

Ragged Left



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March Meeting Wrap-up _____

Real World XML

by Adrian McGilly

The March 9th meeting of the Berkeley Chapter of the STC included a presentation by Mira Wooten, Director Client Services, and Jennifer Hoffman, Information Developer of Lasselle-Ramsay entitled “Real-World XML.”

Presentation Overview

The gist of Jennifer’s presentation was that XML, XSL and XSLT are tools that allow writers to separate the content from the presentation and automate many aspects of producing a technical document. Using these tools, it is possible to prepare a document for rendering on multiple media (e.g., print, web, PDF, hand-held device), on multiple platforms and in many languages—all from a single source, and with minimal duplication of effort.

Benefits include a decreased word count, increased accuracy, portability and platform independence, better version control, and auto-generation of features such as tables of contents, glossaries, indexes, etc. But all this comes at a price: to fully realize these benefits, someone has to learn how to write code in XML, XSL and XSLT.

What is XML?

XML stands for “Extensible Markup Language.” It is a scripting language similar to HTML in that it relies on “tags” to delineate “elements” embedded within the scripts. When writing XML, just like when writing HTML, you can use a plain text editor or one of many WYSIWYG editors now available. You then need an XSLT processor to render the XML script into a nicely formatted document just as you need a browser to render HTML into nicely formatted web pages.

XML allows you to capture both the structure (topics) and the content of a document, but by keeping the two separate, each can be managed independently. For example, a paragraph that occurs in several places throughout a finished document need only appear once in the source XML document, even if it needs very different formatting for each occurrence. This leads to savings down the road when maintaining or translating the content. Similarly, because the structure of the document is isolated in the XML code, the author can manage the structure directly from one central location in the XML script without having to “work around” the content.

What are XSL and XSLT?

XSL (Extensible Stylesheet Language) looks a lot like a structured programming language and is therefore trickier to learn than XML; however, it provides a lot of power. You can use XSL to do things like show or hide content depending on the context. For example you can have it show a breadcrumb trail if the document is being rendered in a hyperlinked environment such as a web browser, or hide the breadcrumb trail if not. You can also use XSL to build tables of contents, indexes and glossaries and perform version control operations.

XSLT (Extensible Stylesheet Language Transformations) is used in combination with XML and XSL to provide rendering instructions that are specific to a given output medium (e.g. print, web, PDF).

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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 approximately 25,000 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. Regular membership is \$155/year, with an additional \$15 enrollment fee the first year. Student membership is \$56/year. 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.

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.



Why are we back to coding? Isn't this a step backwards from WYSIWYG?

During Jennifer's presentation, there was much debate as to the merits of XML over WYSIWYG applications such as FrameMaker or even Word. To some it seemed like a step backwards, especially when you consider that those programs offer many of the same benefits of XML such as independent control over structure, auto-generation of tables of contents and indexes.

In response, Jennifer pointed out that there are several WYSIWYG XML authoring tools such as XMetal and Word 2003, so you don't necessarily have to learn XML to start generating XML. She also acknowledged that XML is not appropriate for every documentation project. A lot depends on the anticipated life cycle of the document. Will it be translated? Will it need to be published to a variety of media? Will it become part of a larger, more complex document set? If so, you want to consider using XML.

In her closing remarks, Jennifer explained that no other approach to document management offers the flexibility and control that XML offers, and for that reason the tech writing industry is moving in this direction at a rapid pace. Quoting the evil cyborg from Star Trek, Jennifer said "Resistance is futile."

I guess the real question is, will we be XiMiLated? Sorry...couldn't resist.

Adrian McGilly recently joined the STC's Berkeley Chapter.

Letter from the Editor _____
by Gina Blednyh

Qualified Writers Sought

With the rollout of my first *Ragged Left* issue, I want to thank the contributors to this newsletter. We have some useful content that I hope you can all benefit from and enjoy; thanks in particular to the writers who offered pieces on recent meetings and the NorCal Leadership Day. The task of writing up an event summary may not sound very sexy but offers an important service to STC members who cannot always attend our meetings.

The *Ragged Left* can use more articles, though! And we can always continue to learn from one another. If you would like to contribute a piece, please send me an e-mail. Additionally, I am ready to set up interviews with scientists or entrepreneurs for members willing to write articles about the physical,

biological and computer sciences. Having "cold-called" professors and executives for interviews about their areas of expertise in the past, I can attest that people are typically very accommodating and gracious in the sharing of knowledge—and it's a lot of fun as well.

Finally, I'd like to have a regular "Letters to the Editor" column. If you want to send in a letter for consideration, please e-mail it to me no later than June 15th for the July/August issue.

Ragged Left editor Gina Blednyh can be reached at newsletter@stc-berkeley.org.

Guest Column _____
by Barry Schoenborn, Sacramento
Chapter

Turning Online Documentation into Money

"Online documentation," "online communication," and "online information" are very broad terms—so broad that they embrace just about everything that isn't printed, sung or sent by smoke signal. That much breadth won't help you get and execute online work. In order to make some or all of your living from online documentation, it's up to you to give the term definition. Since employers do a great deal of defining for us, you should be prepared to go along with their definitions of online documentation. Our purpose today is to spot the ways you can be paid for creating online documentation, with minimum learning and expense on your part. Here are the basics:

1. You are probably doing it already.

You may not believe it, but I don't know a single technical communicator who doesn't make PDFs out of text. These PDFs go on CD or on a company's public website. If you've got a job, you are already being paid to make online documents.

2. Let your company come up with bright ideas.

You are wasting your time "selling" online docs to those who won't listen. Despite what you read in STC pubs, it's up to management, not you, to get a bright idea about online documentation. Then you can miraculously fill the need.

3. Get into online help only if you've got the courage.

Online help is a specialty, for sure, and you can



become a specialist. If you study hard, you may find yourself working with only one package, and that (unfortunately) may cost you during a job change. It's an odd thing, but I've not met any help developers who make more money than "conventional" writers. This includes three friends of mine who worked at a giant lending institution. If your company wants online help, it's a great chance for you to learn a package and develop your skills on company time.

4. Get into web work only if you've got the courage.

All of us can do web content. Most of us are clear on how to organize websites and ensure accessible web pages. And a great many of us have a decent design sense. Just the same, we limit our web work to "brochure" style sites, where there's not a lot of hard work. Why? Because if we want to get good at the "back end" stuff, we're off to college classes. They cost money and take time, and the career results are not always satisfying. You can form a little web design business or, at some companies, they'll let you do some HTML, if they'll trust you. I know of no rule that says competence in this form of online documentation is a passport to prosperity.

5. Be prepared to leverage your skills and change titles.

By now, you've probably documented a bunch of terrible screens in your step-by-step procedures. Well, the first time somebody asks if you could design a better screen, by all means say "YES!" With some luck, you can call yourself an Interface Engineer, and make the title stick.

6. Don't confuse the message with the medium.

Before online, there was paper. Before that, parchment. Before that, papyrus, clay tablets, and cave walls. In all media, there was content to convey. Today, the presentation method is linear, or hyperlinked, or some combination of the two. We haven't seen much yet in "predictive" online information (except for the famous MS Word paper clip saying, "It looks like you're typing a bomb threat. Want some help?"). But in all cases, there is content. Delivering content is likely to be valuable, no matter how fast the media change.

7. Don't fail to appreciate the ironies.

I'm grateful to Dr. JoAnn T. Hackos and Dawn M. Stevens for writing *Standards for Online Communication*. There's a lot to be learned from this book. The biggest lesson to be learned is that Hackos

wrote a book about online communication. So what do the experts do when they want to make some royalty money? They write a book on paper!

President's Column

by Joe Devney

The Touchstone Competition Returns

A Broad View

I often write about the need for volunteers for the Berkeley chapter, but this time I want to let you know about some volunteer opportunities outside the chapter. Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communication Competition, has been dormant for a couple of years, but it is coming back this year.

Touchstone, for those readers unfamiliar with it, is a competition sponsored jointly by the six STC chapters in northern California. It is an opportunity for companies to show off their best efforts at technical communication, either printed or online. Trained volunteer judges evaluate each entry in detail, and the winners are announced at an awards banquet.

Even those entrants who don't win awards receive thoughtful critiques from the Touchstone judges, which can help them improve their work for next time.

The local STC chapter presidents have been planning and organizing Touchstone's return for the last several months. Recently we approved Gilbert Gonzalez as executive director for Touchstone 2005. His first task in this post is to find people to fill some of the other leadership positions for the competition. These include an associate director, two competition managers (one for online, one for print), a treasurer, a banquet manager, and a webmaster/CIO (which may end up to be two jobs).

If you think that you might be interested in any of these positions, let me know and I will tell you more about them, and how to apply.

If none of these seem to be a match for your skills and interests but you still want to be involved, have a bit of patience. As things progress, there will be other opportunities published. Touchstone will have a great need for judges, of course, but also other

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First Person

Third NorCal STC Leadership Day

by *Patrick Lufkin*

On March 12, about thirty STC members met to discuss the future of STC and to develop the leadership skills needed to meet today's challenges and deliver value to the STC membership. The all-day convocation was held on the Mills College campus in Oakland, and included members from five of the six Northern California STC geographical communities.

Organized under the title "Leadership for the Emerging Future," the one-day conference was the third in a series of NorCal leadership days that have been held over the past several years. The first leadership day was held in December 2002, the second in April 2003.

The first two meetings found the profession coping with a deep recession, and explored such topics as "reducing volunteer burnout" and "alternative jobs for technical communicators." With the economy showing signs of recovery, and the Society in the midst of a transformation, the current meeting focused primarily on building for the future.

STC NorCal Director, Viki Maki, welcomed everyone and got the day off to a rousing start by leading the group in singing "Happy Birthday" to Region 8 Director Beau Cain, who acted as Master of Ceremonies. Marie Highby set the tone for the day with a keynote talk on "New Definitions of Effective Leadership."

The day consisted of a series of breakout sessions. Session subjects varied from the theoretical—what are the qualities of great leaders?—to such practical matters as developing impromptu speaking skills. Other sessions dealt with such topics as the Touchstone Competition, the Gordon Scholarship, development of an inter-chapter speaker database, and the ongoing Society Transformation.

Over the course of the three leadership days, those who have participated have come to develop a genuine sense of community. During the present meeting, this sense of community manifested itself in a decision to explore the possibility that NorCal might become a chartered STC community that

could serve the STC in ways that are not really possible at the chapter level. In addition to its role as a leadership incubator, with some development NorCal might also help with Touchstone, the Gordon Scholarship, conferences, and other regional activities.

Several factors entered into the decision:

- A great deal of leadership expertise lies in people who have held offices in the past, but who are not currently holding an STC chapter position. Among other things, NorCal could provide a venue for these people to continue to participate and share their expertise with those who are just starting their careers as STC leaders.
- The collective STC membership in Northern California has long recognized itself as a unique geographical community with a commonality of interests that extend beyond chapter boundaries, but which are often narrower than the boundaries of Region 8. Over the years, the combined Northern California STC membership has repeatedly formed ad hoc committees to manage various area-wide activities, including Touchstone and NorCal itself. While these ad hoc entities have often demonstrated a great deal of creative energy, they have also been plagued with the problems that come with having to continuously "reinvent the wheel." NorCal may be able to help with such efforts by being a repository of knowledge and resources.

Whether STC NorCal can, or should, pursue certification as a recognized community, and if so, what form that community should take, are questions that will require long and thoughtful discussion. A meeting has been tentatively scheduled for June 12 to explore the issues.

Patrick Lufkin is a Senior STC member of both the East Bay and San Francisco chapters. He is currently co-chair of the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship. He can be reached at lufkin@ix.netcom.com.



Richard Mateosian, Patrick Lufkin, Eunice Malley, Jim Dexter and Gina Blednyh at STC NorCal Leadership Day



President's Letter *continued*

positions to help make the whole process run smoothly.

Back to Berkeley

While we do want people to volunteer for Touchstone, your local chapter can also be a place to offer your skills or pick up some new ones. One venue may be a better fit for you than the other. In particular we are still seeking a Logistics Manager, someone who can handle the nuts and

Other STC chapters
in Northern California

East Bay

<http://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/

Upcoming STC Berkeley Meetings

**Panel: Working as a Writer in
the Medical and Scientific
Fields**

Speakers: Martha Silverspring, Susan
Becker, Wren Withers, Mark Evans,
Sharon Tellyer, Linda Urban (Moderator)
June 8, 2005

July Meeting Topic: TBD

July 13, 2005

**A New Level of Edit:
Usability Evaluation by
Channelling Personas**

Speaker: Dana E. Chisnell
August 10, 2005

bolts of putting on the meeting each month. This involves arranging the food delivery, working with the hotel for extra chairs or other amenities, seeing that everyone gets a name tag, and handling the cash box if the Treasurer is unavailable. If you are organized and dependable, I want to talk to you.

And as always, the *Ragged Left* needs articles. Do you want to see your name in print? Attend a chapter meeting and write about the guest speaker for those members who couldn't attend. Read a book about technical communication and write a review for the newsletter. Write about how you solved a communication problem at work. If you have an idea for an article, send an e-mail to the editor.

If you have other ideas about how you might want to contribute to the chapter, please contact me directly.

SCT President Joe Devney can be reached at president@stc-berkeley.org.

Berkeley Chapter Election
by Richard Mateosian

It's election time again. You can find candidate statements and voting instructions on our website. If you are a chapter member in good standing, you should already have received an e-mail ballot. If you haven't, please send e-mail to membership@stc-berkeley.org to let us know your correct e-mail address.

We will count ballots and announce the winners at our June 8th meeting. If you don't vote before the meeting, you can pick up a ballot at the meeting and vote there.

We'll announce the winners after dinner, then proceed with our scheduled program. Come on out to thank our outgoing officers, congratulate the incoming ones, and enjoy a stimulating presentation.

Richard Mateosian is the Berkeley Chapter Elections Manager and a senior member of STC.

First Person

Judging the ITAC

by Joe Devney

In March I had the chance to examine some of the best examples of technical communication in the world. That sounds like hyperbole, so I will qualify the statement a bit. I was a judge for the International Technical Art Competition (ITAC). I worked onsite in Arlington, Virginia, with people from STC headquarters and the judges from the larger International Technical Communication Competition, which was part of the same event.

These are not competitions you can enter directly. Each entry for both the ITAC and ITCC had already won a Distinguished award at a local or regional competition, such as our own Touchstone. The competition was indeed international: among the entries evaluated by my judging team were an annual report from India and a technical illustration from Australia.

Each team was given a number of entries to review. A few weeks before the final judging weekend, I received an oversized package from STC headquarters. Inside were the entries I was to evaluate: several annual reports, a reproduction of a ten-foot-wide informational poster about some cancer drugs, a CD-ROM with an image loop from a genomics organization, a set of animated drawings, a set of posters aimed at employees, and some mounted illustrations. Along with each entry was an explanation from the entrant explaining the purpose and audience for the piece.

I spent evenings and weekends poring over the entries, judging them using detailed criteria provided by STC. Did the entry seem to achieve its purpose? Does it address the stated audience properly? Is it visually appealing? These were not simple yes-or-no questions: I had to determine how well the piece met each criteria.

In addition to the criteria checkboxes, I offered my own opinions of the strengths and weaknesses of each entry, which

aspects worked well and which didn't.

On a Saturday in March, the judges met at a hotel outside of Washington, D.C. My judging team (a graphic artist, a teacher, and me) discussed each entry in detail, comparing notes, defending our opinions, and finally coming up with an award level for each one. These ranged from no award to Distinguished. All these entries had won awards at the chapter level, but the competition is necessarily tougher at the international level—that is why some earned no award. Most of the work we did occurred during the discussions, as each of us saw the entries from the perspectives of the other two judges, and sometimes changed our own opinions because of that.

At the end of the judging day, each team decided on their candidate for Best of Show, and explained to the other teams the reasons for their choice. Representatives from all the teams then evaluated these candidates, and we had three rounds of votes before we came up with a single Best of Show winner. The Technical Communication judges went through a similar process to determine their own Best of Show winner.

I was glad for the opportunity to be involved in the competition, and I hope my comments will help the entrants produce even better work in the future.

Joe Devney has twice served as a judge for Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communication Competition.

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.

-
- | | |
|------|---|
| 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. |
-

*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

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>

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

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

Location
Shattuck Plaza Hotel
Allston Way at Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley

Wednesday, June 8, 2005

Panel: Working as a Writer in the Medical and Scientific Fields

June Meeting

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

Ragged Left

By BART:

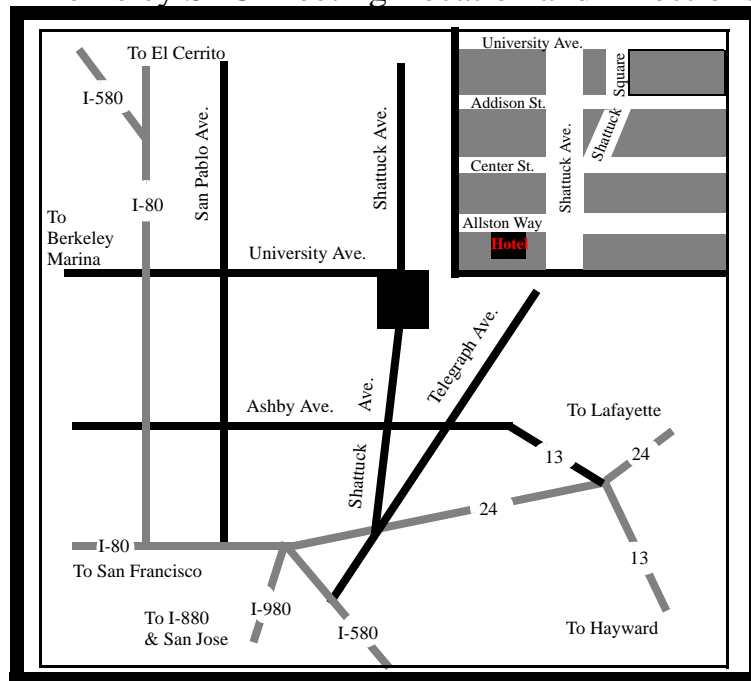
Get off at the downtown Berkeley station (Richmond line) and walk south to Allston Way, the first street. Cross the street and turn right.

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.

Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions



Walking to your car or BART?

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