

The following is a review of Christina Chen's talk titled "When All is Said and Done—hosting a meaningful project retrospective" presented at [QA SIG](#) on November 11, 2003.  
by **Jonathan Bach**, managing test lead at [Quardev Laboratories](#)

Christina Chen (a Microsoft program manager for the past 6 years) gave a succinct and thoughtful talk about useful ways to maximize the power of project retrospectives (aka "post mortems").

Top Ten Highlights:

Retrospectives are most effective if ...

- ... there are less than 20 people involved
- ... they are held at a neutral location
- ... are less than 6 hours long (including breaks)
- ... are structured with an "issues list", filled out by attendees before the meeting
- ... the project timeline is discussed, to remind people of the original goals of the project
- ... they are hosted by a moderator and a scribe (note-taker)
- ... the moderator is not part of the project team
- ... focus is also made on a what-went-well list
- ... Stress releasing toys - (Play-Doh for example) for people to play with -- it diffuses

nervous energy

... they are intended to provide closure as well as a voice for people who may not have felt empowered during the project

Christina definitely practices what she preaches, leading the retrospective I attended as a tester on Microsoft Combat Flight Simulator 3. Her diplomacy and organizational skills were key to making that experience useful for me, turning what would have likely been a bland meeting of suggestions and complaints that never got addressed or solved into actionable lessons for the next release.