Ragged Left

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Berkeley

Blue Skies, No Candy: Pros and Cons of Freelancing

A panel discussion moderated by Berkeley-STC President Sarah Lee Hauslinger, featuring Richard Mateosian, Marla Wilson, Thomas Albert, and Judith Herr.

Technical communicators at all levels seem to be interested in freelancing. In fact, many cite a desire to work independently as one of the motivating forces in their decision to enter the profession. Freelancing can be heavenly, hellish, or both; this panel discussion addresses the question of why, how, and when both of these descriptors can apply. The panelists range from diehard independent contractors to steadfast staffers, with a few transitioners thrown in. They'll share their experiences and stories and participate in an audience-driven open Q&A session.

PANELISTS:

Sarah Lee Hauslinger had her own consulting business for 15 years before joining Intraspect Software in 2000 as Director of Publications.

Richard Mateosian was an independent contractor for many years before going captive. He is now with Documentum.

Marla Wilson has her own business, Printed Page Productions. She has been self-employed for well over a decade.

Thomas Albert is a Senior Technical Writer with MDLI, and teaches in the UC Berkeley Extension Technical Communication Program.

Judith Herr started her own business, Well Chosen Words, in 1999 after a ten-year stint with SAIC.

Come and join us on May 9th for what promises to be a lively and interactive program.

Meeting details appear on page 2. You can reserve by check or make a reservation online at *www.stc-berkeley.org*.

Chapter Elections Ballot Enclosed

Ballots and instructions for voting are enclosed in this issue and also appear on the chapter Web site. Votes will be counted at the May chapter meeting.

Candidates are: President—Kathryn Munn; Treasurer—Susan Marchionna; VP of Programs—Ruth Wright; VP of Membership —Paul Sinasohn—all running unopposed. The two candidates for Chapter Secretary are: David McCoard and Joseph Ryshpan. Statements for both appeared last month.

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STC Headquarters

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About the STC

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.

STC has more than 20,000 members and 144 chapters world-wide. Its members include writers, editors, artists, illustrators, photographers, audiovisual specialists, managers, supervisors, educators, 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. Regular membership is $110/year, with an additional $15 enrollment fee the first year. Student membership is $45/year.

To receive additional information and an application form, via mail or email:

- Call our chapter voicemail number 510-466-5464 and leave a message.
- Send email to *bkymbrs@stc.org*.
- Send mail to STC-Berkeley, PO Box 1007, Berkeley CA 94701-1007.

Advertising Rates

Page $70, 2/3 page $50, 1/2 page $40, 1/3 page $30, 1/6 page $20, business card $10. STC members receive 20% off. Ad deadline is the fifteenth of the month prior to publication.

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 contact the editor for details of how to submit articles and illustrations.

Deadline for unsolicited submissions is the 21st of the month preceding publication. 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.

STC-Berkeley Chapter Meeting Details

Next meeting: Wednesday, May 9.

The Silver Dragon Restaurant serves STC-Berkeley members delicious Chinese food. The meeting begins at 6 P.M. with networking and conversation, and dinner at 6:30 P.M. Chapter business and announcements are made around 7:15 P.M., followed by the speaker.

If you want to eat dinner, reservations are required and *must* be received (by Ruth) no later than 12:00 NOON the Monday before the meeting (May 7). Reservations are necessary so that we can order the right amount of food. Do *not* contact the restaurant.

Send checks to Ruth Wright, 586 Vernon Street, Oakland, CA 94610.

Checkout

RSVP online: Use your credit card to order meeting reservations via the chapter Web site, *www.stc-berkeley.org*.

With a reservation, the meeting fee with food for members is $20, for student members is $17, and for nonmembers is $23; if you come for the program only, starting at 7:30 P.M., the fee is $12 for members and non-members ($10 for students). If you are not eating, payments may be made at the door.

Last Call for the Annual STC Conference in Chicago

STC's 48th annual conference is happening in Chicago on May 13-16. STC's annual conference is the largest conference in the world that focuses on the arts and sciences of technical communication.

The conference includes educational presentations, opportunities for networking and a chance to view vendor exhibits and award-winning entries from STC's technical communication competitions.

Full conference details and registration forms can be found at *http://www.stc-va.org/48thconf/index.html*. This year, for the first time, you can register for the entire conference online

New Monthly Column Premieres

The *Ragged Left* is introducing a new column this month, the *Resource Corner*. Each month rotating guest writers will offer short features on resources that benefit the technical writing industry.

If there is a topic you would like to cover for a future edition, email *editor@stc-berkeley.org*.

Resource Corner

Distance Learning: Online Universities

BY GARY HAYES

Need to begin using an unfamiliar software application in a hurry? How about expanding your writing know-how into a new frontier—possibly Networks & Servers or a programming language? Perhaps you frequently see terms such as APIs, C++, OLE mentioned and you just wonder what they are all about.

At last, the much anticipated day of Web-based distance learning has arrived. Today there are scores of venues for hands-on, interactive training courses of study that address a truckload of subjects in a variety of ways. Training choices include: instructor led, self-paced tutorials, and even short, video based information-only seminars.

Instructor led courses begin and end on a set date and generally run from four to six weeks. Enrollment is limited. The instructor posts assignments and assists students in a virtual classroom. In addition to giving you course materials, these classes often point you towards related links, supplementary references, related applications and even additional tutorials.

If you like the chat format, you can check out the online university's department lounges where you can discuss assignments and trade ideas with the other students in your class.

One big advantage that distance learning providers offer is single-source learning. You download the class textbook, data files and any necessary software plug-ins from a single site. Another advantage is that the person teaching the course is often the person who has authored the course.

Due to competition among training providers, these sites make it very easy to decide whether or not a particular course is right for you. Sites usually present clearly written course descriptions, course outlines and prerequisites. Just to make sure you have a good feel for a course before you hand over your hard-earned plastic, many sites will allow you to download the first chapter of the textbook or to take an initial class session at no charge.

Some of the available online resources include; *www.ElementK.com, www.LeapIt.com, www.SmartPlanet.com, www.Techies.com, www.Learn.com*, and *www.Learn2.com*.

Recap of the April Program

When I Grow Up, I Want To Write API Docs

ANNA T. ARANETA

Most of us have tangled with plug-ins and applets enroute to our greater quests for application functionality or web viewing. But how many of us knew plug-ins and applets are made usable by application program interfaces (API)? For that matter, how many of us knew anything about APIs until the STC Berkeley chapter meeting on April 11?

Enlightening an audience of around 60, Jim Bisso of Bitzone LLC defined APIs as interfaces facilitating communication between two software components. An interface is defined at the source code level. Jim made several analogies to illustrate how interfaces access the functionality of applications (as with plug-ins), or implement class libraries (as with applets).

Answers to the "what" and the "how" of APIs beg documentation. According to Jim, documented APIs are needed to enable development and save time.

Since API documentation (or API docs) assume a familiarity with C, C++ and Java programming, the audience is comprised primarily of software developers. Jim also counts product managers, technical support and quality assurance staff among API doc readers. An API documentation writer's plate is piled high with reference manuals, programmer's guides (tutorials), installation guides, readme files, white papers, technical notes, and specifications. Sounds like the usual fare of tech docs? Not quite, when the task at hand is to describe the interfaces, the functionality of software components, and abstract programming concepts.

As Jim's title suggests, the first requirement for breaking into this niche is to "grow up," and then you have to WANT to write API documentation. Growing up translates to 3-5 years as a technical writer before you specialize in APIs. Learning programming concepts and techniques combined with learning the common language of software developers give you the necessary technical background. "The demand for competent API documentation writers hasn't changed with the cooling of the job market," Jim observes. "The field is lucrative."

For those who missed his presentation, Jim will lecture on the same topic at the Silicon Valley STC chapter meeting on April 26, 2001.

About Jim Bisso:

Jim is one of our own; a Berkeley STC member. His career spans 13 years in the computer industry as a technical writer, software archivist, product manager, and trainer. He specializes in API documentation for C++ and Java and has taught computer science at Golden Gate University, San Jose State Extension, and Mills College. He has an undergraduate degree in linguistics and masters in computer science.

Biotech Column

The Berkeley Biotech SIG is taking a hiatus. In the absence of meetings, STC Berkeley offers this monthly column.

Reading DNA the Polymerase Chain Reaction Explained

BY RUTH WRIGHT

Analyzing DNA and reading the genome has been the space race of the 1990's. The sequencing of the human genome in 1999 would not have happened without the prior development of a technology that allowed the multiplication of a DNA sample to an amount of a size we could handle and do things with. The capacity to analyze DNA sequences became available in 1985 with the development of the technique called polymerase chain reaction, or PCR. PCR can reproduce, actually the correct terminology is amplify, very large quantities of DNA sequences without needing to do it within a living cell, not an efficient method if you want more than the most minute quantities of something. The DNA from a selected portion of a genome can be amplified accurately a billion-fold using PCR. It has permitted the reevaluation of physical evidence from crime scenes, the production of chemical compounds derived from cells that can have medical and industrial uses, and has even allowed comparisons between bacteria today and the same species of bacteria found during archeological digs that are thousands or millions of years old.

Normal gene replication involves first the unwinding of a portion of a double-helix strand of DNA. Genes are made of bases, two paired sets of four different chemical compounds that repeat in different patterns to make an alphabet. Each one of the four has a naturally matching partner. When the helix is unwound and separated, new bases manufactured in the cell bind naturally with their appropriate partner, forming a copy of the original. In each of the copies made, one strand is from the original DNA molecule and the other strand is composed of new material. A clever

fellow figured out how to reproduce DNA outside the body by introducing the enzymes that control those processes within the cell into his system.

PCR amplification starts with a piece of DNA that is put in a container. It is heated so that the double-helix unwinds and separates into single strands. Something called a primer is added to the mix. A primer is a small molecule that serves as a starter for DNA synthesis. It contains the raw material pieces that will be used to make the new strands.

In the cell, an enzyme called DNA polymerase assists in the addition of new nucleotide bases to the chain that is being constructed. This enzyme is added to the PCR process to perform the same function, but it comes from an unusual place, which I'll describe in a moment. The heating step is necessary to separate the weak chemical bonds holding the helix together, but it also denatures proteins.

Every chemical whose name ends in –ase is an enzyme. Every enzyme is a protein. Every protein can be denatured, either reversibly or permanently. Denaturing means that you've done something to change the protein's shape. Its three-dimensional shape is critical to its being able to do whatever task it does, so denaturing it ruins it. A cooked egg white in a fried egg is a permanently denatured protein. The heating in PCR that separates the double-helix strands is temporary, but strong enough to denature human DNA polymerase, so the process uses something else instead.

One of the miracles of bacteria as a life form is their amazing diversity. There are bacteria that can glow in the dark, that can carry a magnetic charge, that can live by digesting solid rock. Some of them live at the bottom of ocean trenches, some live in salt marshes, in arctic ice, and others live on or around volcanic vents and geysers. DNA polymerase isolated from one of these species that lives in very hot environments, called appropriately enough Thermus aquaticus, is used in PCR because the enzyme will continue to function when the temperature gets hot.

The mix is cooled, allowing the primer molecules to combine with the larger, split in half DNA piece, creating a new double strand. The process is repeated until a large enough quantity of identical portions of identical DNA have been created.

The way the genome people analyzed the genome was to start with the very few gene pieces we actually did know the composition of, reproduce adjacent pieces with PCR, examine the resulting product for overlapping segments, and put the pieces together like a giant puzzle.

If you'd like to publish something in this column, ask a question, correct a mistake or oversight, please forward those missives to *programs@stc-berkeley.org*.

Résumé and Portfolio Review

Does your résumé or portfolio present your qualifications in the best light? Will your résumé get you an interview? Will your portfolio help you to persuade the hiring manager to offer you the job? If you're new to the field, or just concerned that your résumé or portfolio may not be up to snuff, sign up for a free 30-minute review, and find out.

If you–or someone you know–would like some résumé or portfolio help, look no further. We have a cadre of seasoned tech writers who all have experience making hiring decisions, and who will be able to review your material and give you expert feedback.

How to sign up for a résumé review:

- Email the Employment Manager *employment@stc-berkeley.org* to request a résumé review.

- Copy and past your résumé into the message text. (Note: Do not attach your résumé to the email—we're trying to practice safe email.)

- State your name and the meeting at which you're hoping to have the résumé reviewed.

- Be sure to write *résumé review* in the subject heading of the email message.

- Send the email by the Thursday before the monthly meeting.

- Look for a reply email from the Employment Manager, confirming that you are booked for a résumé review. The message will also specify your review time (6 or 6:30) and who your reviewer will be.

- *Optional:* Bring a hard copy of your résumé to the review appointment, if you want feedback on the formatting as well as the content.

How to sign up for a portfolio review:

- Email the Employment Manager at *employment@stc-berkeley.org* to request a portfolio review.

- State your name and the meeting at which you're hoping to have your portfolio reviewed.

- Be sure to write *portfolio review* in the subject heading of the email message.

- Send the email by the Thursday before the monthly meeting.

- Look for a reply email from the Employment Manager, confirming that you are booked for a portfolio review. The message will also specify your review time (6 or 6:30) and who your reviewer will be.

- Bring your portfolio to the review!

Reviews are booked on a first-come, first-served basis, so it's best to send in your request as early as possible. Since our reviewers are volunteers, the number of slots available varies for each meeting.

Editors Guild Meeting

TUESDAY, MAY 29TH, 7 PM TO 9 PM
ROCKRIDGE LIBRARY, 5366 COLLEGE AVENUE (AT MANILA),
OAKLAND

The May East Bay Editors guild meeting program is an interactive group-discussion on starting your own business. This is a great opportunity for newcomers, or those interested, to come and learn from seasoned professionals.

The meetings are held in the Rockridge Library's community room. Enter through the front door and come up the stairs. The front door may appear closed, but should not be locked; slide it open by hand.

Optionally, some members meet in front of the library at 5:40 for a no-host dinner at a nearby restaurant before the meeting. Check the door for a note naming the location.

Editors Guild welcomes everyone interested; there are no dues, fees, or membership required. To be added to the Editors Guild listserv, email *jyl@dolby.com*.

Managing Content Sharing

STC SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER
WEDNESDAY, MAY 16TH, 2001
6:00 P.M.: NETWORKING AND SELF-SERVE HORS D'OEUVRES
7:00 P.M.: PROGRAM

Components: Capturing, Managing, and Using Information Assets to Meet Business Challenges is the program Chip Gettinger, Director of Technical Solutions at Lightspeed Interactive, *www.lspeed.com*, will present at the next STC San Francisco chapter. Chip will discuss and present a methodology for managing content sharing based around XML. She will show how Lightspeed's customers are sharing content between different organizations. Additionally, she will provide a demo of an XML-based eLearning application that provides dynamic, personalized assembly of content that is unique for the student.
Chip started as a trainer and course developer at Compugraphic, and has worked for various companies involved with print and publishing since then. Most recently she has been working with Web-based applications around structured content, watching SGML evolving into XML.
This presentation is based on her ongoing classes in content strategy, development and management at U.C. Berkeley extension and in San Francisco State University's Multimedia Studies program.

Meeting Location: London Wine Bar, downstairs
415 Sansome Street, Downtown San Francisco
STC members: $10; Non-members: $12; Students: $8
Details: *http://www.stc-sf.org*

Ragged Left

Next Meeting:

Wednesday

May 9

Blue Skies, No Candy:
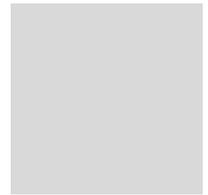### Pros and Cons of Freelancing

AN INTERACTIVE PANEL DISCUSSION

Meal reservations required by Monday, May 7.
See page 2 for costs and meeting details.

RSVP online: Credit cards accepted at
.stc- e d .o g.
Silver Dragon Chinese Restaurant:
835 Webster Street (at 8th) in Oakland

Dinner	6:30 - 7:30
Announcements and Program	7:30 - 9:00

Please do ot call the restaurant!

STC-BERKELEY MEETING DIRECTIONS

From north of Oakland: Take the I-880 North. Merge onto the I-580 East ramp towards downtown Oakland. Merge onto I-980 W. Take the 18th street exit towards 14th street. Merge onto Brush St. Turn left onto 17th St. Turn right onto San Pablo Ave. Turn slight right onto City Hall Plaza. Turn left onto 14th St/International Dr. Turn right onto Webster St. and proceed to 8th & Webster.

From south of Oakland: Take I-880 north from San Jose through Oakland. Take the Oak Street exit towards Lakeside Dr. Turn right onto Oak St. Turn left onto 8th St. Turn right onto Harrison St. Turn left onto 10th St. Turn left onto Webster St.

From San Francisco: Take the Bay Bridge towards Oakland (I-80 East). At the end of the bridge, take the I-580 East ramp towards downtown Oakland (CA-24)/Hayward-Stockton. Merge onto I-580 E. Take I-980 West ramp towards downtown Oakland. Merge onto I-980 W. Take the 18th street exit towards 14th street. Merge onto Brush St. Turn left onto 17th St. Turn right onto San Pablo Ave. Turn slight right onto City Hall Plaza. Turn left onto 14th St/International Dr. Turn right onto Webster St.

From far East Bay: Take Highway 24 west through Caldecott Tunnel. Highway 24 west becomes I-980 west. Take the 18th street exit towards 14th street. Merge onto Brush St. Turn left onto 17th St. Turn right onto San Pablo Ave. Turn slight right onto City Hall Plaza. Turn left onto 14th St/International Dr. Turn right onto Webster St. and proceed to 8th & Webster.
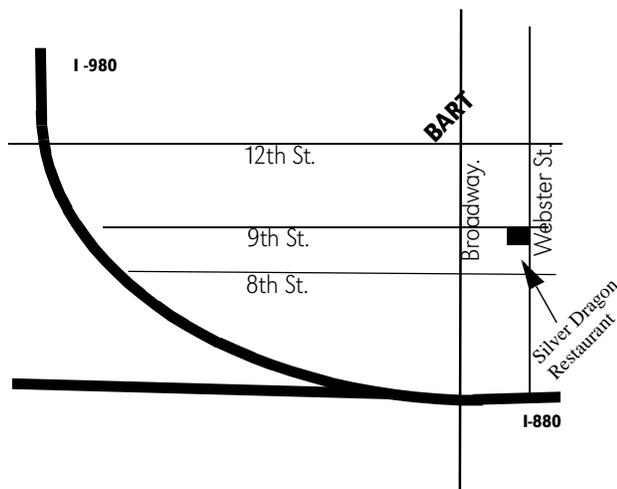
Join us in our New Meeting Location in Oakland

By BART: Exit the 12th Street Oakland station. Walk south for two blocks, to Webster St. Turn right and walk west to 835 Webster St.