2014
Handbook
for Judges

Society for Technical Communication

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Contents

Introduction

Each year the Society for Technical Communication (STC) sponsors the International Summit Awards (ISA) Competition, which provides technical communicators the opportunity to receive recognition for their work. STC communities and regions hold preliminary competitions from which Distinguished and Excellence award winners advance to the Society or International level.

Judges are the backbone of the competition process. This handbook is provided to help guide judges and to ensure consistency and high quality. Each judge has a responsibility to set aside adequate time to complete the tasks outlined in the handbook, to carefully follow judging guidelines, and to provide adequate feedback to all entrants. If chosen to judge in the ISA, consider it an honor to be thus recognized for your qualifications and a privilege to contribute to the profession of technical communication in this way. Thank you for your commitment.

Purpose

Judges' 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. Some people enter solely for the feedback. They use this information to provide justification for recommended changes to process or product, gain recognition, and gather ideas for subsequent releases. In other words, **your comments are important!**

Resources

Competition rules

The STC ISA General Information and Rules and other resources are available at http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/competitions/.

STC officials and volunteers

The following officials and volunteers are valuable resources for information. Their job in the STC ISA is to help you be successful as a judge.

ISA Competition General Manager
Nathaniel Lim, STC Associate Fellow (nathaniel.lim@elekta.com)

STC Office Competition Liaison
Lloyd Tucker, STC Deputy Executive Director (Lloyd@stc.org)

ISA Competition Judging Manager
Paula Robertson (fine-lines@sbcglobal.net)

Defining technical communication

What is technical communication? It seems like the answer should be simple and obvious, but sometimes it's not. After receiving entries for assessment, the first task of a judge is to determine if the entries qualify as technical communication.

STC does not place restrictions on the type of content of materials submitted to its technical communication competition, provided an entry meets the criteria for the specific category. STC also trusts the judgment of local competition committees and judges in making decisions about whether a particular entry is acceptable. However, judges might have questions about whether an entry qualifies as technical communication.

Technical communication (which encompasses scientific and medical communication) has come to mean two quite different things for the purpose of the STC ISA. A submission can be "technical" if it is:

- **About a technical product, service, or subject matter.** These pieces are often, but not always, computer related. Examples: computer software and hardware manuals, illustrations of equipment, and online help for software applications.

- **Produced by a technical organization**. These pieces can be newsletters, annual reports, policies and procedures, and employee guides and need not describe technical aspects of the organization. *However, an entry that a technical organization produced but that has no relationship to that organization is **not** acceptable.*

It is impossible to define *technical* to everyone's satisfaction. **STC recommends a liberal interpretation** in which *technical* encompasses any entry having to do with a mechanical or scientific topic, or with practical, detailed methods, processes, or means of accomplishing objectives. Such entries typically contain specialized information in a wide variety of subject areas for audiences that range from the general public to subject matter experts. Under this definition, the content might seem to be nontechnical (cooking instructions are an often-cited example), and yet the communication about the subject is technical if the intent is to inform or instruct.

Note the important distinction that *technical* **applies to the content of an entry, not to the delivery mechanism.** That is, the delivery method alone (for example, web pages) or the tool used to produce an entry (for example, a sophisticated drawing application) does NOT qualify an entry as technical. A book of fairy tales produced on the most elaborate publishing or online system is still a book of fairy tales.

Who decides whether an entry qualifies as technical communication?

- **Submitters** are responsible to ensure that their entries meet all criteria, as specified in STC ISA General Information and Rules.

- **Judge team leads** are responsible to:

  - Resolve team member questions about entry qualifications.

- Escalate disqualified entries to the judge manager, with an explanation of why the entries should be rejected.
- **Judges** are responsible to:
  - Identify entries they feel should be disqualified.
  - Notify lead judges of any concerns.

Roles and responsibilities

Besides meeting requirements for professional and judging experience, all judges are expected to:

- Perform judging tasks individually and as a member of a team.
- Commit the time to complete the judging within the timeframe of the competition.
- Stay in communication with the team for progress reports.
- Attend any meetings that are required.

The following are further descriptions of the two roles.

Lead judge or team lead

One member of each team is appointed as a lead judge or team lead by the ISA competition managers. The team lead is usually someone with previous experience as an international judge and/or someone with a wide degree of technical communications experience. This person has additional responsibilities to make the judging run smoothly:

- Ensure that all team members have the same entries and that all entries are complete (that is, all submission forms are present), compliant with competition rules (for example, produced during the correct time window), and submitted in the appropriate competition category.
- Monitor the team's progress.
- Answer team members' questions about the entries and the judging process. The team lead is a liaison between the team and the ISA competition managers to resolve problems (such as miscategorizations) and team member questions.
- Make sure all team members have completed all their assigned entry assessments by consensus judging day. Team leads should check with their team members regularly throughout the assessment period.
- Schedule team meetings as necessary. Arrange for the consensus meeting.
- Lead the consensus meeting and make sure entries and assessment forms are correct, professional, acceptably thorough, and delivered to the ISA judge manager in a timely fashion.

- Communicate award levels and any Best of Show recommendation to the ISA judge manager immediately after consensus judging.

Judges

Judges are responsible for evaluating every entry they receive. **They must provide substantive feedback to each entrant.** The assessment should provide clear, impartial, and constructive feedback. ISA judge duties include:

- Check the contents of the package as soon as possible after receiving it to ensure that everything assigned is included.

- Review each entry.

- Provide constructive feedback on each entry.

- Meet with team members for consensus on awards.

- Contribute to writing any Best of Show recommendations.

- Complete and return assessment forms by the specified method and date.

ISA 2014 Schedule

The ISA schedule for 2014 includes several critical checkpoints or "milestones" for judges to monitor their progress and help them meet the final delivery date for entry assessments. The ISA Committee strongly recommends that you adhere to these milestone dates. However, the lead judge on a team may choose to create a slightly different schedule to suit the team's particular constraints. *Ultimate responsibility for ensuring that all judges provide complete assessments of the highest quality rests with the team leads.* For further description of the judging process and milestone requirements, see **Judging process overview**.

November 4, 2013	Call for entries (for January 31 deadline).
November 8, 2013	Call for judges (for January 14 deadline).
January 14, 2014	Deadline for receipt of judge applications.
January 31, 2014	Deadline for physical receipt of entry submissions.
February 1	Mandatory training for lead judges and first-time judges; optional for returning judges.
January 15–February 7	Judge Manager and Entries Manager process judge applications, create judge team assignments, and assign entries to teams. See "Judging process overview", item 3.
February 8–10	Print entries are shipped; information about electronic entries and final team assignments is emailed to judges. See "Judging process overview", item 3.
By February 14	Judge teams receive all entries and related materials. See item 4.

1	February 14–**18** (5 days)	Milestone 1: Judges provide first impressions to lead judge. See item 5.
		Lead judges provide the team's first impressions to the ISA judge manager by February 25. See item 5.
2	February 17–**28** (10 days)	Milestone 2: Judges provide draft comments to lead judge for at least one entry.
		<mark>Recommendation</mark>: Lead judges provide selected draft comments—their own or team members'—to the ISA judge manager to receive additional clarification or confirmation of comment acceptability. See item 7.
	February 28–March **14** (two weeks)	Lead judges provide feedback on draft comments to judges.
		ISA judge manager provides feedback to lead judges on any draft comments provided. See item 8.
	February 8–March **26** (6.5 weeks)	Judges complete assessment comments for all assigned entries in preparation for consensus meeting. See item 10.
3	No later than March **30**	Milestone 3: Teams hold final judging consensus meeting to determine award recommendations, including Best of Show. See item 10.
		Lead judges report award decisions and BOS nominations to judge manager. See item 11.
	No later than April **1**	Best of Show nominated entries are shipped to BOS judges. See item 11.
	~April **1**	Written comments for all entries due to team lead.
4	No later than April **4**	Milestone 4: After reviewing all entry assessments to confirm the acceptability of all comments, team leads submit complete assessment packets to the judge manager. See item 12.
	By April **8**	Best of Show judging is held.
	April 4–May **4**	ISA team members review all assessment comments for submittal to entrants. If comments do not meet the judging criteria, judges will be asked to revise them. (<mark>See Milestone 2 *Recommendation*.</mark>)
	May 20	Best of Show is awarded at International Summit Awards ceremony.

Judging process overview

For a checklist of activities for team leads, see Appendix A.

This section provides an outline of the activities expected of judges and lead judges throughout the STC International Summit Awards judging process. In concert with the preceding Schedule, follow these steps to help you stay on track.

1. Review the roles, responsibilities, and deadlines required of judges.

2. Use the link *STC ISA Judge Application Form* to submit a judge application online at http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/competitions/

3. Receive team assignment and connect with the other members of your team.

4. Receive the package of entries and examine them immediately. Read all comments on the entry submission form to understand any constraints. Spend at least 10 minutes on each entry and jot down your first impressions.

5. By the date in the Schedule for Milestone 1, send your first impressions to your team lead. For more information, see the section **Recommendations for first impressions**.

    Lead judge: Compile your team's first impressions of each entry (using the suggested format) and submit it to the ISA judge manager. See Appendix B. Sample First Impressions Format for Lead Judges.

6. Plan your judging time carefully. You have more than six weeks until all of your written comments are due. Budget at least eight hours per week, so you don't get behind.

7. By the date for Milestone 2, all judges write draft comments for at least one of your entries and send them to your team lead. Make your draft as close to the final version as you can. This will help your lead to clear up any mismatched expectations early. For more information, see the section **Recommendations for assessment comments**.

    Lead judge: Decide whether you want each judge to review a different entry or the same one. Decide whether to share draft assessments among your team. You are strongly encouraged to submit your own draft assessment or that of one or both of your judges to the ISA judge manager for review and feedback on the appropriateness of the comments.

8. Lead judge: Review draft comments and provide feedback to judges by the date indicated in the Schedule.

9. Discuss entries with your team members throughout the judging period.

10. By the date for Milestone 3, meet with your team to compare assessments and arrive at a team consensus award recommendation for each entry, including Best of Show. For information about award levels, see the section "Awards" later in this guide.

11. Lead judge: Immediately report award decisions and BOS nominations to the judge manager and arrange for your team to ship the nominated hardcopy entries to the BOS judges.

12. By the date indicated in the Schedule, submit your final comments to your team lead.

13. Lead judge: By the date for Milestone 4, the ISA judge manager must receive all results from team leads.

14. Do not keep entries for personal use or share them with anyone else without express permission from the submitter and all contributors listed on the submission form. Judges may donate entries to a local library or technical communications academics or dispose of them in a recycling apparatus.

Tips for individual judging

- Make sure you have received all the entries assigned to you. If not, contact your team lead or the ISA Entries Manager immediately.

- Examine all the entries to get a general impression of the workload.

  - If you feel that you cannot be impartial about a particular entry, notify your team lead. If you are a team lead, notify the ISA judge manager.

  - If you feel any of the entries are miscategorized, bring up the matter with your team lead. If all on your team agree, the team lead will discuss with the judge manager.

  - Don't be too strongly influenced by this initial pass. Keep an open mind throughout the assessment process.

  - Set a personal schedule for reviewing the entries within the judging schedule so you won't be rushed at the end. Allot *at least six* hours to judge each entry.

- After the initial review, begin evaluating the entries. For each entry:

  - To download an assessment form, go to http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/competitions/. Under INTERNATIONAL FORMS AND FILES, click *STC ISA Entry Assessment Form*.

  - Complete all information at the top of the form. **Use the exact entry title** from the corresponding entry submission form. Use your assigned judge number—never record your name on the forms.

  - If you are unfamiliar with the entry assessment form or terminology, see Appendix C "Overview for Judges".

  - Don't be overwhelmed by the complexity or extent of an entry. Look at one area at a time. You don't have to read every word in a large publication or follow every path in a complex online entry. However, you do need 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 assessment is only one of several, and the consensus judging might yield different final award recommendations than any of the judges originally expect.

Consensus judging

At the ISA level, consensus judging can be face-to-face (if judge teams are in the same geographical area) or remote. Judges are assigned to teams based on the preferences they indicate on the judge application. The competition managers make every effort to assign judges according to their choices, but logistics and other constraints also contribute to assignment decisions.

Remote consensus judging can be accomplished by teleconference, email, or whatever method works for all team members. The *STC Competition Manager's Handbook* suggests various means you might use. Teams must allow enough time to complete consensus judging and write Best-of-Show nomination justifications.

What is consensus?

Whether consensus judging is done locally or remotely, awards are given by a consensus of the judging team. For STC competitions, consensus is a general agreement among the members of a judging team. Each judge exercises influence in decision making and awards. Achieving consensus requires serious consideration of each judge's opinion. Debate improves the process; arguing does not. Reaching consensus does not mean that the judge who argues the loudest or longest gets his or her way. Rather, the final decision should be one that the entire team can agree on and support.

View consensus judging as a professional learning experience. Even experienced technical communicators do not know everything about all of the types of entries that STC accepts, nor are they able to review every word in a document. As you attend consensus judging, you will be pleasantly surprised at how much you learn from everything you missed that another team member found.

> **Surprise!**
>
> As your team discusses the entries, don't be surprised if you find:
> - Wide differences of opinion
> - Healthy disagreements
> - Comments that emphasize aspects of an entry different from yours
> - Yourself reevaluating an entry in light of the other judges' opinions
> - Yourself learning new things from the team. Sometimes you will learn new things related to an entry, but often judges have the opportunity to hone skills in teamwork, tact, assertiveness, and cooperation.
>
> **Keep an open mind!**

Before consensus

- Get to know team members before the consensus meeting. This is important for building rapport.

- Complete your assessments *before* the meeting and have award recommendations in mind.

- Try to be flexible in scheduling plenty of time for the consensus meeting. An arbitrary time limit creates pressure, which might rush your decisions.

During the meeting

1. Briefly review the list of entries to see if you can come to immediate agreement on the entries that you all feel deserve no award. You can set these aside, although you may choose to discuss them as a learning experience.

2. Discuss each of the remaining entries and come to consensus about awards.

   - There might be a tendency to think you must decide the fate of an entry at the time you discuss it, because you won't have time to come back or it will be too confusing to do so. However, when there is indecision or disagreement, don't force an award decision. Come back to the entry later.

   - Allow yourselves to take a break after a certain period or schedule more than one session. Don't let the discussion become too long-winded. Respect each other's time.

3. From among your Distinguished award winners, decide if you want to recommend one or more for Best of Show. If so, jointly write a recommendation statement that explains why you think it deserves the Best of Show award.

   - Judging teams must complete a recommendation form for each Best of Show candidate.

   - The recommendation should synthesize the comments for the entry from the judges' assessment forms, describing as specifically as possible how close the entry comes to the ideal for its category. The statement should be detailed enough to guide the Best of Show judges in their assessment of the candidate entry.

After consensus

- Team lead: Immediately, submit your team's award decisions and any Best of Show statement to the ISA judge manager. For a Best of Show Recommendation template, see Appendix I in the *STC Competition Manager's Handbook*.

- Team lead: Make sure you have complete sets of all judges' entry assessment forms. Check that comments are professional and thorough. Provide feedback to individual judges on their comments and suggest revisions if necessary.

- Team lead: Submit all assessment forms to the ISA judge manager.

- All judges: Make note of specific ideas to improve the judging process next time and share these ideas freely with the ISA managers. Know that your expertise is valued!

Best of Show judging

How do you judge the best annual report against the best user guide? How do you compare the best apple with the best orange?

The answer is that you do not compare one type of entry to another type. Instead, you compare each nominated entry to the *ideal* of its own type. That is, the best annual report is compared with the ideal annual report and the best user guide with the ideal user guide.

The Best of Show award then recognizes the one entry that surpasses all others of its type. If there is a particular entry that, in the opinions of the Best of Show judges, raises the standards of technical communications, that entry can receive the STC International Summit Award for Best of Show.

Best of Show procedure

Only entries that win Distinguished awards *at the International level* are eligible for Best of Show at the ISA. The judging team may identify any Distinguished award winner as a candidate for Best of Show judging.

Best of Show judges are experienced professionals with previous experience in judging. They also have broad expertise in technical communications, so that they are capable of evaluating entries in any category. The Best of Show judges must determine how close each candidate entry comes to realizing the ideal for its type. The entry that comes closest to that ideal is the Best of Show.

When the Best of Show judging team has agreed on the Best of Show winner, the team members write a citation that describes why the entry achieved this distinction. That citation is used on the award plaque, as well as in the remarks about the winner at the STC Summit.

General information for ISA judges

The information in this section is designed to help judges have a positive and productive experience. Knowledge, work experience, and education vary even among experienced judges. The information that follows applies across judging teams and competitions. Remember to be flexible and willing to learn and to participate by sharing your expertise.

Expectations

Submitters and contributors enter STC competitions not only with the hope of receiving an award, but also with the expectation of receiving a thorough critique and constructive feedback from knowledgeable professionals. This feature is what sets STC competitions apart from other competitions. All entry assessment forms are

returned to the submitters. Your judging comments, although anonymous, reflect the credibility of STC competitions and our profession.

Judges are responsible for providing a **fair**, **impartial**, and **constructive** assessment of each entry that they judge. Even when there are multiple entries that look similar because they are from the same company, you cannot assume they were produced by the same individuals. Each submitter paid the fee to enter the competition and each entry deserves the same, full assessment as any other entry.

Depending on the size and complexity of an entry, you might find yourself spending four to 10 hours per entry. Please schedule your time accordingly to devote equal effort per entry.

Judging principles

Two principles are basic in assessing an entry:

- Judge the work the contributors actually did.

- Judge how well the work does what it is intended to do.

These principles are obvious, but it is easy to lose sight of them. For instance, in a scholarly/professional article, the writing ought to be the focus. Yet a judge whose specialty is information design and who doesn't really understand biology may fault a well-written, nicely argued scholarly paper on cell temperature because it doesn't look slick. Scholarly articles in technical writing rarely have imaginative graphics, and the authors don't have control over the quality of the printing even if the articles do have graphics. If you are judging a category with which you are unfamiliar, consider using this as a learning experience and ask for advice from an STC member who does have experience in that area of technical communication.

Accuracy is an essential aspect of technical communication. Sometimes it's difficult to tell how accurate a piece is unless you are working with the product or have a sound background in the subject matter. It's okay if you can't verify accuracy or don't understand the complexity of the content. You can judge how well the communicator appears to have organized and presented the information, and you can certainly judge the quality of the writing.

The technical complexity of the content must be considered in judging. The more complex the subject matter, the more difficult a task the producers have to successfully deal with that subject matter. It is also more difficult for judges to assess how the producers dealt with the topic. Unfortunately, entries that address complex subjects do not always get the judges' full consideration (or comprehension) and therefore suffer in the resulting assessments. Not that you should try to judge "good" science versus "bad", but you should factor in the difficulty of the task faced by the contributors and how well they dealt with the difficulties. **Keep in mind that communication and usability of the entry are central to your assessment.**

General guidelines for judging

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

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

Look for effectiveness, appropriateness, and professionalism. Try not to be swayed by qualities, such as color graphics, animation, or expensive paper and binding. Read all comments on any attachment to the entry submission form, particularly those that cover the production of the entry or other pertinent considerations.

Your comments should correspond to the award level. For example, you might have 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 the things that set the entry apart. Comment on why the entry received this award and provide positive reinforcement for a job well done.

Because a print entry you receive may end up being sent to Best of Show judges, do *not* write on print entries. You may use sticky notes to mark or comment on specific pages, but be sure to remove them when consensus judging is complete.

Confidentiality

While it is okay to show other technical communicators the entries you are judging, please keep your assessments and personal opinions about them confidential. If you have any questions concerning confidentiality while judging, contact the ISA judge co-managers.

Please treat all information about awards to be given (or not given) as confidential until the competition committee has sent notification letters and entry assessment forms to the entrants. Companies and communicators have paid 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 can take one month or longer.)

Changes and emergencies

Personal emergencies, unexpected workload changes, and other unforeseen circumstances happen. You don't need to apologize for them. If anything comes up that prevents you from starting or completing your judging assignments, contact your team lead (or ISA judge manager) as soon as you can. Backup judges may be able to step in and assist.

Conflict of interest, personal feelings

As you review the entries you are assigned to judge, you might recognize the work of friends or employees or of companies with which you have a previous or current business relationship. If for *any* reason you feel you cannot evaluate a specific entry due to a conflict of interest or personal feelings, please notify your team lead (or ISA judge manager) immediately.

Miscategorization

If you feel that an entry is miscategorized, contact your team lead. If you are the team lead, contact the ISA judge managers for guidance on how to handle the situation. The decision of the ISA judge managers is final.

If an entry does not meet general competition guidelines (for example, only one issue of a periodical is sent or an entry is not about a technical subject), immediately notify the ISA judge managers.

Recommendations for first impressions

First impressions are just that. You thumb through the entry and write down whatever comes to mind first. You do not have to spend more than five to ten minutes per entry on this milestone. Two to four sentences are usually sufficient.

The following are example first impression comments for five hypothetical entries:

- A glossy professional publication. Initials caps are used periodically to break up long articles. Formatting across articles is consistent (e.g., by lines, references, resources, author descriptions).

- An automated easy-to-use interface tool for end-users. Reports are plain and simple but seem informative for customers. Writing looks clean. I noticed some fragmented sentences, but that may be okay given the context.

- I was able to download the necessary software per their instructions. The ebook has an antiseptic feel to it. All fonts are san-serif. A few graphics appear fuzzy. Writing looks pretty clean and succinct.

- Most of the PowerPoint slides don't look too cluttered, although some flowcharts might be hard to read. Format from slide-to-slide is consistent. Job aid gets

straight to the point of certain tasks. Seems easy to follow. Screen shots look a little small, but the field engineer probably does not need to look at them too closely.

- A compact, two-colored publication. Screen shots are small but still legible. Very clean. Good use of the word "you". I saw one passive voice by chance. I also saw a contraction, giving it an informal tone.

Because impressions of an entry can change as you read it more thoroughly, you do not have to include your first impressions in the entry assessment form (unless you want to). First impressions are for internal use only and never sent to the entrants. Therefore first impressions do not need to be as formal compared to your entry assessment comments.

Team leads will collect and compile their team's first impressions. Appendix B provides a suggested format to use to submit to the judge manager. Send the information as an attachment or directly in an email message.

Recommendations for assessment comments

The point of comments is to provide valuable feedback to entrants. Put yourself in the entrant's place and ask, "What feedback would I like to receive from a colleague sitting beside me, helping to ensure that my work meets audience needs?" Imagine that you are responding to a colleague who has asked for your opinion on an important documentation project.

The rest of this section provides some stylistic rules for writing comments, with examples labeled **Avoid** (Don't) or **Better** (Do).

Support your comments with specific examples and references

Avoid Great navigation aids!

Better The active site map is a great navigation tool. The fact that you can zoom out to an aerial view of the campus, then zoom in on the right building, the right room, then its schematic diagram, gives maintenance personnel a natural way to find the information they need. I was able to find the inspection records for the elevators in building 7 in less than 30 seconds.

Avoid The design is cluttered.

Better Consider breaking the information in Figure 17 (p. 41) into four diagrams, each representing one of the major subsystems. Each can be on its own page, along with the legend and is then simpler and less cluttered, so users can find what they're looking for more easily. Also consider applying similar simplifying techniques to the tables on pages 46 and 48 and to the explanation of XML schemas on pages 67-84.

Avoid Graphics are well done.

Better Graphics make good use of callouts—for example, on pages 5 and 10.

Avoid More entries are needed in the index.

Better People can come to an index with many different words in mind for the same action or concept. Try to anticipate what those words might be and include them.

Better 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 *sending a file*, but does not have an entry for *file, sending*. The alternative wording would benefit users who look up the word *file* in the index.

Write suggestions diplomatically

Imagine yourself presenting your comments to the entrant face to face.

Note: In general, don't point out isolated errors. Only call attention to the following types of things if it's such a problem throughout the entry that *target users* might not trust the information.

Avoid This quick reference card looks like a ransom note!

Better The more you use highlighting, the less effective it becomes, so you might want to reconsider your choice of highlighting all notes and tips.

Better You've organized the information clearly and logically. The large selection of fonts and colors hides that organization. Changes to the physical appearance could help users see the structure right away. For example, consider using a single color and typeface for the heads, and distinguishing their levels by font size and indentation.

Avoid Whoever wrote the text of this manual should go back to second grade for a refresher course in English!

Better Consider adding an editing pass to your production cycle to eliminate errors like the use of "it's" for "its" and "demonstration's" for "demonstrations" throughout chapter 4, or the use of "descendent" for "descendant" in the chapter on compound documents.

Frame comments as suggestions, not orders. The words "consider …" are often more useful, as in the following examples. Include the reasoning behind your suggestions.

Avoid Use more white space on page 47.

Better Consider using more white space on page 47.

Avoid You should use fewer fonts.

Better The large selection of fonts makes the document hard to read. (reasoning included.) Consider using fewer fonts.

For points that might not be obvious, be less direct.

Avoid Always use numbered lists in procedures.

Better Consider using a numbered list instead of bullets for the installation steps on page 6. If you do not want to use a numbered list for procedural steps, such as the long list of tasks on page 16, you might also consider a checkbox. Users can print out the PDF and check off each step. Alternatively, retitle the section as Overview of Configuration Tasks, so that readers don't wonder why the steps lack numbers.

For obvious points, make them directly. Reserve the word "consider" for suggestions about issues that entrants might approach in other ways.

Avoid Consider including page numbers in cross-references to accommodate users who want to print from the PDFs.

Better Include page numbers in cross-references to accommodate users who want to print from the PDFs.

Using "you" or "your" can sound accusatory. In general, use second person to address entrants, but use third person to describe entries.

Avoid Your illustrations are blurry.

Better   The illustrations are blurry.

Don't mention award levels or competition rules

Avoid   This entry falls between two categories, so I judged it as a quick reference.

Avoid   I would have considered this entry Distinguished if you had submitted it on sturdier paper.

Better   Sturdier paper would help this book survive in its intended environment.

Write comments about the entry, not about you

Comment on your experience of examining the entry only if it's relevant. If so, write in the first person singular.

Avoid   The first time this judge read the chapter on stored procedures, she was totally confused until she read section 4. Consider moving that material into the chapter introduction.

Better   The first time I read the chapter on stored procedures, I was totally confused until I read section 4. Consider moving that material into the chapter introduction.

The entrant already knows that these are your opinions. If your experience from examining the entry is not relevant, write comments as declarative, present tense, active voice descriptions of the entry. Leave out wishy-washy words like "I think" and "in my opinion".

Avoid   I think the figure on p. 17 gives a wonderful overview of the entire production process.

Better   The figure on p. 17 gives a wonderful overview of the entire production process.

Use present tense

Write in the present tense as if you are describing the entry in front of you. Use the past tense only if the point you're making is no longer true. For example, "Chapter 6 was confusing" (but now it's clear).

Avoid   The illustrations were wonderful.

Better   The illustrations are wonderful.

However, when you discuss a procedure you followed for example, use other tenses as appropriate.

Better   The first three links I tried took me to pages that seemed irrelevant. I then looked in the index, but I couldn't find "widgetation."

Write in active voice

Read your sentences and recast the ones that use passive voice unnecessarily. Just as we look for simple, direct, active prose in an entry, find ways to express your comments simply, directly, actively. In other words, your comments should be self-exemplifying of the quality of work that this competition seeks to recognize as superior.

Avoid   The meaning of the chart is obscured by the use of too many colors.

Better   The use of so many colors in the chart makes it hard to understand.

Better Consider using fewer colors in the chart for better readability. Use color to highlight the most important aspects.

Other recommendations

- Consider the end product in relation to budget. Contributors do not always have control over the entire process. Some pieces might be produced on a limited budget or under limitations inherent to the delivery medium. Read all comments on the entry submission form to help you establish what the contributor was able to do within these constraints. Consider how effectively the available resources were used and how well the entry communicates the message to the intended audience.

- Keep your comments to the point. Don't lecture or go off on tangents.

- Give concrete suggestions for correcting problems. For example, "The all-cap headings in the Table of Contents are difficult to read. Uppercase and lowercase would be better." Consider what you would want to know or how you would like to receive feedback about the entry. If the submitter clearly has no idea how to index a manual, don't be reluctant to give some tips.

- 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.

- Make sure your comments are qualitative. Resist the urge to merely describe the entry in answer to an assessment question. Provide a commentary or value judgment that indicates you have made an "assessment".

- Beware of "reviewer syndrome," which is the preoccupation with finding small flaws. Instead, concentrate on a balanced and perceptive assessment of the "accomplishment of the whole" as well as its parts.

- *Do not try to be humorous* in your comments. Some people may take offense.

- Try not to be influenced by your own company's corporate style guides or standards for design and format. Companies set standards to be effective for their particular use, and they vary based on company need. Your preferences may also be simply a matter of taste.

- Check your comments for spelling and grammar!

Follow the Golden Rule

Above all, write as if you were telling this information to a colleague, face to face. Don't be snide, sarcastic, or unkind in any way. Such comments are unprofessional and only make more work for the people who review and, if necessary, edit your comments before sending them to the entrant.

Awards

The following table describes the three levels of award at the International level.

Award Level	Definition
Distinguished	Clearly superior in *all* areas. The entry contains no major flaws and few, if any, minor flaws. **It applies the principles of technical communication in an outstanding way**, particularly in the way that it anticipates and fulfills the needs of its audience.
Excellence	Consistently meets high standards in all areas. The entry might contain a single major flaw or a few minor flaws. The entry clearly (if slightly imperfectly) **demonstrates an exceptional understanding of technical communication principles**.
Merit	Consistently meets high standards in most areas. The entry might contain a small number of major or minor flaws, but it still applies technical communication principles in a **highly proficient** manner.

These awards do not represent first, second, and third places, but are levels of accomplishment in reference to a standard. It's true that the words do not necessarily indicate the relative levels, but that is a positive aspect. An argument against using numbers instead of words is that winners are more likely to hang a certificate in their office that says "Merit" than one that says "Third Place."

As mentioned in the previous table, major and minor flaws are defined as follows:

- **Major flaw:** Substantially confuses or hinders the user. Examples:

  - Illogical organization
  - Incomplete or missing content
  - Consistently unclear style
  - No table of contents, headers, page numbers, or index
  - Inaccurate page numbers in table of contents or index
  - Procedural steps buried in text
  - Consistent pattern of spelling and grammatical errors
  - Confusing terminology
  - Difficult navigation
  - Poor visual quality

- **Minor flaw:** Might cause a momentary stumble, but doesn't slow down the user much. Examples:
  - Few instances of spelling or grammatical errors
  - Misplaced graphics
  - Inconsistent capitalization
  - Confusing terminology

An entry that receives any award must be thorough, accurate, useful, appropriate, and well executed. The entry size might determine whether a flaw is major or minor. For example, misspelling a client's name in a short marketing brochure would be considered a major flaw, whereas a 500-page document with one instance of a

misspelled name that was spelled correctly dozens of other times would be considered a minor flaw.

FAQ

Is there a limit to the number of awards that can be granted at a given level? Should only a certain percentage of entries receive awards?

No more than one Best of Show is awarded per ISA competition, but there is no limit on any of the other award levels. Entries are to be judged against a standard. If an entry meets the standard for a level, it should receive the award for that level.

Do we have to nominate an entry for Best of Show?

No. Best of Show is the one entry in the entire ISA that surpasses all others of its kind. If you do not feel any entry merits a Best of Show nomination, there is no requirement for your team to nominate one.

However, if you have more than one Distinguished award winner that your team wants to nominate for ISA Best of Show, you may do so with the appropriate documentation for each.

Where can I find more information about the competition categories?

The "2014 STC ISA General Information and Rules", available at http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/competitions/, provide in-depth information about the four competition categories, including examples of the types of materials that can fall under each category.

Special Thanks

ISA Competition Entries Manager
Elizabeth Bailey, STC Associate Fellow

ISA Competition Judge Training Manager
Dorothy McDuffie, STC Associate Fellow

Appendices

A. Lead Judge Checklist

B. Sample First Impressions Format for Lead Judges

C. Entry Assessment Form Overview for Judges

A. Lead Judge Checklist

Receiving Entry Assignments

Receive two important emails from the Judge Manager. The first communication includes your team number, judge numbers, and an email contact list for your team. A second email will provide a list of the entries assigned to your team and entry access information.

Check your entries immediately upon receipt, whether through email or by delivery.

Verify that your team members have received and checked their entries. Escalate problems about entry receipt to the Judge Manager for resolution with the Entries Manager.

Check whether the entries match the entry submission forms received in hardcopy or electronically.

Review the STC ISA General Information and Rules available on the International Summit Awards page at www.STC.org. (Scroll down to International Forms and Files.) Verify that each entry meets the rules and is complete.

Verify that each entry is correctly categorized.

Determine whether any judge on the team has a conflict of interest or other issue in judging a particular entry.

Contact the Judge Manager to resolve any issues.

Leading the Judging Process

Follow the "ISA 2014 Schedule" and "Judging process overview" in the *Handbook for Judges* to meet the milestone dates in the judging process.

Verify that all first-time judges either attended the live training or viewed the recorded session.

Download the STC ISA Entry Assessment Form (from STC.org).

Name an assessment form file for each entry using the format: Entry Number_Judge Number_Entry Title. For example, the file name for judge 15-2's assessment of entry number 1234 would be: 1234_15-2_Acme Widget Farm Technical Reference. Use the same entry title as on the entry submission form.

Evaluate each entry and enter your comments on the assessment forms. Do *not* write on entries.

Assign each entry a preliminary award level. Do *not* write this on entries or assessment forms.

Determine a date for consensus judging (Milestone 3). This date must be no later than **March 30, 2014.**

Set up the consensus meeting with the team. Use Skype, email and phone, or other remote meeting options.

As a team, determine awards and annotate an entry list with award levels or "None".

Complete a Best of Show recommendation, if you propose an entry for this award. NOTE: By **March 31, 2014**, contact Judge Manager for instructions to ship copies of BOS candidates to BOS judge team members by **April 8, 2013**.

Wrapping Up

Finalize and submit assessment forms to the Judge Manager (Milestone 4) no later than **April 4, 2014**.

Verify that there are three *complete* and *professional* assessments per entry from your team.

Review the team's assessments based on the criteria in the *Handbook for Judges* and the judge training materials.

Verify that the assessment files are named correctly.

Compress the files into a single file named Team XX Entry Assessments.

Email assessment form zip file, including award list and any BOS recommendations to the Judge Manager no later than **April 4, 2013**.

B. Sample First Impressions Format for Lead Judges

First Impressions from Team [NN]

[Entry Number_Entry Title]

Judge	First impression comments
NN-1	
NN-2	
NN-3	

[Entry Number_Entry Title]

Judge	First impression comments
NN-1	
NN-2	
NN-3	

[Entry Number_Entry Title]

Judge	First impression comments
NN-1	
NN-2	
NN-3	

[Entry Number_Entry Title]

Judge	First impression comments
NN-1	
NN-2	
NN-3	

Assessment Form Hierarchy

The competition entry assessment form uses the following hierarchy and terms.

Category	Competition Category: Informational Materials, Instructional Materials, Promotional Materials, or User Support Materials. For descriptions of the types of materials included in each category, see the *General Information and Rules* and other training materials: http://www.stc.org/membership/recognition/competitions
Assessment Structure	Main divisions of assessment criteria: Information Design, Writing and Editing, and Overall, indicated by first-level headings in the entry assessment form.
Assessment Area	Highest level of types of criteria within the main divisions, indicated by second-level headings (Example: 1.3 Visual Elements).
Subarea	Lowest level of criteria within some assessment areas, indicated by third-level headings (Example: 1.3.5 Artwork).

Assessment Form Outline

In the form, assessment criteria are organized within the following assessment structure.

1. Writing and Editing (main division)
    1.1 Writing Basics (assessment area)
        1.1.1 Audience and Purpose (assessment subarea)
        1.1.2 Technical Vocabulary (subarea)
        1.1.3 Capitalization, Spelling, and Punctuation (subarea)
        1.1.4 Grammar and Syntax
        1.1.5 Consistency
    1.2 Essentials of Style (assessment area)
        1.2.1 Word Choice
        1.2.2 Clarity and Conciseness
    1.3 Optional Comments (assessment area)

2. Information Design (main division)
    2.1 Organization (assessment area)
    2.2 Content Scope
    2.3 Visual Elements
        2.3.1 Layout and Presentation (assessment subarea)
        2.3.2 Color and Shading (subarea)
        2.3.3 Typography
        2.3.4 Artwork
    2.4 Navigation
        2.4.1 Table of Contents
        2.4.2 Interface Design
        2.4. Cross-references
        2.4.4 Index
        2.4.5 Search
    2.5 Publication or Delivery Method
        2.5.1 Choice of Delivery Medium
        2.5.2 Implementation

Assessment Form Instructions

Before you begin, *review the entire form* to become familiar with the assessment criteria.

- As an STC ISA judge, you are required to evaluate and comment on all relevant assessment areas and subareas defined in the entry assessment form.

- The criteria questions or prompts are guidelines to consider. Use these prompts as suggestions to help in 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 *1.1.3 Capitalization*, *Spelling, and Punctuation* and *1.1.4 Grammar and Syntax* are not applicable. Indicate "Not Applicable" for criteria that do not apply to an entry.

- For comments on an aspect of an entry that the form does not address, use the *Optional Comments* sections.

- However, for any criteria questions or areas that you think disregard a particular delivery medium, consider how the concept in question might apply to that medium, but for the lack of specific mention. For example, "Do [learning] assessments provide both reinforcing and corrective feedback?" Interpret the question in terms of the method of feedback the entry provides. In other words, "feedback" can refer to real-time chat, if a chat facility is part of the entry.

- Section *2.8 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.

- Note that the space at the top of the form for Entry Number may be used or not, depending on whether the management team for a given competition assigns numbers to the entries.

- **Important**: Use the following *new* file-naming convention when you save each assessment: Entry Number_Judge Number_Entry Title