

Writing successfully for everyone

Including accessibility in your documentation



Communicator

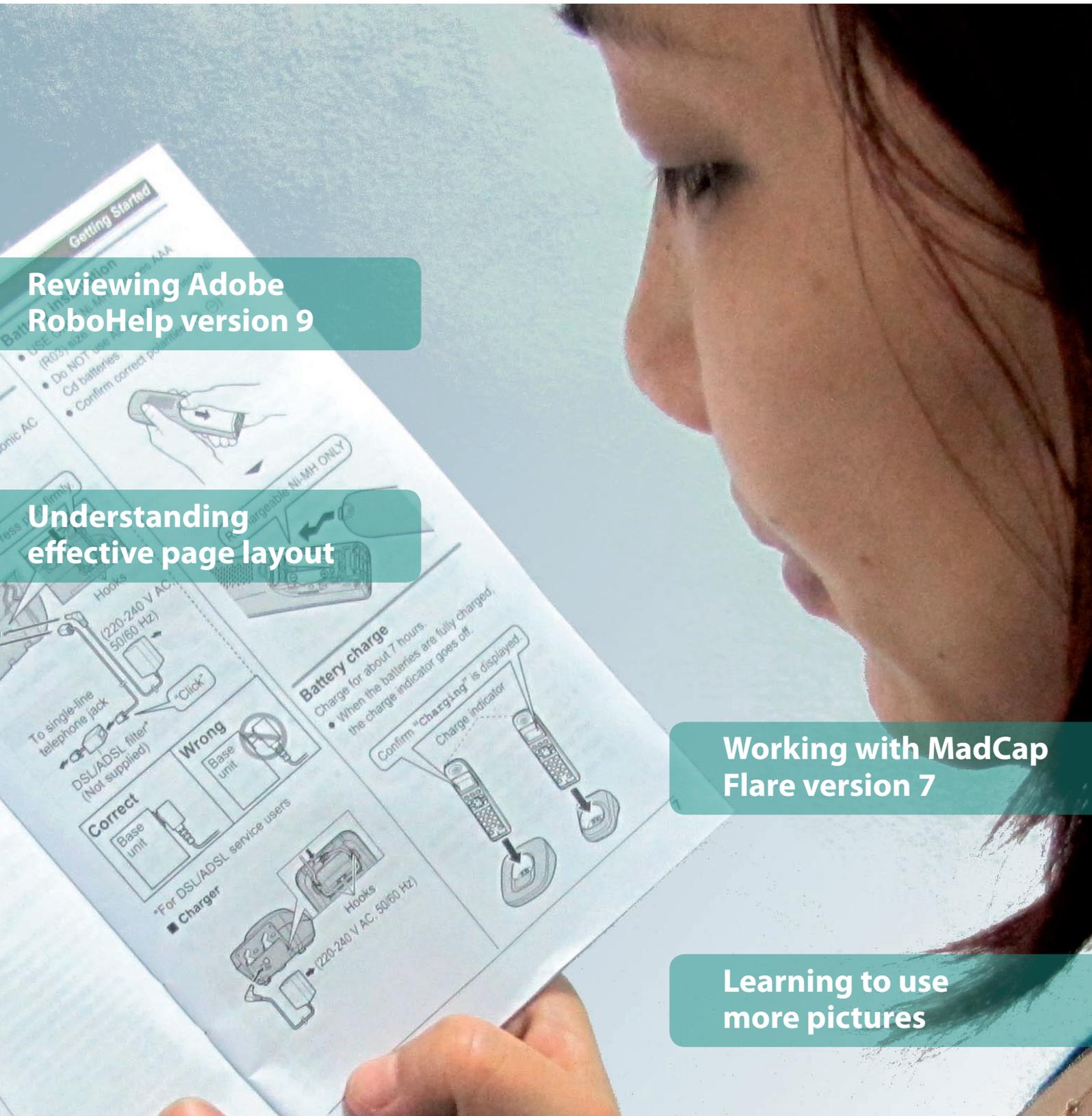
The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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Reviewing Adobe
RoboHelp version 9

Understanding
effective page layout

Working with MadCap
Flare version 7

Learning to use
more pictures



Letters

What kind of assistance do users need?

Richard Truscott FISTC compliments the authors.

I congratulate Matthew Ellison and James Windebank on a very useful and interesting article on User Assistance in the Winter issue. I was particularly interested in the Confirmation class of assistance questions and the suggestions they make (Guided help) for giving assistance. Their suggestions of a simulated environment could easily be done with a Captivate demo (show me). Providing confirmation can be done in tasks/procedures (tell me) if they are fully illustrated with screen captures.

However, both of these approaches seem a bit 'clunky' and have (as pointed out for demos) disadvantages. Lots of screen captures are time consuming to produce and take up lots of space in printed material, though of course they can be reduced to thumbnails or links in help.

I wonder if a system could be devised that provided the hints and tips that the novice user requires and can be turned off for the expert? Would Matthew and/or James be able to write a follow-up article with some practical advice on how to achieve guided help?

The article was a great contribution to *Communicator*, thanks for getting it published.

Response from Matthew Ellison

The kind of Guided Help that Richard describes has been an interest of mine for a while now, and I have investigated

a number of alternative software tools that aim to provide such a facility.

For some reason, none of them seem to have caught on in a big way, which surprises me. I covered some of them in a conference presentation that I delivered a couple of years ago:

- www.uatraining.eu/downloads/Guided_Help_AODC.pdf

I'd be happy to revisit this topic for a future *Communicator* article.

Common Grammatical Errors

Phil Stokes discusses articles and Asian speakers.

As a long-time ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in Asia, I'd like to suggest that there are two reasons why Asian speakers find articles difficult:

- they don't have articles in their own languages
- the rules for articles have multiple exceptions.

For example, there are exceptions to the rule mentioned in the Winter issue:

“the' functions to name a definite/known/specific noun”. Think of

A: 'Where are you going?'

B: 'I'm going to the post office.'

In this case, the noun after the definite article need not refer to any particular post office. Also notice the absence of articles in expressions like:

- 'Let's have dinner.'

and compare with:

- 'Let's go for a drive.'

Why is 'a drive' countable, but not a meal?

And yet, add a modifier to 'dinner',

and the article will reappear:

- 'Let's have an early dinner.'

There are no rules by which ESL learners can capture the difference between these uses. They have to learn the exceptions on a case-by-case basis.

As pointed out in the Winter issue, editors do need to be aware that articles present difficulties for non-native English speakers. However, in my experience, many Asian writers of technical English are highly competent and problems with articles — intuitively easy for the native speaker to edit — should not deter editors from commissioning them.

Is it easy to find information in a manual?

Steve Thompson MISTC discusses indexes.

I enjoyed this article in the Winter 2010 issue. I wondered if the author has read Peter Schorer's book, *Zero-Search Time Computer Documentation* (www.zsthelphelp.com). He's keen on measurement and he loves indexes.

I often use synonyms in my indexes, because I feel they are a valuable learning aid. Especially as each company has its own jargon. My company “cleaned a virus”. A rival company “disinfected a virus”.

In my indexes, I include synonyms like this:

- disinfecting, see cleaning 99

I feel my entries provide a simple way to educate readers who were familiar with one term but have to re-learn new names for the same concepts. **C**



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Explanation by Pattern

Explaining complex logic in text can be difficult. Richard Truscott explains a technique using tables that makes it easier.

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Who has not tied themselves in knots trying to use words to explain a complex piece of logic? A diagram can help but may not readily convey all of the meaning. Some time ago, I discovered Explanations by Pattern. They go by a number of different names:

- FLIPP Explainers or FLIPP diagrams. FLIPP stands for **F**ormat for **L**ogical **I**nformation **P**lanning and **P**resentation.
- Nassi-Shneiderman Diagrams. These are very similar.

They use a simple principle based on showing the logic in a table. Starting at the top left-hand side of the table, the logic flows down the rows of the table and to the right. To follow the logic, answer each question in turn, then follow the answers down the table. You must not cross the vertical lines.

Example

This is best explained using the example of a railway level crossing with lights and gates. **C**

References

You can find information about FLIPPs at the following sites:

- Cox, David, 'Explanation by pattern means massive simplification' [online book] www.flipp-explainers.org, accessed January 2011.
- Wikipedia, 'Nassi-Shneiderman Diagram', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nassi-Shneiderman_diagram, accessed January 2011.
- Sowa, John F, 'FLIPP Diagrams', www.jfsowa.com/logic/flipp.htm, accessed January 2011.
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