

# Ragged Left



September/October 2005

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## July Meeting Wrap-up

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### July STC Takes Aim at the Wild SMEs

by Craig Gordon

Even the most skillful technical communicator can stumble in a thicket of busy schedules, quirky temperaments and miscommunication in the search for information from a SME, such as an engineer. Susan Becker, Melody Brumis and Gwaltney Mountford applied more than 60 years of combined technical communication experience to lead July STC attendees through the perilous adventure they called, "Stalking the Wild SME Bird."

Sporting bird-watching camouflage and accessories, the guides introduced seven major types of SME Birds, describing major characteristics of each "species," and ways to leap hurdles to find what a client wants communicated. Here is a synopsis of their advice:

#### **Busy Bee SME Bird**

When encountering this all-booked-up variety, strategy and preparation are key. Compile your questions and find out who else might be able to answer them. Then write a summary of your findings and give it to the SME for feedback when you meet. Use e-mail as much as possible, make appointments and maximize the efficiency of short meetings.

#### **Elusive SME Bird**

This SME can prove even more slippery than the Busy Bee by missing appointments or rarely being seen around the office. In this case, e-mail your questions and keep questions handy for a chance encounter. ("A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," our sage guides reminded us.) Offer to take the SME to lunch. (All SMEs have to eat sometime.) If all else fails, seek help from the SME's supervisor.

#### **Arrogant SME Bird**

For the SME with little patience for the "lowly" writer species, wear thick skin. Don't be intimidated or take rudeness personally. Maintain your sense of humor and remember that arrogance often covers discomfort. If necessary, try to find someone on the SME's "level" willing and able to obtain the needed info and effectively convey it to you.

#### **All-Knowing SME Bird**

Some SMEs assume nobody could possibly express their vast knowledge as well as they can. On these occasions, immediately demonstrate your proficiency as well as your appreciation for the SME's technical expertise. For example, repeat each of the explanations in the way you would express it and ask if you got it right.

#### **Cuckoo SME Bird**

If you find a SME who is out to lunch, practice your best poker face and plenty of patience. Also be sure to confirm all information with another source.

#### **Chicken Scratches SME Bird**

Some SMEs accompany all explanations with a jumble of symbols or other graphics on a white board or paper. In these situations, it helps to draw up your own version of the graphics and check to see if you got it right. Review your notes immediately

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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 e-mail

- Send e-mail 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 conferences: Seattle, May 8-11, 2005; Las Vegas, May 14-17, 2006. 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:

- AccessAbility
- Canadian Issues
- Education and Research
- Illustrators and Visual Designers
- Environmental, Safety, and Health Communication
- Consulting and Independent Contracting
- Quality
- Marketing Communication
- Scientific Communication

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 6 for contacts for these chapters. See page 7 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 fifteenth of the preceding month.

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## July Meeting Wrap-up Continued

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after meetings and write up your understanding.

### Caged SME Bird

Sometimes the problem is a manager who keeps an engineer under wraps. In these cases, you may have to catch the SME whenever you can (see Elusive SME Bird). Or you may need to convince the manager that you are efficient and your time with the engineer will be cost-effective. If necessary, appeal to a higher authority.

Our guides concluded the field trip with some general tips. For example, establish your expectations and the SME's preferences in advance. (Does the SME prefer to get all of your questions in one e-mail or a shorter message for each topic? How long and how often should you hold meetings?) Always do your homework and respond appreciatively to answers and reviews.

Though an occasionally nightmarish SME experience may be an occupational hazard, following our guides' advice could help render it a rare breed.

Craig Gordon is a technical writer and former H.S. teacher.

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## Letter from the Editor

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### Short and Sweet

by Gina Blednyh

We had plenty of great contributors and content for this issue. 'Nuff said. Please take a look!

*Ragged Left* editor Gina Blednyh can be reached at [newsletter@stc-berkeley.org](mailto:newsletter@stc-berkeley.org).

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## Book Review

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### Friedman's Flat World (Part II)

by Richard Mateosian

If you missed Part I of this book review, see our July/August issue.

*The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* by Thomas L. Friedman (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York NY, 2005, 496pp, ISBN 0-374-29288-4, [www.fsgbooks.com](http://www.fsgbooks.com), \$27.50)

### Flattened Workers

For Friedman's triple convergence, the ten flatteners reinforce and amplify each other. Businesses change their practices to accommodate the new reality. Business, technical, and even liberal arts schools start turning out graduates who are comfortable with the flat world.

At the same time, the entire populations of China,

India, and the former Soviet Union—areas of the world with well established traditions of education and rewards for excellence—enter the worldwide job market. Of course, not all of these three billion people are prepared to compete in the global marketplace, but Friedman estimates that at least 150 million technically qualified workers who couldn't do so before are now competing directly with US workers. That number is about the size of the US workforce.

### The Dark Side

Having laid out a picture of the flat world in highly optimistic terms, Friedman tries to address the troublesome points. Friedman contends that we need to distinguish between different categories of obstacles to globalization. Some obstacles are sources of waste and inefficiency. Others are sources of identity and belonging.

The political discussion of a social contract that distinguishes between bad and good obstacles has to happen at the level of individual countries. Large companies, however, can provide transnational influence. Friedman cites the cases of companies like HP, Dell, and IBM, which negotiate—from a position of great advantage—standards of socially responsible manufacturing practices that all of their suppliers throughout the world must meet. This is one side of the transnational companies. The other side is that being in many countries gives a company the flexibility to avoid the troublesome regulations of any particular country.

Friedman also sets up a contrast between Wal-Mart and Costco, firms that provide approximately the same services. He notes, for example, that Wal-Mart provides much less health care coverage to its employees than Costco does. Wal-Mart thereby provides lower prices to its customers and a better return to its shareholders, but states and communities in which Wal-Mart does business may have to pick up the tab for Wal-Mart's underinsured employees. This raises the question of where the boundaries between companies and their surrounding communities lie.

In the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, the United States adopted many laws to protect workers and to provide a social safety net. In addition to laws, though, companies felt a civic responsibility to provide for their workers. Lifetime employment followed by a good retirement pension was common. Another part of that social contract was that local governments kept property taxes low

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to protect homes.

This unwritten social contract pertained for many years, but in the 1970s it started to break down. Partly in response to global competition, people saw ways to squeeze the fat out of companies and real estate. Leveraged buyouts led to layoffs, reduced medical benefits, and evaporating pensions. High property taxes and other housing price pressures led to increased homelessness. Without a social contract these trends will continue into the flat world.

Friedman rounds off his ten flatteners with one he calls the steroids. By this he means that each new generation of computers provides greater MIPS, more memory, and faster I/O. File sharing, multi-purpose devices, voice over IP, and wireless communication all work to supercharge the other flatteners.

### **What to Do**

Friedman draws upon his analysis of the flat world to make separate recommendations to the United States, developing countries, individual companies, and individual workers.

Friedman's rules for companies boil down to the following: introspect and collaborate. You should understand all the parts of your business, outsource the parts that you don't really specialize in—especially the vanilla parts where it's hard to maintain a competitive advantage—and develop the others. This requires you to develop the ability to collaborate as a core competency.

Friedman's suggestions for individual workers are similar to his suggestions for companies. In the flat world of collaboration, companies and individuals are on an equal footing in many areas, and those are the areas where individual workers can thrive.

Friedman believes that developing countries must follow a path that proceeds from "reform wholesale" to "reform retail." By this, he means an infrastructure that ensures efficiency, transparency and impartiality in government, law and commerce.

For the United States, Friedman cites Rensselaer president Shirley Ann Jackson's warning of an impending perfect storm. This is a quiet crisis, because the storm isn't imminent, but all the factors are in place to make it inevitable if nothing changes.

The factors, in brief, are the following:

- Shrinking numbers of available scientific and

technical workers.

- Higher quality technical and scientific work from other countries.
- Failure to invest to a sufficient degree in education and research.

Friedman sees similarities to the situation that existed after 1957 when the Soviet Union deployed Sputnik, the first artificial Earth satellite. When President Kennedy spoke to Congress on May 25, 1961, he said:

Let it be clear that I am asking the Congress and the country to accept a firm commitment to a new course of action, a course that will last for many years and carry very heavy costs. . . . This decision demands a major national commitment of scientific and technical manpower, materiel, and facilities, and the possibility of their diversion from other important activities where they are already thinly spread. It means a degree of dedication, organization, and discipline which have not always characterized our research and development efforts.

Friedman's quiet crisis demands a similarly serious and honest call to action. In the absence of other leadership, Friedman offers his own doctrine of "compassionate flatism." The essential features of this program are portable pension and health care benefits, opportunities for lifelong learning, and more demanding parents.

### **Geopolitics**

Friedman talks about the parts of the world that are not flat and explores the reasons why some countries are globalizing while others are not.

Finally, Friedman poses his Dell theory of conflict prevention. In essence it says that no country that belongs to a major supply chain wants to risk war. There are other suppliers out there, and the if the business goes away, it won't come back soon. He cites the pressure of the Indian information technology industry on India's government to persuade it to back away from a conflict with Pakistan.

On the whole, this is an incredibly useful book. It contains much more information than I can summarize here. I highly recommend it to everybody.

Richard Mateosian is a senior Berkeley chapter member. A version of this review appeared in the May-June 2005 issue of IEEE Micro. Copyright © 2005 IEEE.

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## August Meeting Wrap-up

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### Presentation: A New Level of Edit: Usability Evaluation by Channeling Personas by Ron Sands

At the August meeting, Dana Chisnell of Usability-Works gave an interactive presentation on usability evaluation using heuristics and personas. The presentation summarized the findings of two research papers she co-wrote with Janice (Ginny) Redish of Redish & Associates, Inc. Their research was commissioned by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP). All quotations in this article are from the paper “Designing Web Sites for Older Adults: Expert Review of Usability for Older Adults at 50 Web Sites,” which is available for download at the AARP web site ([http://www.aarp.org/olderwiserwired/oww-resources/designing\\_web\\_sites\\_for\\_older\\_adults\\_expert\\_review.html](http://www.aarp.org/olderwiserwired/oww-resources/designing_web_sites_for_older_adults_expert_review.html)).

Dana began her presentation by giving some background on the subject of usability evaluation. She defined the term heuristics as “the art and science of discovery and invention.” This is distinct from the term algorithm, which is a step-by-step procedure. In the context of the research project, the heuristics they used were a set of 20 guidelines from four major categories of usability (see below). A complete description of the heuristics they used is available at the AARP web site.

She described personas as assumed roles, archetypes, or character sketches. Personas are more detailed than user profiles, taking into account the character's age, marital status, day-to-day activities, and job tasks. The personas created for the research project emphasized four areas of diversity: age, ability, aptitude, and attitude.

She explained the methodology they used. They created a number of task lists to be performed by each persona at the web sites being evaluated. They performed the evaluations in two phases. First, they channeled (pretended to be) a particular persona, performing the tasks on the task list, and recording their observations (actual experience, thoughts, and opinions). Next, as themselves, they repeated the actions of the persona, and graded their observations against the 20 usability guidelines in their heuristics.

Possible scores were 4 (no problem), 3 (minor hindrance), 2 (serious problem), and 1 (task failure).

In the interactive portion of the presentation, audience members were asked to channel one of two personas. Some of us chose to be Matthew, a 54-year old attorney, working full-time whose attitude was described as, “When something doesn't work right away, Matthew moves on. He doesn't have the time or patience to figure it out.” Others chose to be Edith, a 73-year old retired grandmother, with very little experience using web sites.

We were asked to perform one simple task: find information about Zocor on the AARP web site. As both personas, we found several instances where we graded the AARP web site as a 2 (serious problem) that could have been improved with the application of the guidelines.

### Interaction Design

- Use conventional interaction elements
- Make it obvious what is clickable and what is not
- Make clickable items easy to target and hit
- Minimize vertical scrolling; eliminate horizontal scrolling
- Ensure that the Back button behaves predictably
- Let the user stay in control
- Provide clear feedback on actions
- Provide feedback in other modes in addition to visual

### Information Architecture

- Make the structure of the web site as visible as possible
- Clearly label content categories; assist recognition and retrieval rather than recall
- Implement the shallowest possible information hierarchy
- Include a site map and link to it from every page

### Visual Design

- Make pages easy to skim or scan
- Make elements on the page easy to read
- Visually group related topics
- Make sure text and background colors contrast
- Use adequate white space



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*August Meeting Wrap-up Continued*

**Information Design**

- Make it easy to find things on the page quickly
- Focus the writing on audience and purpose
- Use the users' language; minimize jargon and technical terms

The overall conclusion of the research project was that "the World Wide Web is not an inherently hostile place for older adults, though there are some ways that sites could do better to increase

Other STC chapters  
in Northern California

**East Bay**

<http://www.ebstc.org/>

**North Bay**

[www.stc-northbay.org](http://www.stc-northbay.org)

**Sacramento**

[www.stcsacramento.org](http://www.stcsacramento.org)

**San Francisco**

[www.stc-sf.org](http://www.stc-sf.org)

**Silicon Valley**

[www.stc-siliconvalley.org/](http://www.stc-siliconvalley.org/)

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Upcoming STC Berkeley Meetings

**Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI): Recognizing the Signs, Confronting the Injury, and Compensating with Voice-Recognition Software**

Speakers: Barbara Forsberg and David Schorr  
September 14, 2005

**October Meeting Topic:  
Design for Non-Designers**

Speaker: Barbara Sikora  
October 12, 2005

SEE THE CHAPTER WEB SITE FOR MORE  
DETAILS: [WWW.STC-BERKELEY.ORG](http://WWW.STC-BERKELEY.ORG)

their usability for everyone."

To learn more about the subject, consider attending the "Creating and Using Personas to Improve Usability" course at the next STC Training Program on October 20-21 in Arlington, VA. See the STC web site for a course description (<http://www.stc.org/training/course.quesenbery.htm>).

Ron Sands is an aspiring technical writer with a background in Information Technology.

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**President's Column**

by Joe Devney

**Touchstone News: Next Year**

Over the last few months I announced the return of Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communications Competition, at meetings, in e-mails, and in the Ragged Left. Sad to say, Touchstone will not happen this year. Executive Director Gilbert Gonzalez heard from many people who wanted to act as judges, but not from enough people who wanted to be competition managers.

On July 29, Gilbert wrote: "I regret to inform you that the Touchstone competition does not have the required people in place to ensure a successful event." The committee hopes to take advantage of the organizational work done so far, and have an easier time of it in producing a Touchstone competition for 2006.

If you would like to help make next year's competition a success, please contact me.

**Another Competition, and an Opportunity for You**

As you may know, Touchstone is a fund-raiser for the Ken Gordon Scholarship Fund. Since this is the third year that Touchstone has not been produced, the fund has been dipping into its reserves in order to grant scholarships. This cannot go on indefinitely: the fund needs to find a source of income. Richard Mateosian suggested having another, smaller competition to help build up the fund's resources.

Richard is both a long-time active member of the Berkeley STC chapter and treasurer of the scholarship fund. The Berkeley chapter leadership board discussed the idea at the July meeting, and agreed that the chapter would sponsor the competition.

This competition is not Touchstone, nor is it a replacement for Touchstone. It will be smaller in scope and shorter in duration, and managed by people from the Gordon Scholarship committee. It is a one-time event, not an annual one. It will be partly a fund-raiser for the Berkeley chapter, though most of the net proceeds will still go to the scholarship fund.

And here is the opportunity for you. Since the Berkeley chapter is sponsoring this event, I'd like a strong showing of Berkeley STC members in the ranks of the volunteers. Those of you who already volunteered to be judges for Touchstone can volunteer to judge the Berkeley/Gordon competition. For those who did not volunteer, please consider doing so now. Being a competition judge will give you a chance to look at what your peers are doing in the area of technical communication. You will get a broader view of what is possible, of what is effective and what is not. This can help you in your own work as a technical communicator. And your thoughtful judge's comments will help the people entering the competition to improve the quality of their work the next time.

If you want to volunteer, please e-mail me, or watch for announcements about other ways to get your name on the list. And if you want to enter some of your work in the competition, you are invited to do so. Please see our web site: <http://www.stc-berkeley.org>.

## Other Opportunities

Do you have stand-up training experience? Can you teach a class in some marketable skill that technical communicators might want to add to their resumes? If so, would you be willing to volunteer some time to help the chapter? Please contact me if this is an idea that appeals to you.

## RoboHelp Class in November

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by Eunice Malley

An Introduction to RoboHelp class will be held Saturday morning November 12 from 9:30 to 1:30 at the Albany Senior Center in Albany. Our own Kim Rathbun will teach the class, an experienced trainer and RoboHelp user. Attendees will download a free trial version of RoboHelp and bring their own laptop. The cost is \$40 for members, and \$55 for non-members. Class size is limited to 12. Watch the website for more details.

## Berkeley Chapter Sponsoring Competition

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To benefit a scholarship fund, the Berkeley Chapter is sponsoring a competition. Please go to [http://www.stc-berkeley.org/Berkeley\\_Pubs\\_Competition/competition\\_page\\_index.shtml](http://www.stc-berkeley.org/Berkeley_Pubs_Competition/competition_page_index.shtml) for more information.

## Meetings

Our chapter holds a dinner meeting the second Wednesday of each month at the Shattuck Plaza Hotel, 2086 Allston Way, just west of Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley. The Hotel is across the street from the BART station at Allston and Shattuck. The cost for dinner and meeting is \$18 for members, \$15 for student members and \$21 for non-members. For those attending the meeting only, the cost is \$12 for members and non-members, \$10 for students.

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|------|---|
| 6:00 | Check-in, conversation.   |
| 6:30 | Dinner.   |
| 7:15 | Chapter business and announcements. Anyone can announce jobs that they know about.*   |
| 7:39 | Formal program. Usually we have a speaker or panel of speakers on a topic related to the business or technology of technical communication. |
| 9:00 | Conversation, offline questions for the speaker, follow-up on job announcements   |
| 9:30 | Clear the room. Move conversations to the sidewalk.   |
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\*Recruiters are welcome to attend meetings, place literature on a designated table, and talk with attendees one-on-one during the informal parts of the meeting. We ask them not to announce specific jobs during the formal announcement period, but they are free to stand up and identify themselves.

Similarly, we ask anyone else with commercial announcements to confine themselves to calling attention to the availability of literature on the designated table.

## Other Organizations

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**American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) of Northern California.** Meets periodically at various Bay Area locations. <http://www.amwancal.org>

**American Society for Training and Development, Mount Diablo Chapter.** Meets monthly in Danville. <http://mtdiablostd.org/>.

**American Society of Indexers, Golden Gate Chapter.** <http://www.asindexing.org/site/chapters.shtml#golden>

**Association for Women in Computing, San Francisco Bay Area chapter** <http://www.awc-sf.org/>

**International Association of Business Communicators, San Francisco chapter.** A network of professionals committed to improving the effectiveness of organizations through strategic interactive and integrated business communication management <http://sf.iabc.com/>

**National Writers Union (UAW).** A labor union for freelance writers of all genres. <http://www.nwu.org>

**Northern California Science Writers' Association.** Quarterly meetings and other events. <http://www.ncswa.org>

# Ragged Left

## Next Meeting

# Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI)

Wednesday, September 14, 2005

Speakers: Barbara Forsberg and David Schorr

## Location

Shattuck Plaza Hotel  
Allston Way at Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley

## Agenda

Networking 6:00 Dinner 6:30 Program 7:15

First class mail  
Please return to sender if not deliverable as addressed

Berkeley Chapter  
The Society for Technical Communication  
P.O. Box 1007, Berkeley CA 94701

## Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions

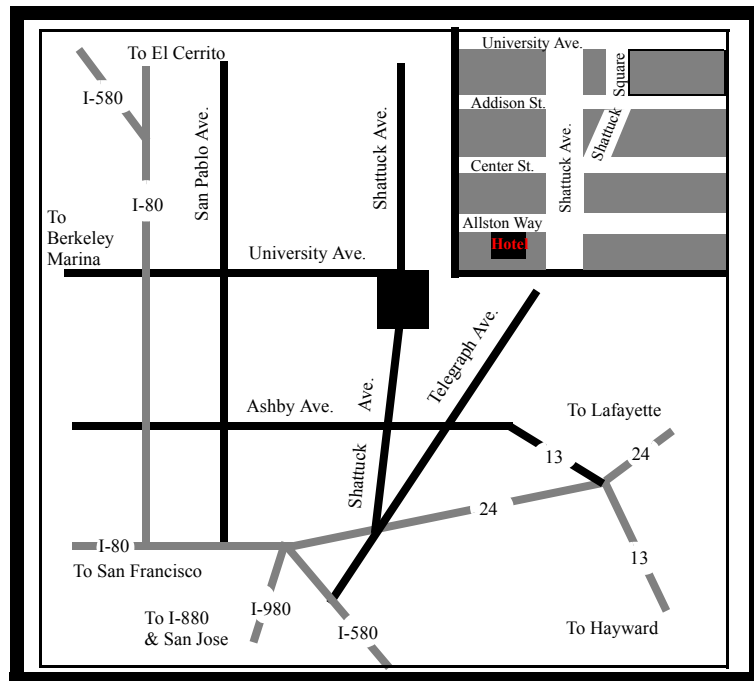
### By BART:

Get off at the downtown Berkeley station (Richmond line) and walk south to Allston Way, the first street. Cross the street and turn right.

### By Car:

From north of Berkeley on I-80, take the University Avenue exit (east). Turn right on Shattuck Avenue. Allston Way is three blocks south.

From south of Berkeley, take 880 north from San Jose. Continue through Oakland on 880. Follow the highway as it curves sharply to the right (where traffic merges in) and becomes 980. Continue on 980 to Highway 24 (toward Berkeley and Walnut Creek). Take the first exit from 24 (Martin Luther King Jr./51st). Turn right on 51st and make an immediate left onto Shattuck. Proceed north on Shattuck 2.3 miles to downtown Berkeley. Allston Way is immediately before the BART station.



*Walking to your car or BART?*

*We can't guarantee you an escort, but we'll try.*