



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

# Competition Judging Guidelines

Thank you for volunteering your time and expertise as a judge in the Willamette Valley Chapter’s Technical Publications, Technical Art, and Online Communication competitions!

People enter STC’s 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. Your judging comments, while anonymous, reflect the credibility of STC’s competitions and our profession.

Judges must provide fair, impartial, and constructive evaluation of each entry that they judge. Even when there are many similar entries from the same company, you cannot assume the same individuals produced them. Each entry paid a fee to enter the competition and deserves the same, full evaluation.

The following guidelines explain a little bit about the judging process, the award levels given, criteria for the awards, and suggestions for providing constructive feedback. Please take a few moments to look these over. If you have any suggestions for improving the guidelines or the judging process, please contact the competition manager.

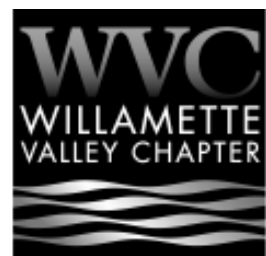
Thank you again for your support and participation!

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## Getting Started

### **Read the comments of the entrant**

These comments are very important; they usually will give you the background, constraints, and intended audience. Contributors do not always have control over the entire process. For example, some pieces might be produced with a limited budget or under production system limitations. Read all the comments on the entry sheet to help establish what the contributor was able to do within these constraints.

Sometimes a developer has to adhere to company standards that actually detract from the entry. When you write constructive feedback, the developer may want to show your opinion to management in an effort to change policy.

### **Spend an equal amount of time on each entry**

Take between 20 and 40 minutes to review an entry (remember 90% of what you can get, you will get in the first 15 minutes - after that, returns diminish). You will have several entries to evaluate, so your time is limited. Make multiple passes for grammar/spelling, layout/design, usability/effectiveness, TOC/Index. Then, allot another 10 to 20 minutes to complete the judging sheet for each entry.

### **Be objective, impartial, and helpful**

When you look over 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 the competition manager immediately so the entry can be reassigned.

### **Treat each entry with confidentiality**

Keep your evaluations and personal opinions about them confidential. Treat all information about awards given or not given as confidential until the competition committee has sent notification letters and evaluation forms to those participating. 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.

### **Be respectful and support your comments with examples**

Remember that the entrant is looking for constructive feedback and encouragement toward higher achievement, as well as acknowledgment for achievements made. Be professional and generous with praise, and give the specific location of any problems so the developer can find them easily.

### **Write clear, concise comments**

Remember that judging technical publications involves more than the text. Verify TOC and Index entries; check for spelling, grammar, and consistency between design and purpose. Is the design germane to the entry? For example, if a User Manual is bound so tightly that when you lay it down, it does not stay open, then the design is not consistent with the intended purpose.

### **Have fun!**

Enjoy the fruits of another writer's labor, and look for techniques and methods you might employ.

### **Please do not write on any of the entries.**

They need to be in show condition in case they are sent on to be judged at the International level.

## Awards Levels and Definitions

### Award levels

There are three levels of awards (in descending order): Distinguished, Excellence and Merit. These awards do not represent first, second and third places; instead, they are levels of accomplishment with reference to a standard. It's true that the words do not clearly indicate level; however, an argument against using numbers is that people are more likely to hang a certificate in their office that says "Merit" than if it says "Third Place." The words are better for the certificates and the image conveyed.

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 nor in each category if entries do not meet the standards.

Here are definitions of each award level, as well as for a "no award" entry:

### Distinguished

The entry meets or exceeds high standards in all areas. It contains no major flaws and few, if any, minor flaws. It applies the principles of technical communication in a superior way, particularly in how it anticipates and fulfills the needs of its audience.

### Excellence

The entry consistently meets high standards in all or most areas. It might contain a single major flaw or a few minor flaws. It clearly (if slightly imperfectly) demonstrates an exceptional understanding of technical communication principles.

### Merit

The entry consistently meets high standards in most or some areas. It might contain major or minor flaws, but still applies technical communication principles proficiently.

### No award

The entry is of average or less-than-average professional quality. It generally has many major and minor flaws. It shows a lack of understanding of technical communication principles, is poorly executed, is hard to use, or fails to meet the needs of its audience.

### What are major and minor flaws?

For any entry to receive an award, it must be thorough, accurate, useful, appropriate, and well executed. Note that the size of an entry might affect whether a flaw is major or minor; for example, misspelling a client's name in a short marketing brochure would be a major flaw.

### Major flaw

Substantially 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
- a consistent pattern of spelling and grammatical errors
- consistently confusing terminology

### Minor flaw

Might cause a momentary stumble, but doesn't slow the user down much. Examples:

- a few instances of spelling and grammatical errors
- a misplaced graphic or two
- inconsistent capitalization
- some confusing terminology

### Technical art

Technical art is judged on how well it visually communicates a technical message. Judges evaluate the visual appeal, technical execution, and presentation of each entry to determine awards based on the entry's strengths and weaknesses.

### Technical publications

Technical publications are rated on four factors: writing, graphics, copyediting, and overall integration. All factors are judged in the context of the purpose, content, and organization of the document.

### Online communication

Online communication is judged in the context of the entry's stated purpose. Judges evaluate the content, structure, and design of each entry, and how well it fulfilled its purpose.

## Judging Criteria

### **Be objective, impartial, and helpful**

Make detailed comments on the Publications Evaluation forms, but remember that your comments will be mailed to the submitter, and that this feedback is often shared with the submitter's employer. Be frank, but tactful. Constructive criticism is valued, especially when a work has been given a below-average evaluation. 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.

### **Miscategorizations**

If you feel that an item is miscategorized, complete a Publications Evaluation form for it anyway. Contact the other members of your team to discuss your concern. If your team agrees, the leader will give the entry to the competition committee at the consensus judging. The committee then gives the entry for consideration to the team judging the category to which you believe it belongs.

### **Look for effectiveness, appropriateness, and professionalism**

Try not to be swayed solely 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.

### **Budget and time constraints**

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.

### **Standards**

Don't be influenced by your own company's 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 the standards will vary based on company need. And your personal preferences may simply be a matter of taste.

### **Accuracy and complexity**

Accuracy is an essential aspect of technical communication. Sometimes it's very difficult to tell how accurate a piece is unless you are actually 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, however, judge how well the communicator appears to have organized and presented the information, and you can certainly judge the quality of the writing itself.

The more complex a subject matter, the more difficult a task the producers have to deal with that subject matter successfully. And, it also is more difficult for judges to assess how the contributors dealt with the topic. Unfortunately, entries that deal with complex subjects do not always get the full consideration (or comprehension) of the judges and therefore suffer in the resulting evaluations. The technical complexity of the content must be considered in judging. Not that you should be judging "good" science versus "bad" science, but that you should factor in the difficulty of the task faced by the contributors and how well they dealt with the difficulties.

### **Finding flaws**

Beware of "reviewer syndrome," which is the preoccupation with finding small flaws. In the words of ITPC judge 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 results can be preoccupation with finding small flaws instead of concentration on a balanced and perceptive evaluation of the "accomplishment of the whole" as well as its parts.

## Judging Process

### First judges' meeting

At the first judges meeting, you will receive the entries you will be evaluating, and be assigned to a team with two other judges. After the first judges' meeting:

1. Make sure you have all entries assigned to you.
2. Complete a Publications Evaluation form for each entry. The forms are available as PDF files from the STC web site ([www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)).
3. Make an initial check of each entry to get a general impression.
  - If you feel that you cannot be impartial about a particular entry, notify the competition manager.
  - If you feel an entry has been miscategorized, bring the matter up with your team members. If all on your team agree, at the consensus meeting, the entry will be given to the team judging the category you believe is appropriate.
  - Don't be too strongly influenced by this initial pass. It often turns out that the entries you liked best at first glance have problems that become apparent later on. Keep an open mind throughout the evaluation process.
  - Set a schedule for yourself for reviewing the entries during the evaluation time frame, so you won't be rushed at the very end.
4. After the initial exam, evaluate your entries. For each entry:
  - Complete a Publications Evaluation form.
  - Complete all information at the top of the form. Use the exact entry title that is on the entry form attached to the entry. Use your assigned judge number; never record your name on any of the forms.
  - Use additional sheets whenever needed. Do not write on the reverse sides (this makes them cumbersome to copy).

- Don't be overwhelmed by the size or extent of an entry. Look at one area at a time and use the Publications Evaluation form as a checklist. You don't have to read absolutely every word in a large publication. 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 Publications Evaluation 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.

5. Make one hard copy of your completed Publications Evaluation forms.

### Consensus judging

You may wish to meet with your team prior to the consensus meeting to discuss the entries and award levels.

When you come to the consensus meeting, make sure to bring all the entries you were assigned, and hard copies of the completed Publications Evaluation forms.

During consensus judging, you will:

1. Briefly review all entries with your team to see if you can come to immediate agreement on the entries that you all feel deserve no award. You can set these aside immediately.
2. Discuss the remaining entries and come to consensus about awards for them. As your team discusses the entries, don't be surprised if you find:
  - Wide differences in ratings
  - Healthy disagreements
  - Evaluations that place emphasis on very different things than you did
  - Yourself reevaluating an entry in light of the other judges' opinions
  - Yourself learning new things

It is up to your team to take into account the different viewpoints, and come to a consensus on the overall award level for the entry.

## Recommendations for Evaluation Comments

Write as many clear, useful comments as you can for each entry, even if you do not feel it qualifies for an award. Your comments are one of the main benefits to the entrants, who have entered the competition not only for the chance to win an award, but also to receive a meaningful critique of their work.

Try to include at least three compliments and three suggestions for improvement, no matter how good (or bad) you judge the entry to be. (One or two short comments make it difficult for submitters to justify the cost of the entry fee to management.) 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.

### Guidelines for writing comments

- List the high points first.
- 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."
- Give the location of any problems so the author can find them easily.
- Avoid being humorous. Some people have no sense of humor and will take offense at what they consider to be frivolous.
- Check your comments to be sure spelling and grammar are correct.

### Use specific examples

Instead of: "Graphics are well done."

Say: "Graphics make good use of callouts; for example, on pages 5 and 10."

Instead of: "More entries are needed in the index."

Say: "You could improve your index by adding entries with alternative wordings. For example, on page 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 entry would benefit users who look up the word file in the index."