

Touchstone Judging Guide (2018-19)

Judging at a Glance

This section summarizes what judges need to know and do.

For More Information

If you have questions that this document does not answer, please send email to xrm@pacbell.net. Make the subject of the email **STC Competition Judge**.

Commitment

Judging entails the following commitments. For specific dates, see the next section, Schedule.

- Attend the first judging meeting to receive entries, judging materials, and training.
- Handle entries carefully and return them at the end of the judging process in condition to be publicly exhibited.
- Devote approximately 40 hours to judging entries and producing deliverables.
- Work with your team to resolve differences and produce deliverables.
- Produce written comments by the date in the table, as a Word document using the template provided and adhering in content, style, and format to the guidelines in this document.
- Attend a team consensus meeting, sometime before the final judging meeting.
- Optionally, attend the final judging meeting. At least one member of each judging team should attend the meeting to return the team's entries, present the team's views to the other attendees, and discuss award recommendations.

Schedule

Weekend of October 13-14 (details to be announced)	Attend first judging meeting: receive entries, judging materials, and training.
Monday, October 15	Email first impressions of all entries. Use the specified email address and subject.
Monday, October 22	Email draft comments for at least one entry. Use the specified email address and subject.
Wednesday, November 28	Email final written comments for all entries. Email first impressions of all entries. Use the specified email address and subject.
Prior to December 5	Meet with team members to discuss entries and make award recommendations. Email consensus recommendations.
Weekend of December 8-9 (details to be announced)	Attend the final judging meeting to discuss award recommendations and return entries.
Saturday, January 19, 2019	(optional) Attend award ceremony at Touchstone's expense. Judges participate in drawing for up to \$250 toward 2018 STC dues.

Deliverables

The judging deliverables are as follows. Due dates are in the previous section, Schedule. Send **all** email deliverables to xrm@pacbell.net with copies to your judging teammates. Use subject line **STC Competition Judge**.

- **Individual judge:** Written comments on each entry, adhering to the guidelines in this document. Use the Word template from the download section of the Touchstone website. *Do not substitute your own template.* Email the comments.
- **Team:** A consensus award recommendation for each entry. Email the recommendations at least a day before the final judging meeting.

We enter judges who meet these deliverables in a prize drawing. The prize is up to \$250.00 toward your STC membership for the coming year.

Process

To judge in this competition:

1. Review the commitments required of judges.
2. Submit the judging form (see the call for judges). *Please do not omit this*, even if you have judged before.
3. Come to the first judging meeting to pick up entries, meet other members of your judging team, and learn the guidelines for judging.
4. Plan your judging time carefully. You have approximately 6 weeks until your written comments on all entries are due. Budget at least 7 hours per week, so you don't get behind.
5. Go home with your entries and examine them immediately. Spend at least ten minutes on each, and jot down your first impressions. Within a day or so, email your impressions to your team and xrm@pacbell.net. Make the message subject **STC Competition Judge**.
6. By the date specified in the schedule, email draft comments for at least one of your entries. Make the message subject **STC Competition Judge**. Make your draft version as close to the final version as you can. This will help clear up any mismatched expectations early.
7. Throughout October and November, discuss entries with your judging team by email.
8. Before the final judging meeting, attend a face-to-face meeting with your judging team to compare entries and impressions and arrive at a team consensus award recommendation for each entry. Information about award levels appears later in this guide. *If you do not plan to attend the final judging meeting, arrange with another team member to bring your entries to that meeting.*
9. By the date specified in the schedule, email your final comments on all entries. Make the message subject **STC Competition Judge**.
10. Bring your entries to the final judging meeting. At least one judge from each team should attend. Attendees review the award recommendations and decide which entries should receive our highest awards. We will collect your entries during the meeting.

11. At Touchstone's expense, attend the Award ceremony in January and participate in a drawing for up to \$250 toward next year's STC dues. You need not be present to win.

Details

Handling entries

The physical entries you judge (books, magazines, art, and so forth) remain the property of the competition. You pick them up at the first judging meeting, and return them at the final judging meeting.

Do not write on the entries or deface them in any way. We may need to exhibit them. If you attach sticky notes or flags, please remove them before returning the entries.

After we no longer need the entries, we give them away or discard them. If you teach and would like some entries to use in your classes, we'll oblige where we can. If you judged an entry and would like to have it as a souvenir, we will try to accommodate you when we no longer need it.

Comment format

The most valuable benefit entrants receive for entering our competition is reasoned, professional evaluations of their entries. We pride ourselves on delivering valuable feedback to all entrants, regardless of their award levels. We provide this feedback in the form of narrative comments. We do not use STC's standard feedback forms to provide feedback to entrants, but we do make use of the work that went into creating the STC forms.

At archive.stc.org/comp/intl-summit-award-forms.asp, STC provides judging forms for different types of entries. These forms have lists of criteria and, for each criterion, a place to write a relevant comment.

Our competition delivers comments in a more holistic narrative form. However, we find the STC forms useful as lists of criteria to pay attention to. We recommend that you look at the STC forms that pertain to your entries, but *do not submit them*. Submit only written comments in the format described here.

We require comments in Word format (.docx). Download the template from the Touchstone website, and use it as the basis of each comment file. Do not include information that identifies you in the document body or properties.

Filename

Construct a filename as follows: *2017_<entry number>_judge_initials.file_extension*. For example, *2017_123456_xrm.docx*.

The judge initials are for competition use. The comment files that go to entrants do not identify the judges.

Content structure

In the Word file, include the following.

Entry number: 2017_XXXXXX

Entry name: The ABC Computing Guide to Widgets

COMPLIMENTS

Under COMPLIMENTS, describe the things you like or admire about the entry. Use a separate paragraph for each thing described. *Don't number or bullet the paragraphs.* Try to group paragraphs logically. For example, if you wish to compliment two different aspects of navigation, place the corresponding paragraphs together or combine them.

SUGGESTIONS

Under SUGGESTIONS, suggest substantive ways to improve the entry. Unless the entry has major copyediting problems, don't use this section to mention them. Trivial matters such as the occasional typo or other things to fix can be mentioned separately (see below). Again, list suggestions as paragraphs and group them logically.

TYPOS TO FIX IN THE NEXT RELEASE (optional)

If you notice typos or similar *unintentional* errors you would like to bring the attention of the entrant, you can include them in an optional TYPOS TO FIX IN THE NEXT RELEASE section. Remove this section if you are not reporting any typos. Do not make stylistic suggestions here. If they are substantive, include them under SUGGESTIONS.

What not to include

The information you include in this file is for the benefit of the entrants and will be seen by them.

Do not include award level recommendations or any information that identifies you in this file. Your team should supply award recommendations in a separate file. Your initials in the filename identify you to us. We use a different filename for the final comments we send to entrants.

Award levels

We recognize the following award levels:

- Distinguished: An outstanding example of technical communication—of superior quality.
- Excellence: An outstanding example of technical communication—superior in most respects and with only minor flaws.
- Merit: A solidly professional example of technical communication—superior in some respects and with few serious flaws.

In the past we included “innovative” as a criterion for Distinguished, but this caused confusion, so we no longer do so.

Experience shows that about 5 to 7 percent of entries achieve the level of Distinguished.

Approximately 10 to 15 percent of entries achieve the level of Excellence.

Approximately 30 percent of entries achieve the level of Merit.

Approximately half the entries receive no award.

These percentages are not rules. We do not grade on a curve. Furthermore, each judge sees only a small number of entries, so your set may be skewed up or down. The percentages simply provide guidelines to be aware of as you evaluate your entries.

How to Evaluate Entries

We are a small competition so we do not attempt to group entries and teams by categories. You may have a variety of different types of entries to judge. In some cases, you may be asked to judge document types or subject matter you have not worked with before. Do your best to judge the material you are assigned.

If you cannot judge an entry

If you feel that a particular entry is so foreign to your experience or background that you cannot judge it, alert us immediately and we will try to make adjustments. Moving an entry from one judge to another can cause problems, which grow worse the longer you wait to raise the issue.

Judge and comment from an appropriate viewpoint

Judging requires you to be aware of the viewpoints of two different audiences. When you judge entries, wear your “intended audience for the entry” hat. When you write comments, your audience is the entrant. Switch to your entrant hat.

When you evaluate entries, determine the audience for the entry. Entrants provide information about the audience and purpose of their entries on the entry forms they submit. Read the audience and purpose information carefully, and supplement it with your own understanding.

From your understanding of the audience and its needs, decide what the entry ought to accomplish. Ask yourself what information it should contain, what navigation it should provide, what it can assume, what it should explain, and so forth. You can also look at the STC criteria for entries of this type for additional ideas about what to look for.

Use this material to judge how well the entry communicates and meets the need of its audiences.

Your objectives in evaluating the entry are:

- Recognize and provide positive feedback for the ways in which the entry succeeds in meeting the objectives you set for it.
- Identify areas where the entry falls short, and suggest ways the entry can be improved or better meet the needs of its audience.

A Guide to Writing Useful Comments

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

As you evaluate entries, make notes and draft preliminary comments. You should start early, because your opinion of a work may change over time. You are responsible for your own comments, but feel free to discuss the entries and share comments with other members of your team.

Once you have evaluated an entry, discussed it with your judging partners, and formed definite opinions about it, it's time to put your comments into final form.

General approach

Write as though you are speaking directly to the entrant with the entry in front of both of you, but express yourself as clearly and carefully as you would in a paper for publication. Judge your own writing as you would judge an entry. Try to make your comments into a Distinguished Technical Communication.

The remainder of this handbook contains best practices for writing comments, including some Do's and Don'ts.

Make it flow

Group your compliments into a narrative sequence that flows from the most important strong points (clear expression, good navigation, helpful index, for example) to smaller points. For example,

The layout of the guide is extremely attractive, making it easy to read. The fonts are easy to read, and there is plenty of white space. The toolbar icons in the text help readers learn to recognize the buttons. Screen images are relevant and readable.

The table of contents is attractive and simple, and information is easy to find. The headings are task oriented.

The writing is clear. For example, the procedure beginning on page 11 and the explanations in chapter 6 are exceptionally clear and well written.

Good use of tables and diagrams to communicate information (for example, p. 6 and p. 60).

Good use of examples (for example, the application in Chapter 4 and the Testing Tables in the example on p. 70).

The section on p. 17 makes related publications, feedback instructions, and the tech support email address available and describes clearly when to use each of these resources. Good reference to PDF documentation (p. 1).

Use the same sort of narrative for suggestions, again proceeding from important general points to less important details. For example,

Provide more context. For example, you introduce the Enterprise Widget (p. 14) a bit suddenly. The same applies to XPC in Chapter 7. Procedures (for example, p. 33) could use more explanation of why users would want to do the task.

In the Managing Content chapter, after the table on page 6, you plunge immediately into the details of content management. Instead, consider an introduction to staging and versioning to lead into content management more smoothly.

By page 15, you abandon the example of the online pet store (or at least suspend it for a time). Referring to it more often will preserve continuity.

Define unusual terms (for example, "widgetize" on p. 19 or "asset" on p. 50), and define acronyms/initialisms (for example, XPC on p. vii and again on p. 33; JHTML and JSP on p. 7).

Consider simplifying figure 1-1; I doubt that any new user of this system will study it or immediately see where the Widget Analysis Module fits in.

Try to use boldface less often, particularly for GUI elements (for example, Click **Product Manager** - see pp. 26-27 for examples in the text).

Look for ways to use fewer figure captions. The ones in the margin of page 8, for example, seem busy and unnecessary.

Look for ways to make the information in tables like the ones on pp. 34-35 stand out better. Consider eliminating vertical rules or shading the side headings.

Consider a spiral binding to let the manual lie flat.

Avoid humor

You are an anonymous judge, and you probably don't know all of the people who will read your comments, so the personal connection that might make humor work is largely absent.

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. This is unprofessional and only makes more work for the people who review and edit your comments before sending them to entrants.

DOs and DON'Ts

Here are some stylistic rules for writing comments, with examples labeled **Good** (DO) or **Avoid** (DON'T).

Don't describe the entry

Write as if you and the entrant are sitting together with the entry in front of you.

Avoid: This is a 4 by 6 inch spiral bound leaflet with 14 pages, each covering a different common task.

Good: Presenting each task on its own page helps readers grasp the entire task at a glance. The spiral binding enables readers to set the book down while they work, without concern that they will lose their place.

Support your comments with specific references

Avoid: Great navigation aids!

Good: 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, then the right room, then to 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.

Good: Consider breaking the information in Figure 17 (p. 41) into four diagrams, each representing one of the major subsystems. Then each can be on its own page, along with the legend for that subsystem. Each diagram is 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.

Write suggestions diplomatically

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

Avoid: This quick reference card looks like a ransom note!

Good: The organization is clear and logical. 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 seventh grade for a refresher course in English!

Good: 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.

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

People don't like to be given orders, especially on matters about which they might disagree. Use the word "consider" when making suggestions that are not obvious or clear-cut. Also, include the reasoning behind the suggestion.

Avoid: Use more white space on page 47.

Good: Consider using more white space on page 47 to reduce the crowded look.

Avoid: You should use fewer fonts.

Good: The large selection of fonts makes the document hard to read. Consider using fewer fonts.

For obvious points, just 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.

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

For points that aren’t so obvious, be a little less direct.

Avoid: Always use numbered lists in procedures.

Good: 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, retitile the section as Overview of Configuration Tasks, so that readers don’t wonder why the steps lack numbers.

In general, use second person when addressing entrants, but use third person to describe entries. This is especially important in the suggestions section, where “your” can sound accusatory.

Avoid: Your illustrations are blurry.

Good: The illustrations are blurry.

Don’t mention award levels

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

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

Don’t mention competition rules

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

Write comments about the entry, not about you.

Bring in your experience of examining the entry only if it’s relevant. In that case, 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.

Good: 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. If your experience of examining the entry is not relevant, write your comments as declarative, present tense, active voice descriptions of the entry. Leave out weasel words like "I think," "In my opinion," and so forth. The entrant already knows that these are your opinions.

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

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

Use present tense

Write in present tense as if you have the entry in front of you and are describing it. Use past tense only if the point you're making is no longer true. For example, "Chapter 6 was confusing" (but now it's clear). "I liked the use of white space" (but on second thought, I hate it).

Avoid: I liked the illustrations.

Good: I like the illustrations.

When discussing a procedure you followed, however, use other tenses as appropriate.

Good: The first three links I tried [specify them] took me to pages that seem irrelevant. I then looked in the index, but I didn't find "widgetation."

Write in the active voice

Take the time to read your sentences and recast the ones that use passive voice unnecessarily. Just as we look for simple, direct, active prose in an entry, look for ways to express your comments simply, directly, actively.

Avoid: The manufacturing stages are clearly delineated by the use of color coding.

Good: The color coding makes the manufacturing stages stand out.

Write about readers (plural) to avoid she/he/it constructions

Try to avoid talking about "the reader" or "the user." Instead, talk about readers or users, so that you don't have to use awkward "gender neutral" constructions.

Avoid: The informative headers help the reader find the information he or she is looking for.

Good: The informative headers help readers find the information they are looking for.