was the keynote luncheon on Wednesday. In the midst of the busy, often hectic schedule, all attending the conference were treated to a leisurely, companionable two hours, giving old friends a chance to touch base, and giving newcomers time to get their bearings. Keynote speaker Craig Harkins provided observations on the conference theme. He stressed the ubiquity of computer communication today, from the assortment of articles found in any issue of *The Wall Street Journal* to the public address system at the airport in Atlanta where taped human voices are electronically distorted to provide the "authority" of machine-generated language.

At the end of the banquet, awards chairman Jim Hill presented the Alfred N. Goldsmith Award to Richard M. Robinson for his long-standing service on the Administrative Committee of the Professional Communication Society (see page 5). Richie was genuinely surprised by the honor and movingly thanked the Society for the recognition.

In the conference rooms at the Sheraton, workshop leaders shared their expertise on managing proposals, dealing with word processors, preparing career documents, and maintaining computer documentation. The featured panel discussion, moderated by Joseph Mancuso, was held Wednesday afternoon and served to link the industrial and academic interests of the Society in a discussion on cooperative education placements in industry. And PCC83 passed the real tests of any conference—the quality and the variety of presentations. Computer communication ruled for three days in Atlanta, with presentations ranging from the opening session on the role of word processors in writing and editing to sessions on completely automated publication systems.

The Administrative Committee did not rest during the conference. At a meeting on Wednesday night that lasted until well after midnight, AdCom members discussed issues ranging from the Society's position within IEEE to conference coordination procedures to editorial direction in the *Transactions* and the *Newsletter*. PCC84 was discussed at length and the groundwork laid for even greater success in future conferences.

On Thursday, after a full day, nearly half the people attending PCC83 found the energy for an evening tour of historic Stone Mountain outside Atlanta. The tour ended late and enthusiastic participants were still talking about it when Friday's session began.

Atlanta itself provided diversion. In the evenings, participants explored downtown Atlanta, finding good restaurants (Mary-Mac's southern cooking proved the most popular), spectacular views (as from the glass-walled exterior elevators at the Atlanta Hilton), and quiet spots to talk (the Okeefenokee Lounge in the Sheraton). The Georgia Institute of Technology was only half a mile away, providing joggers with a route and researchers with a library.

The luncheon on Friday maintained the upbeat tone of the conference, with speaker Dudley Dinshaw's wry slide show on the plight of the technical writer in a technological world—from the Stone Age onward.

When the conference closed, those who attended PCC83 left for their homes around the country to consider the mass of information they had acquired, and to start planning for next year's conference in Atlantic City. Conference Chairman Lois K. Moore and Technical Program Chairman James W. Hill are to be congratulated on their success.

—*David Milley*

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Newsletter Deadline

Articles, news, and comments for publication must reach the editor on or before the first day of the month preceding the month of issue, that is,

Issue	Deadline
January	December 1
April	March 1
July	June 1
October	September 1

Send double-spaced typed contributions to R. J. Joenk, IBM Corp., Dept. 588/022, P.O. Box 1900, Boulder, CO 80302.

IEEE Centennial Year

Throughout 1984 the IEEE will be celebrating its one hundredth anniversary. For the occasion the IEEE Centennial Task Force has developed a variety of projects and activities:

* Special programs at technical events and meetings, e.g., Centennial Founders (Dallas, January 31), Anniversary Celebration (New York, May 13-14), Forum for Planning (Toronto, August 12), Technical Program (Philadelphia, October 8-9).

* Centennial medals to be presented to 1984 individuals throughout the Institute.

* A traveling exhibit covering key historic events and contributors to technology.

* Museum displays at the Franklin Institute and the Smithsonian Institution.

* A Centennial movie, 30-second TV spots, and a filmed report of the year's activities.

* Two IEEE Press books on the history of the Institute and the profession.

* Papers in several issues of *IEEE Spectrum* and *Proceedings of the IEEE*.

* A slide presentation and a historic-photograph file.

* Commemorative postage stamps, painting, flag, banner, calendar, posters, and public-official citations.

* Mementos such as digital clocks, key rings, pens, ties, and paperweights.

Watch *The Institute* and other publications for Centennial news. Chairman of the task force is John Ryder.

□

Dear Computer

On the subject of "salutations in computerese":

Because these machines [personal computers] are in the word-process of revolutionizing mail, language must adapt. We must remember who is in charge: Language comes first; the method of communication comes second. With that firmly understood, we can cave in gracefully to the demands of electronic mail.

—*William Safire*
  The New York Times

Goldsmith Award for 1983 to Robinson

The Alfred N. Goldsmith Award for 1983 was presented to Richard M. Robinson (SM) at the PCS Conference in Atlanta on October 21.

Richie was cited for "continual and meritorious contributions in advancing the goals of the society." He has been a member of the Administrative Committee for seven years and its Membership Chairman for five. Largely though his efforts PCS has grown steadily during this period while other, younger societies have lost membership.

Richie is Editorial Supervisor for Grumman Aerospace Corporation's Presentations Services Department in Bethpage, New York. He has a B.S. degree in physics and an M.S. degree in technical writing from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

The memorial Goldsmith Award was established in 1974 and is given in recognition of service within the Professional Communication Society to improve the quality of engineering communication.

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1984 PCS Conference
(continued from page 1)

promise to be full of ideas on getting the most out of word processors and managing computer files for easy access. There will be presenters showing how to use video techniques for customer and user training. There will be papers on data management, intra-company communication, and verbal persuasion techniques that work, and a great deal more.

Although the program promises to be full, there will be time for other activities, too. Because of the proximity of the ocean, Atlantic City's temperature is moderate throughout the year. It won't be warm enough for ocean swimming—just use the hotel's large pool—but conditions promise to be ideal for long walks along the ocean front in early October. Because Atlantic City is a visitor-oriented city, gift shops and a multitude of entertainment opportunities abound.

So plan now to meet your PCS colleagues on October 10th in Atlantic City, New Jersey. See you there.

—*Andrew Malcolm*
  Conference Chairman

Articles of Confusion

I vividly remember my sixth-grade English teacher, Mrs. Wren. A strict grammarian, she seemed to know everything there was to know about the mechanics of English.

She especially emphasized sentence diagramming. Her logic was simple: by diagramming a sentence correctly, we were demonstrating that we understood the relationship of each part of the sentence to the whole. And diagramming forced us to present that relationship graphically.

When we weren't being asked to diagram sentences, we were being drilled by oral questions. "Should sentence 1 be 'who' or 'whom'?" she'd ask. After the student answered, the next question was invariably "Why?" Frequently the hapless response was, "Because it *sounds* right." I'd watch her cringe. She had heard that now for the umpteenth time. "But, what's the *rule*?" she patiently entreated. She wanted to be sure we understood the relationship. Knowing the rule attested to our knowing the relationship.

Those who knew the rules could glibly offer, "It's 'who' because it's a predicate nominative," or "It's 'whom' because it's the object of the preposition." As long as you knew the rule, it was easy to respond, but what if you didn't know the rule? Then you were expected to discover some meaningful relationship.

Japanese writers often ask me, "What's the rule?" Thanks no doubt to Mrs. Wren's influence, I've been able to provide the rule—until recently, that is—when I was asked for a rule I couldn't supply: how to determine when to use an article (*a, an, the*). I didn't know any rules governing the use of articles, per se, so I was going to have to formulate one. I took inventory of what I already knew about articles. (Mrs. Wren would be proud.)

Let's see. There were two indefinite articles (*a, an*) and one definite article (*the*). I remember hearing somewhere that we should use the indefinite articles when introducing a noun, and we can use the definite article thereafter when referring to that noun. For example, "*A* flashing red light indicates *a* parity error." Hereafter, we can refer to *the* red light and *the* parity error (assuming, of course, they are the same red light and the same parity error).

What else did I know about articles? Nothing came to mind, so I thumbed through a few grammar books to see what they might offer. Not much, I discovered. I looked in the dictionary. Only definitions there. Finally, one style book meagerly offered, "Use 'a' before a consonant sound, 'an' before a vowel sound." This seems not so much a grammatical requirement as it is a pronunciation consideration. Besides, this doesn't appear to be a problem for Japanese writers.

The Japanese have no articles. Simply stated, their problem is they're not able to determine when an article is required and when it's optional. Unlike native-English students who say, "Because it sounds right," Japanese writers cannot rely on euphony to decide the issue. So, they turn to me for guidance.

Knowing that principles are empirically derived, I looked at some old drafts of Japanese-written manuals. I had hopes of finding some relationship that would help me formulate a principle I could pass along. In several sentences I changed articles, deleted articles, even inserted articles to see what I could learn. For example,

1. A pulley without a guard is dangerous.
2. Pulleys without guards are dangerous.

Notice that in deleting the articles in 1, I had to make the nouns plural. But I couldn't conclude anything valid; I needed more examples.

3. If an error code is displayed, ...
4. If error codes are displayed, ...

Interesting, I thought. Maybe singular nouns need articles and plural nouns don't. I knew that *a* and *an* were never used with plural nouns, so I needed to verify using *the*.

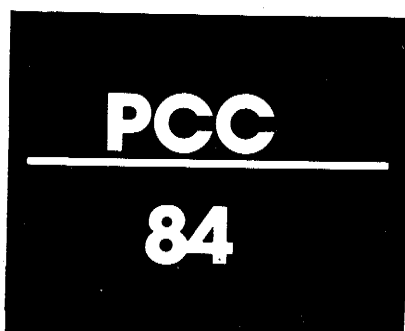5. If the left indicator is blinking, ...

That's consistent, I thought. Perhaps this was the genesis of a principle. Now, I'll try the plural form:

6. If the left and right indicators are blinking, ...

Oh no! What happened? The *the* in 6 is not optional, so it appears that I'm back at the beginning. I'll have to take a different approach. (I'm still working on it.)

In looking back I wanted to take stock of what I had learned—if, indeed I learned anything. I think I learned two significant things. First, I learned that in English we discriminate between specific and general terms; the Japanese don't. By design, their language is more general and ambiguous. I don't see this difference as a shortcoming. Rather, it sheds some light on other dif-

PCC 84

**IEEE
Professional Communication Society**

1884 · 1984
A CENTURY OF ELECTRICAL PROGRESS

CALL FOR PAPERS
& MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

*The Practical Aspects
of Engineering Communication*

Conference Dates 10, 11, 12 October 1984

Location Atlantic City, New Jersey (Hotel/Casino)

Who should participate PCC/84 is designed as a forum for engineers, managers, professional communicators, educators, technical editors and writers, graphic designers, production people, video producers and others involved in communication.

Objective To share ideas and experiences and offer helpful solutions to practical problems related to your work. Emphasis will be on the *practical* rather than the theoretical aspects of communicating technical and scientific information. Authors are encouraged to collaborate with associated personnel and organizations to reflect their perspective and experience in jointly authorized papers.

List of Topics (tentative)
- ☐ Writing and editing on text-management and word-processing systems
- ☐ Using video and interactive computers in training
- ☐ Applying computer technology to graphics
- ☐ Using video and multimedia displays for effective oral communication
- ☐ Using persuasion theory in real-world applications
- ☐ Informing and motivating employees through intra-corporate communications
- ☐ Applying current technology to data management
- ☐ Communicating with peers
- ☐ Working with professional journals and trade magazines
- ☐ Communicating for prestige and profit
  - Science writing and publishing
  - Authoring textbooks
  - Conducting workshops, seminars, and lectures

Submission of Abstracts Prospective authors are invited to send a 250-word abstract to the Program Chairman:

John E. Friedman
RCA Corp. Mail Stop 108-131
Moorestown, NJ 08057
Phone: 609-778-2112

Deadline for abstracts is 29 February 1984

Exhibits Companies offering products and services to the technical publication community are invited to exhibit at PCC/84, Exhibit facilities will be available at the Conference site. For additional exhibit information, contact: William Frevold, Wang Laboratories, 437 South Union Street, Lawrence, MA 01843. Phone: 617-459-5000.

Murphy-Type Laws for Training Sessions, Workshops, and Conferences

A new genre of writing has developed around laws that human experiences have found both delightful and immutable. They are called Murphy's Laws and they provide unique, and up to their time, perspectives on aspects of our existence as individuals, technologists, and otherwise members of organizational entities of all kinds. These statements were culled from coordinators, implementors, and participants in training sessions, workshops, conferences, and the like—gatherings where information is transmitted, skills developed and practiced, and opportunities for social interaction and transaction abound. Such gatherings are commonplace today.

- Agendas and plans sent out prior to the meeting are inevitably left at home or at the office.

- In workshops that run more than a day, one date on the printed agenda will be in error.

- The pre-program content publicized will be different from what will be offered at the session. An on-site correction will be needed to clarify what is to be presented and who is to present it.

- The program, planned for very early fall so that the weather would be good, is beset by a freak snowstorm on the day of the conference.

- The printed copy of the program is finally done just in time, and you spot two serious typographical errors. (If it is an English conference, there will be at least two mistakes in grammar.)

- The names of the planning committee will be left off the program.

- At the designated starting time, only half the participants are in the meeting room.

- Three participants will be *told* to come. They have not seen the agenda, do not know why they are there, and will not see any value in what goes on.

- The audiovisual equipment ordered will arrive just a few minutes late; the room will have to be rearranged to accommodate it.

- Extension cords will be too short to reach the outlet.

- Extension cords will be three-pronged for two-hole sockets.

- Projectors delivered without spare lamps will have burned-out lamps.

- Light controls will be in another room or in a central panel "somewhere"; the guy who usually takes care of things like this is on vacation.

- Films, slides, videotapes, and originals for handouts sent by air express are delivered to the *other* Holiday Inn, miles across town.

- On-site duplicating facilities will run short of paper. By the time the paper gets there, the machine will be broken.

- Four participants swear they pre-registered and paid their fees, but no record can be found.

- Those staffing the registration table find they have no money to make change.

- The major speaker's plane will be late and he is the only one for whom an alternative plan is not arranged.

- The keynote speaker with whom you spent hours explaining the *unique* presentation needed will give the same talk he *always* presents.

- The time scheduled for coffee and other breaks will not please everyone. The food will not please anyone.

- Four participants will request something other than meat and will make a big thing about it with the planning committee and food-service facility; they will get a tuna salad platter with wilted lettuce and wish they had ordered roast beef.

- Two announcements will have to be made about vehicles with their lights left on.

- The stick'um on the name tags will wear out halfway through the session.

- Five participants will take multiple copies of anything handed out for someone "back home," leaving those attending short of copies.

- Materials for display marked "Single Copies—Do Not Remove" will be removed.

- One of five resource people will fail to collect travel and expense receipts.

- Six participants will complain that the program runs too long; it could have been done in half the time.

- Six participants will claim that the program should have been longer; there was not enough interaction or in-depth study and analysis.

- The computer simulation which worked perfectly in rehearsal repeatedly displays "Syntax Error" during the training session.

- A pre-conference intensive training session is planned for a maximum of six participants and 25 show up.

- Facilities, food, and seating are arranged for 25 participants and six show up.

- Round tables are requested, seating no more than eight participants for small-group work; the room is set up with long rectangular tables.

- The overhead projector arrives two minutes before it is needed but without a screen.

- Newsprint pads and Magic Markers are on hand but the sheet cannot be posted because the room has curtains and flocked wallpaper. Furthermore, the management has placed a sign near the light switch, "Do not put or pin anything on the walls."

- The planning committee was careful to schedule the cash bar at the most strategic point in the meeting. On site, it was learned that the county was "dry."

- The conference site was erroneously listed as Holiday Inn-West; it should have been Holiday Inn-East. The correction got in the mail too late.

- Seven of the 20 school districts in the area will schedule their own faculty/staff workshops over two of the three days of your conference.

- The starting time is delayed more than a half hour because the pre-registered participant file cannot be found.

- The seating arrangements fail to assign smoking and non-smoking areas; ashtrays are on every table.

- The loudspeaker in the room is too large for the space; the volume control is locked and no one can be found who knows how the system works.

- Your session is last the last hour of a four-day conference.

- Your session is 8 a.m. on Saturday.

- Your session is separated from others by thin folding doors; a Mary Kay Cosmetics party is on one side; on the other, a pyramid scheme.

- The program lists a room for your session; the room does not exist.

- When asked why they are there, half the participants will say, "Because I was ordered to be here."; the other half say, "The session I wanted was full."

- Coffee and tea are ordered; the participants' religion prohibits coffee and tea.

- The major, general session is on the 15th floor and the elevator is not in service.

—*Albert L. Goldberg*
 Educational Technology, Englewood Cliffs, NJ
 April 1982 and July 1983

□

Articles of Confusion
(continued from page 6)

ferences that exist between the two cultures. The subject of another article, perhaps. Second, I discovered how troublesome non-native language can be.

Meanwhile, I'll continue (1) fixing wayward articles (or should it be *the* wayward articles?) and (2) seeking the (*an?*) elusive principle.

Mrs. Wren, where are you?

—*Jeff Brand*
 Tokyo, Japan

□

Master Stuffer

One of the personnel needed to create a Presidential candidate:

The stuffer's job: To pack [the candidate] with words suitable for emission when he is publicly exposed. The stuffer pounds in tons of manuscript purchased from the ghost-writer factory and six easy-to-remember slogans boiled up in the vats of an advertising agency.

—*Russell Baker*
 The New York Times

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Joint Chapter

The Ottawa Section of the IEEE has formed a joint chapter of the Professional Communication Society and the Engineering Management Society. Rod Adkins is interim chairman until an election is held.

Occupational Ailments

Journalist's neurosis
Sweaty palms and trembling hands brought on by an excessive fear that nobody reads any more and that those who do don't believe a word of it.

Programmer's stammer
An inability to communicate without a computer.

—*Jeff Kunnerth*
 Orlando Sentinel

□

Bells and Whistles

Getting trampled in public by a herd of wild safety inspectors is not the most pleasant way to spend the morning, I have found, but it is possible to learn the most from painful experiences.

Putting out to sea
Our consulting team was charged with improving safety in a multiplant firm. Mounds of money could be lost in an industrial accident, the environment could be polluted in some cases, and there was a very real possibility that lives could be lost. We found that improvements could be made by installing some rather complex equipment that included electronics, microprocessors, and some specially trained personnel. One of our problems was that the mode of operation of all this zoomy stuff was not obvious. We had seen it working at other plants, and we had analyzed the numbers, but the plant managers, engineers, and foremen would have to take our word for it initially.

"Take her to sea speed, helm." "Aye, aye, Sir."
We decided to take old accident reports and write them into scenarios showing how the proposed system could have prevented each accident. We worked up a presentation to be given to plant personnel, and a dry run was set up with the safety inspectors to iron out any bugs in the descriptions of the accidents. The safety inspectors were on our side and they would help us . . . right? We reserved a room, laid on coffee, and delegated one of our number to speak.

Everybody down!
The first scenario was duly presented, rather well, I thought. We noted the accident on which the scenario was based, stated how the proposed system would have prevented it, and paused for the helpful comments that would allow us to change the few minor details that might be lacking.

It was not a pretty sight! The safety inspectors laid into us with long tirades on alarm bells and safety whistles that would have been sounded to prevent the accident. We were told that no responsible plant manager would have acted as we said ours did (despite the fact that one had, and the accident had happened). One inspector remarked that the only thing that consoled him was that by the time our system was implemented, he would have retired.

All rise! This court is now in session.
I didn't try to defend our scenarios. There was no point. The question was, *why* was their reaction so violent? We had obviously stepped on a toe without knowing it.

It took a while to figure out what went wrong, but finally it came to me. All of the inspectors were former plant supervisors, some of them potential plant managers. All of them participated regularly in official accident inquiries.

Our use of old accident reports had placed them in their courtroom mode. None of them was willing to rehash old accidents and, as they saw it, reapportion blame to their peers, former peers, and future peers. As they saw it, we were not asking them to comment on the new system but to judge those involved in the operation of the old system.

Which port in the storm?
Back to the drawing board to rewrite the scenarios. We based them not on how the inspectors might have behaved in old accidents, but on how they would operate in normal circumstances, showing how the new system could prevent accident situations from arising. These versions received the general approval of all concerned.

So what happened?
There is an old saying to the effect that ideas are of no importance—only words have meaning. We had unwittingly adopted a vocabulary, a language, that put our audience into a pattern of thought that we had not anticipated. Demonstrating a new safety system by using old accidents put the inspectors in their "courtroom mode." By changing our vocabulary, we were able to enlist their cooperation and get our point across.

The moral is, *Ask not for whom the bell tolls, find out who is pulling the bell cord and how to communicate with him.*

—*Jean-Baptiste Leon Say*
  Interfaces, The Institute of Management Sciences,
    © 1983, reprinted by permission
  February 1983

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Careers in Communication

The correct address for the free "Guide to Communication Careers" brochure prepared by the Council of Communication Societies (announced in the October *Newsletter*) is CCS, P.O. Box 1074, Silver Spring, MD 20910; enclose a stamped, self-addressed No. 10 envelope.

Wild Owl Lecture
(continued from page 1)

describe the wrong nouns; adverbs link up with the wrong verbs. Here is an example of a phrase in the wrong place:

Your proposition sounds interesting. Please stop by my office and explain what you plan to do to one of my marketing representatives.

What *do* you plan to do to one of the marketing representatives? You can easily fix this ambiguity by moving the offending phrase:

... explain to one of my marketing representatives what you plan to do.

Here's a different kind of phrase in the wrong place:

Lying under some papers in the back of his desk drawer, John found his fountain pen.

This sounds as if John spends his leisure time in the drawer. The problem is that "lying" seems to go with "John" because "John" comes before "the pen." Moving "lying . . ." to the end puts it next to the noun it was meant to describe.

• "And" and "or" can cause terrible problems. Who is eligible for Plan A according to this sentence?

You are eligible for Plan A if you are over 65 and retired or disabled.

One way to read this sentence is that retired people over 65 are eligible for Plan A, and all disabled people are also eligible. But maybe it means you must be over 65 and you must also be either retired or disabled. For problems like this one, a list often helps:

You are eligible for Plan A if you are *either*
  1. Over 65 and retired
or
  2. Over 65 and disabled

• Finally, have you ever heard a wild owl lecture?

We went to the Library of Congress and heard a wild owl lecture.

The problem here is that "lecture" can be a noun or a verb. When readers see noun + X, the first meaning they think of is noun + verb, not noun + noun. Unstringing noun strings reduces ambiguity.

Once you find an ambiguity, it isn't usually difficult to fix. The trick is to find the ambiguities. After all, you are the one person in the world who knows what you are trying to say. It isn't the least bit ambiguous to *you.* What can you do? Ask a colleague to read for you. Read your own work one more time.

—*Simply Stated, No. 40*
 American Institutes for Research
 October 1983

Ballot for IEEE Professional Communication Society
Administrative Committee 1984-86 term

Vote for six—biographies were in the October Newsletter

_____ Ron Blicq	_____ John Phillips
_____ David Crocker	_____ Dan Rosich
_____ Deborah Flaherty	_____ Write-in _____
_____ Lois Moore (Thuss)	_____ Write-in _____

Note: Your mailing label on the back authenticates your ballot; *do not use a copy* of this ballot.

Mail to

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Must be received by **February 20, 1984** to be counted.

—*David Milley*

Newsletter

IEEE Professional Communication Society