

General Guidelines for Judging

The criteria questions or prompts on the Evaluation Form are guidelines to consider as you assess an entry. Use these prompts as a starting point for your review, discussion, and evaluation of the entry's quality in each assessment area and subarea.

Use your knowledge of technical communication benchmarks to augment or interpret the suggested criteria.

Some criteria might not apply to a given entry. For example, if an entry uses only graphics, photographs, or unscripted audio to convey content, the subareas 2.1.3 *Capitalization, Spelling, and Punctuation* and 2.1.4 *Grammar and Syntax* are not applicable. Indicate **Not Applicable** for criteria that do not apply to an entry.

Section 1.7 *Instructional Design* contains additional assessment subareas related only to the **Instructional category**. You are required to complete this section for Instructional Materials, *in addition* to the relevant criteria throughout the rest of the form.

Recommendations for Evaluation Comments

Write *useful comments* for all entries, even entries that do not win an award. Your comments are extremely beneficial to the entrants and are what sets the STC competition apart from others. Many technical communicators enter the competition not only with the hope of winning an award, but also to receive a meaningful critique of their work from respected peers. In fact, some people enter solely for the feedback. Some use this information to provide justification for recommended changes to process or product, for employee recognition, or to gather ideas for subsequent releases, to name only a few. **Your comments are important and required!**

Try to include at least three compliments and three suggestions for improvement, no matter how good (or bad) you judge the entry to be. The more comments you write, the easier it is to determine the winners. The more constructive your critique, the easier it will be for the contributors to acknowledge and incorporate your suggestions. Keep in mind these other recommendations as you comment on the entries:

- List the high points first.
- Use specific examples.

| Instead of saying: | Say: |
|---|--|
| "Graphics are well done." | "Graphics make good use of call-outs—for example, on pages 5 and 10." |
| "More entries are needed in the index." | You could improve your index by adding entries with alternative wordings. For example, on pages 3-25, you have a heading Sending a File. Your index has an entry for <i>sending a file</i> , but does not have an entry for <i>file</i> , <i>sending</i> . The entry would benefit users who look up the word <i>file</i> in the index." |

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- Keep your comments to the point. Don't lecture or go off on tangents.
- Give concrete suggestions for correcting problems. For example, "The all-caps headings in the Table of Contents are difficult to read. Uppercase and lowercase would be better." Put yourself in the submitter's place and consider what you would want to know or how you would like to receive feedback.
- Specify the location of any problems so the author can find them easily.
- Keep comments on the positive side—that is, phrase your feedback in a constructive way.
- Evaluate the work itself, not the subject matter. Don't make negative comments simply because you disagree with the contents or dislike the company colors.
- Beware of "reviewer syndrome," which is the preoccupation with finding small flaws. In the words of Lola Zook:

"I've been given this thing to review and I've got to find something wrong with it or 'they' will think I didn't read it or I'm not well qualified."

The result can be a preoccupation with finding small flaws instead of concentrating on a balanced and perceptive evaluation of the "accomplishment of the whole" as well as its parts.

Consider production in relation to budget. Contributors do not always have control over the entire process. For example, some pieces might be produced on a limited budget or under production system limitations. Read all comments on the entry sheet to help establish what the contributor was able to do within these constraints. Consider how effectively available resources were used and how well the entry communicates the message to the intended audience.

You have been chosen as a judge because of your expertise and the contributor expects to get expert advice; so give it! For example, if the contributor clearly has no idea how to index a manual, don't be reluctant to give some tips.

Here are some examples of judges' comments:

- 1) "People can come to an index with many different words in mind for the same action or concept, so you should try to anticipate what those words might be and include them."
- 2) "The more you use highlighting, the less effective it becomes, so you might want to reconsider your choice of highlighting all notes and tips."
- 3) "One man in eight has difficulty distinguishing between red and green, so you should use another way to indicate the right way and the wrong way to do something."

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- Do not try to be humorous. Some people may take offense.
- Try not to be influenced by your own company's corporate style guides, standards for design and format, or by ways of doing things that you have come to prefer personally. Companies set standards to be effective for their particular use, and they will vary based on company need. Your personal preferences may simply be a matter of taste.
- Provide useful feedback in the spaces provided on the judging form. Judge training includes how to complete the judging form.
- Check your comments for spelling and grammar.

Steps to Follow for Individual Evaluations

1. Make sure you have received all the entries for your category.
2. Examine all the entries to get a general impression of the work.
3. If you feel that you cannot be impartial about a particular entry, notify your team leader (or, if you are a team leader, notify the competition manager).
4. If you feel any of the entries have been miscategorized, bring up the matter with your team leader; if all on your team agree, the team leader will discuss with the competition manager.
5. Keep an open mind throughout the evaluation process. Don't be too strongly influenced by the initial viewing. It often turns out that the entries you liked best at first glance have problems that become apparent later on.
6. Set a schedule for reviewing the entries during the evaluation timeframe so you won't be rushed at the very end. Allot one to three hours to judge each entry.
7. After the initial review, begin evaluating each entry. For each entry:
 - Prepare an evaluation form (download forms from www.stcnymetro.org). Complete all information at the top of the form. **Use the exact entry title** that is on the corresponding entry form. Use your assigned judge number—**never record your name** on any of the forms.
 - Don't be overwhelmed by the size or extent of an entry. Look at one area at a time. You don't have to read absolutely every word in a large publication or follow absolutely every path in a complex online entry. However, you do want to acquire a solid understanding of the entry and its effectiveness.
 - Determine what your award recommendation will be, if any. Do not write this on the form. Your evaluation is only one of several, and the consensus judging might yield different final award recommendations than any of the judges originally expected.

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Awards

There is no limit to the number of awards you can give at any level (except Best of Show, of course). If an entry deserves a Distinguished, Excellence, or Merit award, give it that award. Likewise, an award does not have to be given at each level or in each category if entries do not meet the standards.

Be objective, impartial, and helpful. Make detailed comments on the evaluation forms, but remember the submitter will receive your comments by email, and this feedback is often shared with the submitter's employer. Be frank, yet tactful. Constructive feedback is valuable, especially when a work has been given a below-average evaluation.

Look for effectiveness, appropriateness, and professionalism. Try not to be swayed by production qualities, such as color, expensive paper, or fancy binding. Read all comments made on the attachment to the entry form (if an attachment has been written), particularly those covering the production of the entry or other pertinent considerations. Your comments should correspond to the award level. For example, you might have very few suggestions for improving an entry you recommend for Distinguished, but you should have several suggestions for improving an entry you recommend for Merit or no award.

All entries, even Distinguished, should receive feedback in the form of written comments. If the entry is high quality, your comments should highlight those things that set the entry apart. Comment on why the entry received this award and provide positive reinforcement for a job well done.

Do NOT write on any of the entries! If you want to comment on specific pages during consensus judging, use "sticky notes" as placeholders (be sure to remove them when you have finished your judging).

Confidentiality

While it is okay to show other technical communicators the entries you are judging, please keep your evaluations and personal opinions about them confidential. If you have any questions concerning confidentiality while judging, talk to your competition manager. Please treat all information about awards to be given (or not given) as confidential until the competition committee has sent notification letters and evaluation forms to those participating in the competition. Companies and communicators have paid the fees to enter their work, and they deserve to hear the results directly from the competition committee, rather than through the grapevine. (The official notification process usually takes about one month.)