

Ragged Left

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

January/February 2010
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- *Will resume next issue.*

December 9, 2009 Meeting Notes

Technical Communication Supports High School Literacy

Presentation by T. R. Girill - notes by Jennie Abbingsole

Ten years ago, T. R. Girill started the East Bay STC literacy outreach project, which has helped underperforming high-school students (and their teachers) improve basic nonfiction writing skills by applying a cognitive apprenticeship approach. Girill adapted real-world instruction and description cases into age-appropriate practice activities, and has been introducing participants to professional usability techniques.

To a circle of technical writers gathered near the fireplace at the Hillside Club, Girill described the many skills that are fundamental to technical writing that we may take for granted, and which high school students desperately need to learn. No matter what job students may have as an adult, they will need to be able to share information, and need to be able to write on their own behalf.

High school is so late to start teaching basics -- by fifth grade, students should be able to write instructions that others can follow. However, many teachers don't have technical writing skills, and are unaware of technical writing as a genre of writing let alone a profession.

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Girill's program teaches technical writing skills to underperforming students in underperforming schools such as Fremont High. He has found that sometimes he has to teach students how to learn by example before he can start teaching the material. Students in ESL (English as a Second Language) and ELL (English Language Learner) programs often have only developed social language, and need to learn academic and technical language.

What is the scientific framework for writing effectively?

Girill teaches the fourfold writing matrix:

Fiction	Nonfiction
Narrative	Non-narrative

And the three dimensions of usability: Easy to understand; easy to find; relevant.

In the classroom, Girill works on cognitive apprenticeship, so students learn behind the scenes as the framework of technical writing is revealed. He focuses writing practice with explicit guidelines and peer reviews, so the critic has a list of what to check for and that way learns to apply the guidelines. Students practice writing kitchen recipes; the class might literally cut up an existing piece of writing into small slips and put it back together in order, by context.

Girill finds that teachers do not have time to create their own technical writing exercises, so they can use his handbook for teachers:
<http://www.ebstc.org/TechLit/handbook/handbooktoc.html>.

It takes 5 years to acquire literacy, usually children ages 6-11 develop their language skills. It is hard to take the time later in life to gain literacy! Teaching technical communication in schools is a social application of our skills, and gives us the opportunity to share the knowledge of how to present information others can understand to both language arts and science students.

To read more about the Technical Literacy Project that Girill started and maintains, see http://www.ebstc.org/TechLit/TL_Front.html.

Speaker

T. R. Girill recently retired from a 30-year career in technical communication at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where he led the computer documentation project at the National Energy Research Supercomputer Center for over a decade. He has published numerous technical articles, and has taught students at the College of Alameda and other professionals at U.C. Santa Cruz Extension. He is an STC Fellow and he served as editor in chief of the Association for Computing Machinery's *Journal of Computer Documentation* from 1995 to 2000. Since 1999 he has also managed a technical literacy project for the East Bay chapter of STC, which he discussed in our December meeting.

Jennifer Abbingsole is Manager of Technical Writing at Global 360, Inc. and Newsletter Editor for the Ragged Left. She is also a life-long volunteer and appreciates that technical writing, and technical writers, can help students with the valuable life skill of clear written communication.

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January 2010 Awards/Party Notes

Honors Banquet Celebrates Technical Communication Achievements, Contributions

by Patrick Lufkin

On January 16 the Berkeley STC hosted the annual Touchstone Awards, and also honored chapter volunteers. The event was held at the Highlands Country Club in the Berkeley Hills. Attendees shared a bountiful Meza style buffet of Middle Eastern food from Berkeley's popular La Mediterranee restaurant.

The Touchstone awards were the culmination of the 2009 Touchstone, the Northern California technical communication competition. Touchstone is sponsored by the combined Northern California STC chapters to showcase and honor the best in technical communication. While the competition accepts out-of-area entries, most of the entries come from Northern California companies and institutions.

This year's competition drew 36 entries, of which two won Distinguished awards, six won Excellence awards, and thirteen won Merit awards. Distinguished awards went to Autodesk for *Autodesk Show Me Animations* and to Chevron for *Motor Gasolines Technical Review*. Top winners of Touchstone will be entered in the Society level competition, which will announce its winners at the annual STC Summit in Dallas in May.

Winning Touchstone entries were displayed at the event. Over the coming weeks, they will also be displayed at STC chapter meetings.

In recent years Touchstone has been managed by the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship, an STC scholarship for Northern California technical communication students. Proceeds from the competition help fund the scholarship. Judging was done by teams of leading technical communicators who worked through the fall and gave many hours of their time assessing the entries.

The festivities also included an awards ceremony in which Touchstone winners, competition judges, and chapter volunteers received certificates honoring their achievements and contributions.

Patrick Lufkin is an STC Associate Fellow, a member of the Berkeley chapter leadership, and along with Richard Mateosian, was co-manager of the Touchstone competition.

President's Notes

by Richard Mateosian

STC appears to have come through the financial crisis. Things are not yet rosy, but the Society is in the black for 2009. Renewals and annual conference signups are producing positive cash flow, which we hope will translate into a surplus for 2010 as well.

But this financial survival has come at some cost. Dues are up. Some services are gone or reduced. Chapter finances have been disrupted. For STC to continue its mission of advancing the field of technical communication,

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

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members must feel that their annual dues are advancing their personal missions as well.

STC has formed a task force to figure out how to support chapters, which, to most members, are the face of STC. I am a member of this task force. My main job is to gather ideas at the chapter level and ensure that they receive careful consideration at the Society level. If you have ideas, concerns, praise, or complaints, send me email at xrm@pacbell.net. Use the subject line STC Task Force, so I don't lose your inputs.

Our profession and our organization have many challenges ahead of us. Please help us meet them.

Editor

Submission Deadlines

by Jennie Abbingsole

The regular schedule is to post the PDF the first week of every even-numbered month (it's a bi-monthly newsletter), so I need content the last week of January, March, May, July, September, and November to publish the first week of February, April, June, August, October, and December.

Web usability column

Usability... in use.

Eric Hughes' column on usability will return in a future issue.

Eric Hughes has been an STC member since 2004. Things that don't work the way they should drive him crazy. You can reach him at hughesearthur@gmail.com; or on Twitter, FaceBook, LinkedIn, and delicious at /hughese

Meetings

Our chapter holds a dinner meeting the second Wednesday of each month. See [Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions](#).

Upcoming Meetings

Beyond the Practitioners' Lore: Reading the Research

by Susan Becker

Wednesday, February 10, 2009, 6-9:30pm

Highlands Country Club, 110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

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, email membership@stc-berkeley.org

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. **Annual conference: Dallas, Texas, May 2-5, 2010.** In addition the STC sponsors many regional conferences, which feature the same sorts of programs, seminars, and workshops on a more intimate scale.

Program

You don't need to be an academic to read a research article. Even if you don't read every word, you can find support--and new directions--for your thinking.

As technical communicators at work (aka practitioners), we make countless decisions about document design, sentence structure, vocabulary, typology. Many of these choices we base on our education, training, corporate guides, or department policies. But many we just make up based on what feels right to us--on our "practitioners' lore."

Basing our work on research has always been vital to technical communication. It can ground our decisions in reality, introduce new possibilities, and enliven our style committee meetings.

This presentation explores how we can improve our work by reading research articles. Susan Becker uses as examples several guidelines from the NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology) Style Guide for Voting System Documentation and shows how they were developed through a process of reading the research, reviewing the current accepted guidelines, and critiquing sample documents.

You will learn to:

- Find sources to explore a question in technical communication
- Read a research article
- Apply what you learn from a research article to what you do on the job

Speaker

Susan Becker is a technical communicator and online user assistance developer with extensive experience in writing, editing, document design, and information architecture. She is currently an Information Developer at IBM, providing user assistance for IBM Informix Dynamic Server. Prior to her work at IBM, Susan co-authored the *Style Guide for Voting System Documentation* for the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) with Dana Chisnell. Susan has taught at San Francisco State University in the Technical & Professional Writing program and the English department. She is an STC Associate Fellow, past president of the San Francisco chapter, and a member of the Usability Professionals' Association (UPA). Her online and print documentation have received local STC awards

What Medical Writers Do

by Nancy Katz, Ph.D.

Wednesday, February 10, 2009, 6-9:30pm

Highlands Country Club
110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

Nancy Katz, Ph.D., will describe what medical writers do and what it takes to break into the medical writing field.

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

Nancy will draw on her 14-year experience in the biopharmaceutical industry, which includes heading up the Medical Writing group at PDL and the Developmental Editing group at Genentech, as well as her current work as President and Principal Medical Writing Consultant of Illyria.

Nancy will talk with us about:

- **Medical Writing Projects:** What medical writers do.
- **Medical Writing Competencies:** What medical writers need to know in order to do what they have to do.
- **Medical Writing Jobs:** How to get started, and ultimately hired, as a medical writer

Speaker

Nancy Katz, Ph.D., is President and Principal Medical Writing Consultant of Illyria Consulting Group, Inc. (www.illyriaconsulting.com). Illyria provides writing services for the biopharmaceutical industry, specializing in documents for eCTD-based submissions.

Nancy recently completed a 4-year term as a core committee member of the DIA (Drug Information Association) Medical Writing SIAC (Special Interest Area Community) and now serves on that SIAC's E3 task force. She is a member of the pharmaceutical content subcommittee of OASIS (Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards) and mentors writers through AuthorAid, an organization that helps researchers in developing countries publish their work.

Meeting/Dinner Prices

Advance Reservations

Reserved on the Chapter's website by the day prior to meeting.

Meeting and dinner

- Members: \$10
- Non-members: \$18
- Student members: \$10

Program only

- Members: \$5
- Non-STC-Members: \$15
- Students: \$5

At the door (no reservation)

Meeting and dinner

- Members: \$15
- Non-members: \$21
- Student members: \$15

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. These and a list of other local organizations in which STC members may be interested are included in the *Ragged Left*.

Subscriptions

This newsletter is free to members of the Berkeley chapter.

Advertising rates

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

Note: If you do not reserve dinner in advance, dinner may or may not be available on a walk-in basis. We order dinner for the number of reservations plus a few walk-ins.

Program only

- Members: \$10
- Non-STC-Members: \$15
- Students: \$10

Special cost notes

- Non-members are always welcome to STC meetings at the non-member rates.
- All members of the San Francisco Chapter of the IABC are welcome to register for Berkeley STC General Meetings at the member price by midnight on the day before the meeting.

Meeting Agenda

6-7pm	Check-in, networking, conversation, and dinner.
7:00 -7:15pm	Chapter business, announcements, and introductions. Anyone can announce jobs that they know about.*
7:15 - 8:30pm	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 - 9pm	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.

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.

Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions

Highlands Country Club
110 Hiller Drive
Oakland, California

Information at <http://www.stc-berkeley.org/MonthlyMeeting/directions.shtml>



View from the Highlands Country Club
Photo courtesy of Rhonda Bracey

Driving directions

From San Francisco

Cross the Bay Bridge to I-580 Eastbound. Remain in the right lane, until Highway 24 Eastbound (toward Berkeley and Walnut Creek). Continue eastbound until the Tunnel Road off-ramp. Exit will loop around to the west, crossing back over Highway 24. Turn left at the stop sign. Follow Tunnel Road/Caldecott Lane to traffic signal. Veer to the right, and follow Hiller Drive halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

From Walnut Creek

Take Highway 24 Westbound through the Caldecott Tunnel. Stay in the right-hand lane, taking the first exit after the tunnel ends, the Tunnel Road exit, going towards Berkeley. Follow Tunnel Road to the complex intersection and stop light, at Tunnel Drive, Hiller Drive, and Highway 13. Veer to the right, and continue halfway up the hill on Hiller Drive. Highlands Country Club is on the right-hand side of the street.

From I-80 and Berkeley

Take Ashby Avenue to the Highway 13 exit. Ashby becomes Tunnel Road at the Claremont Hotel. Continue on Tunnel Road (through the split-level section) to the stoplight just before the Highway 24 overcrossing. Remain in the left lane and make a sharp left U-turn around the Firestorm Memorial Garden, on to Hiller Drive. Continue halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

From Hayward

Take I-580 Westbound to Highway 13 north. Continue on Highway 13 past the over-crossing of Highway 24. At the stoplight, turn right, then left, onto Hiller Drive. Continue halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

Parking

Please park on the street. The club's parking lot is for members only.

Public Transit

Prefer to take BART? The Rockridge station is closest. Send email to president@stc-berkeley.org to ask about transportation from BART to the meeting.

AC Transit bus E from SF via MacArthur then Rockridge takes you as far as Tunnel Road & Roble Road, with a half mile walk uphill on Hiller Drive to the Hillside Country Club.

STC News

Increase your network and net worth—join STC today!

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and all media. For more information about STC, send an e-mail to stc@stc.org or visit www.stc.org.

Help Me Enhance the Technical Communication Profession

By Nathaniel Lim



When you tell your friends and family that you are a technical writer, what is their reaction? To me, they say that it sounds like an important job and probably isn't easy. When I tell them I write online help as part of my job, they often tell me that Help does not help. Unfortunately, this is sad but true. People get frustrated when they read poorly written documents and cannot find the information they need.

This is why I am running for **STC Nominating Committee**. I want to make a difference. From here, I could tell you my interesting biography, awards I've received, impressive accomplishments, extensive work history, decision-making process, and reasons for running. But, that is all in my candidate statement on the STC website. Here is the stuff I could not include:

Reliable: I strongly believe in accountability and follow through. If I say I will do something, I make sure it gets done (or tell people early enough in the process if I cannot do it, so we can go to plan B). I also believe in following directions and meeting deadlines. At the same time, if I don't understand the process or don't believe that the rule applies, I will ask questions until I am satisfied that this is the best way to go about it.

Critical Thinker: When I was a lead judge for the STC international tech pubs competition, a new procedure came into effect that required writing at least 24 comments on the judging form. Thinking that this would be too numerous, I inquired to find that this was not a hard and fast rule. The spirit of the procedure was to ensure that submitters received sufficient written comments and not just numbered ratings. Thus, I wrote critiques to help the submitters, not always conforming to the rule.

Innovator: My company recently started translating documents into several foreign languages. My manager gave me the task of creating a new procedure for labeling them, putting them through the approval process, and posting them on our website for customers to download. Tracking and classifying over a hundred documents with different versions and languages could potentially fall into disarray. I was careful to think things through before taking action. I asked appropriate personnel for their input

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and drafted a formal procedure. Management approved. Although the procedure continues to get revised even to this day, I am proud that I was part of the first effort to formalize it.

You can also get to know me at LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com/in/nathaniellim) and Facebook (search nathaniel lim impac).

Starting March 9, please take a minute to cast your vote for Nathaniel Lim. I would be grateful for your vote for Nominating Committee.

Chapter News

Leadership Positions Available

We are looking to fill several leadership positions! Contact Richard Mateosian if you are interested. See <http://www.stc-berkeley.org/VolunteerOpportunities/volunteer.shtml> for a list of open positions.

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

Other Organizations

American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) of Northern California. Meets periodically at various Bay Area locations. 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. www.asindexing.org/site/chapters.shtml#golden

Association for Women in Computing, San Francisco Bay Area chapter — 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. — www.nwu.org

Northern California Science Writers' Association. Quarterly meetings & other events. www.ncswa.org

Events

UC Berkeley Extension

Spring semester classes in the Technical Communication program at UCB Extension start in January, and will include Technical Communication I (January start), Technical Communication II (March start), Visual Design for Technical Communicators (March start), Project Management (January start), and Digital Authoring for Dynamic Publishing (January start). For details, see <http://extension.berkeley.edu/cat/techcom.html>

Awards & Conferences

APEX 2010 Now Open for Entries!

The 22nd Annual APEX AWARDS FOR PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE is now accepting entries for APEX 2010 (Entry deadline: March 17, 2010). The APEX AWARDS recognize excellence in graphic design, editorial content and overall communications effectiveness. Communicators can choose from 127 different categories (many new) under 11 headings, including:

- Newsletters
- Magazines and journals
- Magapapers and newspapers
- Annual reports
- Brochures, manuals and reports
- Electronic media and video
- Web and intranet sites
- Campaigns, programs and plans
- Writing
- Design and illustration
- One-of-a-Kind publications

For a list of new and revised categories, see <http://www.ApexAwards.com/apex2010awardscategories.htm>.

Entry fees are \$69 per entry for WRITING THAT WORKS subscribers; \$89 per entry for non-subscribers.

APEX is sponsored by the editors of WRITING THAT WORKS, a leading newsletter for writing, editing and communications professionals. The contest is open to corporate, nonprofit, freelance and agency communicators. Entrants do not have to be WRITING THAT WORKS subscribers.

CALL FOR ENTRIES information, brochure and entry form are posted at <http://www.ApexAwards.com/apexawards.htm>.

Also see the APEX FAQ page for tips and advice on entering, at <http://www.ApexAwards.com/apex2010faqs.htm>.

New “Green” Categories Added to APEX 2010

Whether you planning campaigns, writing copy, designing brochures and other materials, or producing electronic media and videos, if it's a green topic, you can enter it in one of the APEX 'GREEN' categories. Green topics include subject matter covering energy efficiency, conservation, the environment, climate issues and eco-friendly content.

The Ragged Left is published six times a year (every other month).