

Welcome!

Welcome to the 24th issue of the quarterly CyberText newsletter where you'll find tips and snippets of information, some interesting websites, and some time-saving software.

Quite a bit has happened since my last newsletter. I've finalised one long-term contract, and the other company I've been working for was acquired by a much larger company based in Brisbane, Queensland. So, after some years of "same old, same old" a lot has happened recently regarding my contractual commitments. It's all good!

I've also set up a CyberText Bookstore (associated with Amazon), which contains books, DVDs, and other products that I recommend. And I've written a case study of an interesting pro bono editing project I did for a quilt designer. Details about both projects are in this newsletter.

Enjoy! (By the way, I'd appreciate it if you'd forward this newsletter to anyone you think may find it useful.)

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Windows: Copy Error Message

Problem: Something goes wrong and a Windows error message box pops up. But the error text is long, perhaps full of cryptic characters, and you've forgotten how to capture it as a screen shot to send to Support.

Solution: Click anywhere on the error message, then press CTRL+C to copy the text to the clipboard. Paste this text into an email message or document.

CyberText Bookstore

Over the years people have asked me to recommend useful books on technical writing, usability, style guides, etc. So, in association with Amazon.com, I've set up a CyberText Bookstore—linked from the CyberText website—that contains my recommendations: <http://astore.amazon.com/cybertconsul-20/>

The book listings only include books I've read, or are by authors whom I know personally and whose writing I recommend. I'm regularly adding other products that I use and recommend—everything from vindaloo paste to vacuum cleaners to quilting accessories!

So why should you shop at my Amazon store? What's in it for you? Well, you're still shopping at Amazon, which means you get their usual excellent prices and conditions so there's no extra financial benefit to you; however, you do get a very selected list of my *personal* recommendations.

What's the benefit to me? I get a very small 'referral fee' percentage on every item sold through my store—even for items that aren't listed—provided you purchase them in the same session.

It's definitely not a "get rich quick" scheme, but I think it's a worthwhile service. 

Case Study: Raggedy Stitches

I purchased a quilt kit from Michelle at Raggedy Stitches (<http://www.raggedystitches.com>) after attending one of her excellent 2-day workshops. However, I found the written instructions hard to follow. Procedural steps were not numbered and were mixed in with notes, and the cutting instructions weren't clear. With her permission and thanks, I rewrote her instructions, changed the layout and formatting, and added sections for "Prerequisites" and "Terminology".

Read the full case study (including before and after examples) here: http://www.cybertext.com.au/services_edit.htm

Software for a USB device

So you've got a USB stick (thumb drive, flash drive, or whatever you call it). Yes, it's great for storing and transporting files, but have you thought of using it to store programs that don't have to be installed on your computer—or your client's computer? Go to http://www.snapfiles.com/features/ed_usb_software.html for some free and useful programs suitable for a USB stick. The programs I've used and recommend include **Convert** and **TreePad Lite**.

Lies told to technical writers

Those of you who are technical writers should relate to many of these 'untruths'. If you work with a technical writer, I hope you're not guilty of uttering any of them!

(**Acknowledgement:** This list is from: <http://www.documentia.ca/lies.htm>)

- I'll take it along and read it on the plane.
- I'll read it over the weekend.
- I'll return this to you, with my comments, by the end of the week.
- On Monday: "We need it by Friday." After doing a little digging, you discover that they've known about this project for 6 weeks, but are only getting around to telling you now. More digging reveals that they can really wait until next week.
- Nobody reads the manuals, anyway!
- Code will be frozen 12 weeks before your document is due.
- There's plenty of time in the schedule for these changes.
- I don't really have an opinion on how you labelled those controls.
- One space, two spaces. It doesn't matter to me.
- We're ordering you a faster computer and a 21" monitor tomorrow.
- Our company takes great pride in its technical documentation.
- We've never had any complaints about our documentation.
- You'll have the full support of upper management.
- We're very committed here to producing top of the line documentation.
- Our technical writers are respected members of the development team.
- You'll have the opportunity to learn the latest tools here.

- We're moving to online documentation within the next six months.
- What do you mean you need to know the product name now? Can't you just do a 'search and replace' right before you go to the printer?
- Nobody expects you to take notes or write up the minutes if you attend our development meetings.
- The style guide covers every possible situation.
- The manual is the first thing that the user goes to after installing the product.
- Our readers always notice and care deeply if there are two spaces after a period, if bullets are square instead of round, and if the font is Verdana instead of Arial.
- Your pay is within close range of the developers.
- You'll never perform a non-writing task.
- Designers and developers will ask for and respect your opinion on user interface design, layout, and functionality.
- You'll have a fully-functional product in your hands in plenty of time to complete your document.
- Don't worry. Your document probably won't need to be translated.
- The product's so intuitive it practically writes the manual itself.
- Nobody here is going to offer anything but constructive criticism about your work. There are no ego problems. We're a team.
- Your computer and software is every bit as up-to-date as the ones they have in Engineering.
- You won't be thought of as a nuisance by the Subject Matter Experts. They accept that you're a peer and respect that you have a job to do.
- You don't need to know anything about a computer except how to turn it on and work the word processor.
- The work is simple. Just write down what the thing does and how to do it.
- Oh, there's just one major feature change and some bug fixes.
- This is the latest copy.
- It's still in review.
- It's at the printer.
- It's due back from the printer today.
- We'll make the deadline.
- This is the latest copy of the software.
- Take it from me, this is how the feature is going to work.
- All the information you need is in the specs.
- Don't worry. You'll get my comments on your manual tomorrow. I swear.
- The procedure should only take a page. Two at the most.
- No rush.
- We're an equal opportunity employer.
- We're all just one big happy family here.
- We have no lawsuits pending.
- Our stock options are growing; you can purchase on the employee plan.
- Communication is our priority.
- Teamwork is our middle name.
- The software is frozen.
- I'd make that more abstract.
- We'll make sure you have everything you need to get the job done.
- As the tech writer at our company, you will have full unrestricted access to the development team's time and resources.

Software: PhraseExpress

I can't recall where I found out about PhraseExpress, but it sounded handy so I installed it and set up about a dozen shortcuts to phrases I type regularly. It's similar to Word's Autocorrect but the neat thing about PhraseExpress is that it works across all applications—even within a Virtual Machine and via Remote Desktop across a VPN. Very clever. It also keeps statistics on how much you've saved in typing time and therefore money, which is a bit scary!

Details: <http://www.phraseexpress.com>. Free for personal use; \$19.95 US for professional use. A network version is also available.

Interesting websites



How does your website display in Internet Explorer? When you install Internet Explorer 7, Microsoft uninstalls your previous version automatically. While this behaviour is fine for most people, it's not good for those involved in web development. The different IE versions have many idiosyncracies we have to design around, so it's essential that web developers can test their designs on each of the main versions—which means setting up other computers or virtual machines for testing. To the rescue is a German site that allows you to check how a website renders in IE 5.5, 6, and 7—and all for free: <http://ipinfo.info/netrenderer>

Make long URLs small. You may have seen web addresses that start with tinyurl.com/, snipurl.com/, or similar, and wondered what they're all about. Well, they are a quick, easy, and free way to shorten excessively long web addresses (URLs) into short, permanent ones. Short URLs don't break across lines in an email. You can add these sites to your browser toolbar too, so you can always quickly create a small URL from a long one. Details: <http://www.tinyurl.com> and <http://www.snipurl.com>.

20 ways to say "No". Have you ever been in a situation where someone asks you to take on extra paid or volunteer work, but you really don't have the time or the inclination to do so? Then here are twenty ways you can politely say "no": <http://www.onlineorganizing.com/ExpertAdviceToolboxTips.asp?tipsheet=16>

News

New client: Runge Limited (pron. rung-ee) acquired Fractal Technologies on July 1, 2007, so I am now contracting to Runge for around 3 days a week. Early in July, I spent a week at their Brisbane headquarters, and another visit is planned for early September. <http://www.runge.com>

WritersUA Conference: The 2008 WritersUA conference will be in Portland, Oregon (Mar 16-18). I've submitted a proposal to speak, so hopefully I'll be in Portland for the spring flowers! Details: <http://www.writersua.com>



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