

# Ragged Left

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

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## Meeting Notes

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# Finding Work Outside the Technical Documentation Box

Presented by Judith Herr, President, Well Chosen Words  
Berkeley STC October 2006 meeting

*Report by Sue J. Estey*

"I love to say 'I'm a writer'—and it gives me goose bumps!"

Judy Herr joined STC and started volunteering 15 years ago, and she was named as a Fellow of the Society at the Annual STC International Conference in May 2006. She provides consultative support and services in technical communication, occupational health, environmental science, and business acquisition. Her projects have included proposals to win government and commercial contracts; computer system design documentation and conduct of design reviews; scientific, environmental, emergency preparedness, and occupational safety documentation; adult education, event facilitation, and training; and public relations and marketing.

Judy asked us to download her survey and prepare it before the meeting: "An Encouraging Exercise: Checklist of Available Skills, Talents, and Expertise of Technical Communicators—Applicable in Many Directions". And in case we didn't, she brought it with her.

Is it true that technical communicators are all introverts? Judy says that if we're successful now, we go beyond that. Is there something you have always dreamed of? Why not try that now? There is a tech writers email list in India; they are focused on certification for documenting software. We are enlarging the niche way beyond that. Judy Herr has carved out a welcoming, cavernous (but well-decorated) space for playing as a technical communicator. Her list of technical writing includes application programmers' guides, emergency response procedures, magazine articles, proposals (I think we're referring to suggestions for work to be done here), scientific reports, specifications—for all sorts of industries, from biotechnology to homeland security to information technology to schools—and all points between. "Sometimes the best choice is to choose all options."

Judy got my attention early on by reading to us from *Winnie the Pooh*: "Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't." (A.A. Milne, 1926)

The evening was an exploration into other ways of being technical communicators—that is, distilling complex data and information into its essential components so that people can use it. We know how to do all sorts of things, from the expected: ferret out the message, analyze audiences, communicate effectively, manage projects and people—to the more expansive tasks of cajoling, charming, and embracing change. The key to technical communication is learning the language of whatever you want to write about.

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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 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 last Friday of the odd 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.



Presentations, proposals, and marketing materials—are marketing writers the same as us? “They’re a little flaky, but they’re not evil.” In the old days, technical communicators were pretty anal, but we’re beginning to understand the concept of “good enough”.

As our world expands to the global community, we are recognizing that cultural differences are very real—people work differently in other parts of the world.

As our profession matures, we are rapidly refining understanding of our real core competencies, talents, management style, ability to innovate, and experience. But, how do we gain recognition and visibility from our clients and senior managers? In addition to the expected—choosing tools, capturing, mapping and editing information—be willing to do the “dirty and silly” work too. Agree to take the meeting notes—it’s a way to shape the communication. When you’re hired for a project, watch for additional opportunities. On a big project for a new patient information system, her team found that there was no in-house style guide, so they called all the writers together and developed one—and billed for it. When the time came to roll out the new system, suddenly 300 people were called in from around the world—so the core team put together a handbook for them.

How to succeed in the richly varied world of Technical Communication? All you need is energy, enthusiasm, and the ability to:

- Analyze project requirements and audiences
- Multi-task
- Interview subject matter experts
- Conduct reviews
- Coordinate all stages of projects
- Design information to satisfy requirements
- Write, edit, coordinate, produce, distribute
- See the humor in the ironic,
- Market yourself!

Want to reach Judy?

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## Web Usability

Presentation by Harris Kravatz, Oracle User Experience Group  
Berkeley STC November 2006 meeting

*Report by Eric Hughes*

The November 8th Berkeley STC meeting featured a presentation by Harris Kravatz from the Oracle User Experience Group. Harris began his usability career at IBM in Boca Raton, Florida writing user interface standards for the IBM OS/2 PC. There are over 100 user interface experts at Oracle.

Web usability is defined as a means to design and test how easy a web site or web application is to use for its visitors. Poor usability consequences include a negative perception of the company, customers that are less likely to buy, more likely to buy from someone else, and even less likely to buy a product from the same company offline. Benefits of following best practices for usability include increased sales, increased customer satisfaction and loyalty, competitive advantage, reduced training and re-training, reduced support costs, and better viral marketing results.

The goal of web development efforts should always be to put users in control of their experience. This development philosophy is called “user-centered” design. It places viewer’s needs first, and it involves viewers early in the development process. Good usability practices are a part of any user-centered design project. Usability analysis helps answer these questions: Will the site be an engaging experience? Can content and navigation be found in a timeframe that is acceptable? Are the products displayed in manner that will encourage the viewer to buy? Can the content be quickly scanned for relevance? Are the actions required on the site consistently implemented?

Many people who have experienced poor usability on a web site will not return to that site, given alternatives. Some common usability problems are:

- Confusing checkout processes.
- Pages or transaction results that take too long to display, or the site is



- unavailable when you need it.
- Pages (especially home pages) that are so crowded you can't find anything.
- Clickable links that don't look clickable.
- Relevant content is hidden and too hard to find.
- Getting lost trying to navigate through the site.

Poor usability also contributes to the frustrations that make visitors abandon sites. The most common abandonment causes are:

- Forced registration.
- Too much information that is poorly organized or labelled.
- Can't see shipping (or other hidden) prices before checkout.
- Can't see lack of available inventory before checkout; slow-to-load pages.

Harris offered these criteria as usability best practices. It is a great idea to apply these criteria to sites that are of interest to you:

**Readability and visibility:** Critical information and actions should be visible and explicit. Clickable items should look clickable and pages should be designed for quick scanning rather than detailed reading.

**Simplicity:** Common or important tasks should be short and simple to complete. Terminology should be appropriate to the user and provide just what they need. Less is more on the web.

**Navigation & Organization:** Provide clear ways of continuing, going back, and going home on every page. Let users know where they are and where they are going. Visually group related information together.

**Consistency:** Reuse visual elements and behaviors. Similar actions should be performed similarly, reducing the need to learn multiple behaviors and navigation paths.

**Feedback:** Keep the users informed of problems and actions taken. When there are problems, tell them exactly what is wrong and how to fix it. Make messages clear, concise and polite.

**Tolerance:** Provide flexible, forgiving

systems that support the undoing of user actions. Assume errors and misuse are normal and design for both, but prevent user errors, whenever possible.

Usability testing, along with a user-centered design philosophy, helps identify problems that design teams can't find. Design teams tend to be too close to the development effort to clearly see mistakes that will stand in the way of the tasks their users want to accomplish.

## President's Letter

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December 2006

Happy holidays! I hope we have all the fun, fellowship, and feasting we can stand by the end of the year. Starting in January, our chapter is sponsoring two important events, both on our regular meeting date of the second Wednesday.

On January 10, we hold our annual festive event. This year, as we did last year, we will combine our party at the Hills Club with an awards ceremony for our technical communication competition. Check our website for information about how to attend. As many of you know, we have had a local technical communication competition for many years. The five, then six Northern California chapters sponsored it jointly, and a different chapter managed it each year. In 1990, the chapters decided to put the proceeds of the competition into a scholarship fund to honor a popular East Bay technical communicator, Kenneth M. Gordon, who had recently died. In 1996, we changed the name of the competition from Northern California Technical Communication Competition (NCTCC) to something a little more memorable: Touchstone.

In 2000 and 2001 we tried to alleviate some of the reinvent-the-wheel problems that arose from changing the management each year. The chapters sponsored a permanent committee to manage the competition. This system faltered in 2002, and we did not have a competition in 2003 or 2004. It seemed as though our local competition had died. The chapters still own Touchstone, but they have not been able to get it going again.



In 2005 and again in 2006, the Kenneth Gordon Scholarship committee produced a mini-competition (not Touchstone), sponsored by the Berkeley Chapter and benefiting the scholarship. This year we received about 25 entries. We will announce and display the winning entries at our party on January 10.

On February 14, Valentine's Day, our chapter will welcome STC Executive Director, Susan Burton. She will talk about what's going on at STC headquarters and throughout the organization. She will listen to our concerns and answer our questions.

I know that many of you have little interest in our parent organization. Nonetheless, what happens at headquarters affects us and our profession—from the amount of dues we pay, to the kinds of programs we can carry out locally and regionally, to the publications and conferences that STC produces, to the respect we receive as technical communicators. STC is trying to understand and serve our needs and is restructuring itself to achieve that end and stay relevant.

Among other aspects of this restructuring is the changing relationship between geographically based communities of interest (chapters) and virtual communities of interest (SIGs). STC's organization and funding models are changing to achieve a balance between these kinds of communities. Susan Burton will address all of these issues. She is experienced and smart, she listens well, and she is working hard for us. Please come to talk with her on Valentine's Day.

**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-](http://www.stc-)

## Meetings

### Annual Festive Event and Award Ceremony

*Wednesday, January 10, 2007, 6-9:30pm*

Highlands Country Club  
110 Hiller Drive  
Oakland, CA 94618



We will have an ongoing buffet and no-host bar with networking and conversation throughout the evening. Jim Dexter will provide music from his CD collection.

We will announce the winners of this year's technical communication competition and display the winning entries throughout the evening.

We will interrupt the festivities briefly to recognize some chapter volunteers. STC Director Beau Cain will present this year's Distinguished Chapter Service Award.

Cost: \$25 if reserved in advance. Please visit our website ([www.stc-berkeley.org](http://www.stc-berkeley.org)) to reserve and prepay by credit card. Follow the Annual STC Holiday Party link from the home page to a page labeled January 2007 Chapter Meeting. Scroll down to a link labeled Online Storefront.

If you do not reserve in advance, we will accommodate you if there is still room (the facility has a limited capacity). In that case the charge is \$28 at the door.

### *Parking*

Please do not park in the country club parking lot. It is small and reserved for members. Parking in the street (a fairly steep hill) is free. The earlier you arrive, the nearer you can park.



AC Transit no longer serves Tunnel Road. The nearest you can get is Claremont and Ashby. From there it's about 1.2 miles, all uphill.

## Monthly 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.

NOTE: The February meeting will be held at the Highlands Country Club.

### Upcoming Meetings

#### *Where is STC Going: Six Strategic Objectives*

by Susan Burton, STC Executive Director  
Wednesday, February 14, 2007, 6-9:30pm  
Highlands Country Club  
110 Hiller Drive  
Oakland, CA 94618

#### *FrameMaker-to-Acrobat Advanced Techniques*

by Shlomo Perets, MicroType  
Wednesday, March 14, 2007, 6-9:30pm  
Shattuck Plaza Hotel  
2086 Allston Way, Berkeley

The advance-order price 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. If you do not reserve in advance, dinner may or may not be available, as we order dinner based on the number of reservations.

## Meeting Agenda

- 6:00 Check-in, networking, and conversation.
- 6:30 Dinner.
- 7:15 Chapter business and announcements. Anyone can announce jobs that they know about.\*
- 7:30 Formal program. Usually we have a speaker or panel of speakers on a topic related to the business or technology of technical communication.
- 8:30 Conversation, offline questions for the speaker, follow-up on job announcements
- 9:00 Clear the room. Move conversations to the sidewalk.

\* **Attendees**, please announce open positions, and bring job listings for distribution.

**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.

## Berkeley STC Meeting

### Location and Directions

Give the following address to your favorite mapping program:  
2086 Allston Way, Berkeley, CA 94704

### By BART

Get off at the downtown Berkeley station (Richmond line). Emerge from the west side of the Downtown Berkeley BART station. Walk south on Shattuck one block to Allston Way 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.

### Parking

The nearest lot is on Oxford, between Kitteredged and Allston. Flat rate of \$4.00 for the evening (subject to change—not under our control).

Street parking is scarce, but free after 6:00 p.m.



*Walking to your car or BART?  
We can't guarantee you an escort, but we'll try.*

## Other Organizations

**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://mtdiabloastd.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>

## Chapter News

### Membership Update

*by Jim Dexter*

Total Chapter Membership: 155 (end Dec.)

### Documenting Chapter Procedures

Thanks to the dedicated work of Joe Devney and Mary Ann Campbell, we now have the new 2006 Postcard Generation procedure posted to our Intranet. This is a wonderful addition to our effort to document the Chapter procedures for our future officers and appointees.

## STC News

### Brenda Huettner New STC Director

Paula Berger, STC President, announced that Sherry Michaels has resigned her position as STC Director. Sherry had been an active member of the STC Board of Directors, and the Board thanks her for her years of service to STC, particularly her strong sponsorship of Region 5 and her work with STC's Communities.

Brenda Huettner has been unanimously approved by the Board of Directors to fill Sherry's seat as STC Director, and she will be taking over the sponsorship duties for Region 5. Brenda is a longtime STC member and an STC Fellow. She is past president of Region 5's Southern Arizona chapter and also a longtime leader in the Management SIG. Brenda has accepted the position and she welcomes the opportunity to serve the Society on the Board of Directors. You can reach Brenda at [dir5@stc.org](mailto:dir5@stc.org).

Our Bylaws specify that Brenda will serve as a Director through the Board of Directors meeting in May, 2007. At that time, an elected replacement will be announced for the final year of Sherry's term.



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## Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research

STC has established the Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research. This award honors the late Dr. Ken Rainey, professor at Southern Polytechnic University, for the significant contributions he made to research that contributed positively to practice in our field. The aim of the award is to continue Ken's legacy by encouraging and rewarding high quality research in technical communication.

To qualify for the award, a researcher needs to demonstrate either a lifetime of quality research or a study or set of studies that has made a significant contribution to the field of technical communication. A researcher award will be given at the STC annual conference in Minneapolis in May 2007.

## Related Events

DITA Boot Camp workshop we are offering in Redwood City, CA January 29-February 2, 2007. This workshop will be led by JoAnn Hackos and sponsored by Astoria Software.

During this five day workshop, DITA Boot Camp will cover the concepts needed to move to DITA successfully. The DITA Boot Camp has combined four of JoAnn Hackos' workshops, Minimalism, Structured Writing, XML and DITA to give attendees a strong foundation for topic-based authoring. To register and for information about this workshop please visit our web site at <http://www.comtech-serv.com/workshops/dita-bootcamp.shtml>.