By Cheryl Landes
STC Associate Fellow
Senior Member, STC-Boston and Puget Sound Chapters

Kupka, Lorraine and Joy Underhill. *Five Steps to MadCap Flare* **(First Edition). Rochester, NY: WME Books, 2009.**

I remember my first Flare project with the fondness of a root canal. At times, I longed for the root canal. It was in the early days of Flare when, as a regular, full-time lone writer employee of a manufacturing company in Massachusetts, I had to complete a 500-topic help system in less than a month, on top of all of my other duties. By the time this project started, I had attended a half dozen demos of Flare at various STC meetings, and my supervisor approved the purchase of Flare shortly thereafter. The demos looked simple, so how hard could using Flare be?

Oh, my! As a veteran RoboHelp user (more than 10 years at that point), my learning curve for Flare was much higher than I expected. I struggled through the program, writing topics and developing the help structure as the deadline loomed. My final output, which I am not proud to share, was a mess. We had to release the help system as is, because I didn't have time to fix anything.

So when Joy Underhill posted a request for help authors to review hers and Lorraine Kupka's new book, *Five Steps to MadCap Flare*, I replied immediately. I hadn't seen a published book yet that would guide users through the maze of features in Flare and how to set up a help project. They selected me as one of the reviewers, and when I received the book and read it, I wished that such a guide had been available when I labored through that first Flare project.

Five Steps to MadCap Flare walks readers through all of the necessary steps to create and compile a complete help project. Before Underhill and Kupka present the first step, they cover all of the basics, from defining the term, topic-based authoring, to giving a tour of the Flare interface. They even include a table that provides tips on when to use these help formats: DotNet Help, HTML Help, WebHelp, WebHelp Plus, and WebHelp AIR.

Underhill and Kupka's five steps to a finished Flare project are:

- Getting started—Planning a project and understanding the basic tasks, such as creating a Flare project; adding, previewing, and opening topics; spell check; adding targets; saving files; and creating a document template.

- Learning the XML editor—Working with text in the XML editor; viewing tags, cursors, text blocks, and layout modes; and saving projects.

- Developing content—Copying and pasting text, deleting topics; working with lists, tables, images, and symbols and special characters; and formatting topics.

- Creating navigational aids—Creating tables of contents, links, cross-references, and index entries.

- Creating print and online output—Types of print and online output, creating print and online documents, formatting print output, troubleshooting and testing online output, and distributing online documents.

Each of these steps are illustrated with ample screen shots so that readers can follow along as they create their own Flare projects and not become lost in the process. There's also a detailed appendix with troubleshooting tips in case they encounter glitches along the way. Other appendices include tips for planning worksheets for help projects, importing content from other file formats into Flare, and comprehensive references for the XML editor, single-sourcing, and context-sensitive help.

Five Steps to MadCap Flare is an excellent guide for the first-time Flare user to start and finish that initial project successfully and painlessly. For those who have more experience, it's an essential resource that you'll refer to again and again.

Author's Bio

Cheryl Landes, an award-winning technical writer and STC Associate Fellow, is the owner of Tabby Cat Communications in Seattle. She has more than 18 years of experience as a technical writer in several industries: computer software, marine transportation, manufacturing, and the trade press. She is the past president of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the American Society for Indexing (PNW/ASI) and is active in the Society for Technical Communication on the chapter (Boston and Puget Sound) and international levels. She speaks frequently at STC and ASI meetings throughout the United States and Canada.