

Ragged Left

The newsletter for the
Berkeley Chapter of the
Society for Technical
Communication

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August 13, 2008 Meeting Notes

A Passion to Serve Your Customers

Notes by Nicki L Davis

At our August meeting, Melanie Albert of Autodesk in San Rafael described four factors that go into creating good online help:

1. Know your users
2. Find the best way to serve your customer needs
3. Create a supportive development environment
4. Implement changes gradually as a series of incremental steps.

The first step in creating effective online help is to find out more about your users. She outlined a number of methods of achieving this, ranging from low-cost methods such as Survey Monkey to more expensive methods such as usability testing and site visits.

Melanie used information to create personas and find out user workflows. One factor to consider is a user's learning style. For example, people under 30 have different learning styles than older people who don't have as much experience with video games.

After you gather information on users, you need to plan the help. She recommended several web sites (listed in her presentation) for research on how users search for information, how they navigate, and what they look for when they search for information on a page. For example, research has shown that only 5% of users get to information through a TOC. She gave an example of a colleague who tried to write a manual for a modem and began the book with a 30 page chapter on the history of modems. (Do you know that modem is short for modulator/demodulator? Do you know the 3 different methods that modem services use to transfer the data? If you had just bought a modem and wanted to get it set up so you could deliver your help system to your new client, would you want to read 30 pages of this information? As the editor, Melanie cut the whole chapter.)

To create a supportive development environment, you need to show your value to management and to the software development team. To balance the needs of the software development team and the need to preserve TechPubs, she suggested helping the development team write specs when they are short staffed, for example: "We will help you with this piece, but there will be no new tutorials for the release." She recommended that you not do any work on documenting new features until the specs are done, because the writing goes very quickly when the specs are complete.

Melanie's presentation gave details on how the improvements in the help took place over six product releases, as her knowledge of users' needs grew. For example, for the first release she made up workflows based on what she thought users needed. For the sixth release, she has increased her knowledge to the point where she can consider these different learning styles of customers who use different workflows. She plans to use this information to decide which workflows should be used in tutorials and which should be used in animations.

Nicki Davis has helped several software companies to improve their user experience by designing better user documentation and more usable interfaces. She currently works for OSISoft, Inc. in San Leandro.

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TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION is the bridge between those who create ideas and those who use them. Conveying scientific and technical information clearly, precisely, and accurately is an essential occupation in all sectors of business and government.

THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION (STC) has members worldwide. Its members include writers and editors, artists and illustrators, photographers and audiovisual specialists, managers and supervisors, educators and students, employees and consultants.

STC strives to:

- Advance the theory and practice of technical communication
- Promote awareness of trends and technology in technical communication
- Aid the educational and professional development of its members

MEMBERSHIP Membership is open to everyone. Classic membership is \$145/year with an additional \$15 enrollment fee. STC also offers Limited, E-Membership, and Student Membership options. To receive additional information and an application form, via mail or email.

- Send email to membership@stc-berkeley.org
- Send mail to Berkeley STC, PO Box 1007, Berkeley CA 94701-1007

INSURANCE Members of STC can apply for health, disability, and other insurance at STC group rates. For more information, contact STC office at stc@stc.org or (703) 522-4114.

WORLDWIDE ACTIVITIES STC's annual conference brings together more than 2,000 technical communicators from around the world for educational programs, seminars, and workshops conducted by experts in the field. Upcoming annual conference: Minneapolis, May 13-16, 2007. In addition the STC sponsors many regional conferences, which feature the same sorts of programs, seminars, and workshops on a more intimate scale. STC sponsors international and regional competitions in all aspects of technical communication. STC Special Interest Groups (SIGs) bring together members with common experiences and interests to share their skills and knowledge. STC SIGs include:

- Academic
- AccessAbility
- Canadian Issues
- Consulting and Independent Contracting
- Emerging Technologies
- Environmental, Safety, and Health Communication
- Illustrators and Visual Designers
- Information Design and Architecture
- Instructional Design & Learning
- International Technical Communication
- Lone Writer
- Management
- Marketing Communication
- Online
- Policies and Procedures
- Quality and Process Improvement
- Scientific Communication
- Single Sourcing
- Technical Editing
- Usability & User Experience

STC sponsors research grants and scholarships in technical communication. STC publishes the quarterly journal *Technical Communication*, the newsletter *Intercom*, and other periodicals, reference materials, manuals, anthologies, standards, and booklets.

Formed in 1953, STC has today become the largest professional society in the world dedicated to advancing the theory and practice of technical communication.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES The six northern California chapters of STC conduct a variety of individual and joint activities. See page 5 for contacts for these chapters. See page 12 for a list of other local organizations in which STC members may be interested.

SUBSCRIPTIONS This newsletter is free to members of the Berkeley chapter.

ADVERTISING RATES The *Ragged Left* is not accepting advertising at this time.

SUBMISSIONS *Ragged Left* publishes original articles and illustrations. We edit them to meet our needs. You retain copyright but grant every STC publication royalty-free permission to reproduce the article or illustration in print or any other medium. Please talk with the editor for details of how to submit articles and illustrations.

The deadline for unsolicited submissions is the last Friday of odd-numbered months.

Other STC publications are hereby granted permission to reprint articles from *Ragged Left*, provided such reprints credit the author and the specific *Ragged Left* issue, and a copy of any publication containing such a reprint is sent to the *Ragged Left* editor.

President's Notes

by Richard Mateosian

Our chapter, following STC's lead, is now on a calendar year. That means that the terms of our elected leaders will end at the end of December. I'd like to thank them all for serving. Not all of them are running for re-election. Some people have stepped forward to fill vacant positions, but I don't want to mention any of their names until the final ballots and candidate statements are ready.

Mary Ann Campbell and Linda Urban have shared the role of VP for Programs for the last eighteen months and done a wonderful job. We have had a long series of excellent chapter meetings and workshops. Unfortunately, neither Linda nor Mary Ann wishes to run for re-election, but some talented people have stepped forward to take over that job.

Susan Jaeger has been our secretary. Highly overqualified for the position, she took it over in an emergency and did a remarkable job – not just taking minutes of the leadership meetings, but preparing agendas, coaxing status reports out of all of the chapter leaders, and running leadership meetings.

Alas, she will not run again either, creating a great opportunity for an interested volunteer. The job requires the ability to follow a fast-paced, sometimes disorderly discussion and to capture and record the key points.

Jim Dexter, among a variety of other contributions, is our VP for Membership. For several years he has dealt with the ongoing frustrations of the STC membership database and has continued to advocate for our chapter at the Society level. Jim has agreed to run again.

In addition to my duties as President, I have also been acting as Treasurer.

This is the opposite of a best practice – a real recipe for disaster, but fortunately, we have a treasurer in training who will run for that office. I have served as President for 30 months, not counting the two years I served in the mid 1990s. I am more than ready to have somebody else take over, but so far

nobody has stepped forward, so I will be on the ballot again.

Patrick Lufkin (lufkin@ix.netcom.com) is our election manager. Let him know in the next few days if you are interested in any of the above positions – whether somebody else is running or not. Contested elections can be fun.

Patrick will publish the names and statements of all candidates soon; then he will send out the ballot. We will accept votes up until our November meeting, then count the votes and announce the winners there.

Note that our monthly meeting program schedule has changed to begin 15 minutes earlier. See Meeting Agenda on page 10.

9/6 Interactive Workshop Notes

Berkeley Chapter Holds Workshop for Presenters

by Patrick Lufkin

As many successful technical communicators have discovered, giving presentations, either at work or at conferences, is an excellent way to raise your visibility and advance your career.

But if you are primarily a writer, how do you get started? How does planning and organizing a presentation or workshop differ from the preparation that might go into a written work?

To answer these and other questions, Linda Urban recently led a workshop on presenting. Entitled *Sharing Your Expertise: Putting Together a Presentation or Workshop*, the half-day workshop was part of the Berkeley STC's ongoing effort to provide technical communicators with opportunities to expand their skills.

The workshop was held September 6 in the spacious meeting room of the Highlands Country Club, located in the Berkeley Hills,



which is also the site of the chapter's regular meetings.

Linda Urban has more than 25 years experience as a technical communicator. In her long career as a trainer, information designer, and content developer, she has made dozens of presentations. In addition to running her own consulting business (www.urbancreations.com), she teaches technical communication through the UC Berkeley Extension program and often presents at professional conferences.

The workshop was primarily directed toward people considering doing a presentation but who didn't know where to begin. Through slides, discussion, handouts, and exercises, Linda gave the attendees the tools they would need to make the planning process both manageable and likely to lead to a successful outcome.

Along the way, she covered the major elements of planning a successful presentation. In a series of lively discussions she led attendees through a development process that progressed from "big picture" planning (different requirements and expectations for different type of sessions); through purpose clarification; through topic selection; through audience and time analysis; through outlining, brainstorming, and fleshing out content; and on through blocking out a syllabus and preparing materials.

While the workshop concentrated on the planning process, it also included "tips of the day" advice for making the presentation or leading the workshop.

The workshop covered many principles that are basic to all technical communication, but also asked participants to consider things that are unique to live performances. For example, the need to tailor material to the audience is basic, but unless we are trainers, how many of us have given much thought to the time it will take to present an idea? Or to the need to provide the audience with activities to keep them engaged? Or how presenting *less* content might actually make for a better presentation?

Linda covered all of these points and more. In Linda's skilled hands the workshop both

described and demonstrated its material. Linda had the attendees divide into teams to work on a number of well thought-out exercises, and then led them in discussions of their experience. To ensure attendees really got what they came for, Linda handed out a number of checklists and planning charts, which attendees could take away to do further planning on their own. As a model, she handed out copies of her slides and a filled-in version of the planning syllabus she created for the very presentation she was then giving.

The workshop was informative and fun, but more important, attendees came away confident that planning and giving presentations is something they could do.

Patrick Lufkin is a senior member of STC and Chair of the Kenneth M. Gordon Memorial Scholarship for Technical Communication. He is currently co-manager of the 2008 Northern California Technical Communication Competition.

Web usability

How Not To Do It

by Eric Hughes, Managing Director, Simplicity, LLC

Now that we've discussed the various criteria necessary to develop a usable web site, I thought it might be fun to take a look at some examples – bad examples this issue, then good examples next time.

These are examples as of early October 2008. By the time you read this, it is always possible that re-purposed sites are launched fixing the problems that caused the sites to be on this list in the first place. These are in no particular order.

As you look at these (non-transactional) sites, pretend you are doing a usability study on them. What would you say about navigation and organization? What about simplicity and convenience? Readability? Tolerance and feedback? Performance? Design? If you are ever hired to do a usability review of a site, these are great places to start!



1. <http://www.brillpublications.com>
If I wanted to play “Myst”, I would. What were these people thinking?
2. <http://www.culver.org/>
A high school in Indiana with unreadable scrolling headlines; stuff that flies all over the home page while moving your cursor; navigation that sometimes shows you where you are, sometimes not; more “loading” messages than content; and incredibly annoying white screens that appear out of nowhere when you navigate.
3. <http://www.ownyourc.com/>
OK, so how are you supposed to know what to do from the home page? The same music repeats over and over and over. Each choice in the Flash version of the site (if you can find the choices) takes FOREVER to load. I wonder how much they paid for this? Sometimes bad sites can work for a very specific audience – they may have more patience than I have – but I can't for the life of me figure out who the audience for this site is supposed to be.
4. <http://www.ktvu.com/>
Yes, our own “channel 2”. Uninformative labels, terribly crowded home page, no persistent navigation. This is a great example of a site where little or no information architecture work has been done.
5. <http://www.jonespartners.com/>
I'm not even sure what to say about this one. It could be the worst site I've ever seen.
6. <http://www.superdesignstudio.com/>
OK, this one is just silly, but would you hire these guys? It brings back memories of 1996.
7. <http://www.myspace.com/>
A perfect example of a site where, if you know how to use it, you are happy. But as soon as they make any kind of change, finding what you used to use is next to impossible. Check out the ‘More’ navigational link to see what happens when there is no information architecture work done (“Let's just put it there!!”). They use multiple definitions of the label ‘home,’ depending on where you are. That is really confusing.
8. <http://www.usability.gov/>
Ostensibly a site that shows you how to plan for quality usability for your web site. A great example of why not to use anchor tags (go to Templates and Examples.) Links should always take you to a new page, not a place on an existing page.
9. <http://musicoverly.com>
There is some great music on this site, but after ten minutes of playing around with it, I still can't figure out what causes certain music to appear and disappear, and what the lines between and the graphics behind the songs are. Registration information is in Franglaise, an amalgum of French and English. There is information at the bottom of the browser that I can't get to.
10. <http://www.smartmoney.com/fund-map/>
Besides being incredibly depressing this year, why would anyone want to put so much information on one page? You have to mouse over rectangles to get any useful information, but there is no compelling reason to mouse over any particular rectangle. I thought that maybe the bigger the rectangle, the greater the % gain or loss, but that doesn't seem to work.

Next time we'll take a look at some quality examples of both transactional and non-transactional sites.

You can reach Eric at eric@simplexity.net

Other STC chapters in Northern California

East Bay: www.ebstc.org

North Bay: www.stc-northbay.org

Sacramento: www.stcsacramento.org

San Francisco: www.stc-sf.org

Silicon Valley: www.stc-siliconvalley.org



Touchstone Technical Communication Competition

by Patrick Lufkin

Touchstone primarily serves Northern California, but also accepts entries from elsewhere. Touchstone is accepting entries in the technical publications, technical art, and online technical communication categories. For detailed instructions on how to enter go to <http://www.stc-touchstone.org>

The competition takes its name from "touchstone," a fine-grained stone used by ore assayers. The term has come to mean any test or criterion by which the qualities of a thing can be recognized or measured.

Touchstone is co-sponsored by the Bay Area chapters of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). Proceeds help support chapter activities and the STC Kenneth Gordon Scholarship, which provides grants to students enrolled in technical communication programs in Northern California.

Entries that win Touchstone's highest award level go on to the STC international technical communication competitions.

Winning an award in an STC competition can bring recognition from professional peers and increased visibility with employers and clients. Toward this end, Touchstone holds public awards ceremonies, and also offers to make awards presentations at entrants' workplaces. These workplace presentations are often attended by entrants' peers, managers, and company executives.

Touchstone also seeks to advance the technical communication profession by providing useful feedback to entrants. Whether an entry wins an award or not, Touchstone's experienced judges provide feedback to help entrants improve their work. Many entrants regard this feedback as a major benefit of entering.

Competition Judges Sought

The deadline for entries to the Touchstone competition was Saturday, September 27, 2008, so now it's time to start judging!

If you are an experienced technical communicator who would like a chance to expand your role in the profession, consider judging in a technical communication competition.

Touchstone, the Northern California technical communication competition has openings and has issued a call for judges for the 2008-09 competition.

Judges will receive training, will work with other experienced judges, and will see some of the best work being produced in technical communication.

Judging benefits you professionally in many ways, but this year there is an added benefit. We will hold a drawing for \$200.00 toward a 2009 STC membership. The drawing will be open to all judges who successfully complete their assigned judging tasks.

More information about Touchstone is available at <http://www.stc-touchstone.org/>

Judges should plan to attend a half-day judge training meeting on Saturday, October 4th.

To volunteer to judge, read the judging information and download an application (a Microsoft Word file) at <http://www.stc-touchstone.org/Volunteer2Judge.html> Email the completed form to xrm@pacbell.net with the subject STC Competition Judge.

If you have questions, please send an email to Richard Mateosian at: xrm@pacbell.net

Patrick Lufkin is a long-time STC member, is active in the Touchstone leadership, and is chair of the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship for Technical Communication.



August 25, 2008

2008 Gordon Scholarship Winners Announced

by Patrick Lufkin

The Dr. Kenneth M. Gordon Memorial Scholarship has announced that **Kate Shumate** and **Christine Blackman** have each been awarded a Gordon Scholarship for the coming year. Kate Shumate is pursuing a technical communication certificate from the University of California Berkeley Extension, and Christine Blackman is enrolled in San Francisco State University's Technical and Professional Writing Program.

To qualify for a scholarship, applicants must be currently enrolled in a technical communication program at an accredited college or university, and have completed enough work to demonstrate their potential for success in the field.

The Gordon scholarship is sponsored by the combined STC chapters of Northern California. Candidates apply in June and awards are made in August, in time for the beginning of the academic year. Award recipients are also offered a complimentary basic student membership in STC.

The scholarship is named for Dr. Kenneth M. Gordon. Dr. Gordon worked as a technical editor at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory and was a popular, long-time member of the East Bay chapter of STC. He was president of the chapter from 1985-88, and also its newsletter editor. He is remembered as an early advocate for the Northern California Technical Communication Competition, and for having contributed greatly to the success of STC in Northern California in the early years.

The scholarship was created in 1992 when the East Bay chapter discovered that it had money left over from having run a very successful 1990-91 technical communication competition. Dr. Gordon had recently died, and those involved decided to set aside

\$10,000 of the proceeds to establish a scholarship in his name.

Since that time, the Gordon Scholarship has been funded with proceeds from Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communication Competition. This year's Touchstone is currently ramping up. If you would like to enter or help, contact the competition director, Richard Mateosian at xrm@pacbell.net.

For more information on the scholarship, contact the scholarship chair, Patrick Lufkin, lufkin@ix.netcom.com.

Patrick Lufkin is a senior member of STC and Chair of the Gordon Scholarship.

Meetings

Our chapter holds a dinner meeting the second Wednesday of each month. See *Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions* on page 10.

Upcoming Meetings

Content Page Design Best Practices

by Luke Wroblewski

Wednesday, October 8, 2008, 6-9:30pm
Highlands Country Club
110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

In today's social, distributed, search-driven web, customers are finding their way to web content through an increasing number of distinct experiences. Yet when people arrive at most web pages, the experience they get isn't optimized for this context. Instead, the vast majority of content pages online remain more concerned with their own context than the context of their users: where did a user arrive from and where are they likely to go next? These pages remain designed as if they were primarily accessed from a Website's home page or a carefully thought-out selection from the site's information architecture.

To address these issues and more, this talk outlines a set of best practices for Web content page design that focuses on appro-

Continued on next page

