Ragged Left

STC
SOCIETY FOR
TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION

▼

March/April 2006

In this issue

Special Topics

Accessibility and the World Wide Web
by Gina Blednyh

Until an event occurs that brings it to our attention, many of us probably don't think often about whether or not we can easily access a web site. However, given the ubiquity of the web, the increasingly diverse abilities of web site users, and the fact that aging baby boomers will continue to use the web as they live longer lives, accessibility will likely become a tangible concern for all of us reading this newsletter.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) defines "accessible" as "content [that] is accessible when it may be used by someone with a disability." This definition is arguably rather vague—and I'd add, controversial—for what constitutes a disability? With a visual medium such as the Web, limited vision may come to most people's minds. However, users may also have motor skills that require the use of a keyboard rather than a mouse. Perhaps other web site visitors can't use either a keyboard or a mouse. And there are people who may need to rely on visual cues rather than on sound. The job of creating an accessible web site, then, seems daunting. And as one writer in another chapter's newsletter pointed out, a job unlikely to garner much support from management.

Nevertheless, those who prepare and design content for the web with accessibility in mind demonstrate good judgment. For instance, imagine that you needed to book a flight to visit a family member. You visit several travel web sites and find that they present information in either a nonsensical way or that the information is unusable. You must spend an inordinate amount of time simply to find flights. Then, when it comes time to book one, the site prevents you from completing your transaction. You'd probably consider using another travel site or airline that didn't make some customers unable to purchase their goods or services.

When a site is inaccessible, whether it's because it unnecessarily forces users to rely on an unmarked graphic, a mouse, or a red error message, an organization risks the loss of customer confidence. And it's not only users with different visual abilities that may feel frustrated. Just as sidewalks that have inclines help all of us—not only those in wheelchairs—accessible web sites create better web site visits for all users. Additionally, businesses can suffer from unwanted publicity about a lawsuit (http://accessify.com/archives/2004_09_01_default.php) if a site is inaccessible. Finally, your organization may be required to comply with section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. (http://www.access-board.gov/508.htm).

Fortunately, the W3C offers guidance to web developers on the topic of accessibility. If you visit http://www.w3.org/WAI/Resources/Overview you can begin to become more informed about the big issue of "web access" and how to make a site accessible. You probably already know about using alt tags. Did you know that by providing a description of a video, you are helping visitors to your site? Or that auto refresh of a page is not necessarily desirable? And that you can implement many of the techniques rather easily in some cases? The W3C site offers many good tips, although as some colleagues and I discovered, you may have to sort through several pages to find a specific topic. However, help exists. If you write for the web or work on web content, consider visiting the site. Future readers of your work may feel grateful that you did.

Gina Blednyh is a technical writer and active STC member.

TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION is the bridge between those who create ideas and those who use them. Conveying scientific and technical information clearly, precisely, and accurately is an essential occupation in all sectors of business and government.

THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION (STC) has members worldwide. Its members include writers and editors, artists and illustrators, photographers and audiovisual specialists, managers and supervisors, educators and students, employees and consultants.

STC strives to

• Advance the theory and practice of technical communication
• Promote awareness of trends and technology in technical communication
• Aid the educational and professional development of its members

MEMBERSHIP Membership is open to everyone. Classic membership is $145/year with an additional $15 enrollment fee. STC also offers Limited, E-Membership, and Student Membership options. To receive additional information and an application form, via mail or e-mail

• Send e-mail to membership@stc-berkeley.org
• Send mail to Berkeley STC, PO Box 1007, Berkeley CA 94701-1007

INSURANCE Members of STC can apply for health, disability, and other insurance at STC group rates. For more information, contact STC office at stc@stc.org or (703) 522-4114.

WORLDWIDE ACTIVITIES STC's annual conference brings together more than 2,000 technical communicators from around the world for educational programs, seminars, and workshops conducted by experts in the field. Upcoming annual conferences: Seattle, May 8-11, 2005; Las Vegas, May 14-17, 2006. In addition the STC sponsors many regional conferences, which feature the same sorts of programs, seminars, and workshops on a more intimate scale.

STC sponsors international and regional competitions in all aspects of technical communication.

STC Special Interest Groups (SIGs) bring together members with common experiences and interests to share their skills and knowledge. STC SIGs include:

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

STC sponsors research grants and scholarships in technical communication.

STC publishes the quarterly journal *Technical Communication*, the newsletter *Intercom*, and other periodicals, reference materials, manuals, anthologies, standards, and booklets.

Formed in 1953, STC has today become the largest professional society in the world dedicated to advancing the theory and practice of technical communication.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES The six northern California chapters of STC conduct a variety of individual and joint activities. See page 6 for contacts for these chapters. See page 7 for a list of other local organizations in which STC members may be interested.

SUBSCRIPTIONS This newsletter is free to members of the Berkeley chapter.

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

SUBMISSIONS *Ragged Left* publishes original articles and illustrations. We edit them to meet our needs. You retain copyright but grant every STC publication royalty-free permission to reproduce the article or illustration in print or any other medium. Please talk with the editor for details of how to submit articles and illustrations.

The deadline for unsolicited submissions is the fifteenth of the preceding month.

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New Editor For Ragged Left
by Jean Lundquist

Greetings! I would like to introduce myself as the new editor for the Ragged Left, the STC Berkeley Chapter's bimonthly newsletter. My name is Jean Lundquist, and I have been an STC member for approximately four years. After relocating from the Peninsula two years ago, I enrolled in the Professional Certificate Program for Technical Communication, through Berkeley Extension, and subsequently became involved with the STC Berkeley Chapter.

I am very happy to have the opportunity to edit this newsletter, and would welcome any contributions at any time.

Ragged Left editor Jean Lundquist can be reached at: newsletter@stc-berkeley.org.

Book Review

Friedman's Flat World (Part II)
by Richard Mateosian

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

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

Flattened Workers

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

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

The Dark Side

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

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

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

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

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

Friedman rounds off his ten flatteners with one he

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

What to Do

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

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

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

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

For the United States, Friedman cites Rensselaer president Shirley Ann Jackson's warning of an impending perfect storm. This is a quiet crisis, because the storm isn't imminent, but all the factors are in place to make it inevitable if nothing changes. The factors, in brief, are the following:
* Shrinking numbers of available scientific and technical workers.
* Higher quality technical and scientific work from other countries.
* Failure to invest to a sufficient degree in education and research.

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

Let it be clear that I am asking the Congress and the country to accept a firm commitment to a new course of action, a course that will last for many years and carry very heavy costs. . . . This decision demands a major national commit-

ment of scientific and technical manpower, materiel, and facilities, and the possibility of their diversion from other important activities where they are already thinly spread. It means a degree of dedication, organization, and discipline which have not always characterized our research and development efforts.

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

Geopolitics

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

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

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

President's Column

A Fine Spring
by Joe Devney

As winter fades into spring, I want to write about chapter news from the first two months of the year, and look ahead a bit to the annual chapter elections.

A Great Party!

For a change of pace, the January STC Berkeley meeting was a social event instead of the usual dinner-and-guest-speaker routine. The venue was different, too: chapter member **Jean Lundquist** arranged for us to use a room with a view at the Highlands Country Club in the Oakland hills, and put in a lot of effort handling the logistics for us. We had a great turnout, including people from other STC chapters and some of the people who had

Guest Column

What's It Take to Be the Boss?
by Chuck Petch, Sacramento Chapter

OK, so you're a great technical writer, but you're tired of always being under the boss's thumb. If you had it your way, you would be the boss! Are you sure you have what it takes? Since this month's newsletter theme includes management, and this is the employment column where we talk about job outlook and career management, let's look at what it would take for you to become a technical writing manager.

The obvious requirement is seniority. You have to be senior in the technical writing profession. Of course, non-writers who manage other departments sometimes manage technical writers, but most technical writing managers come from the ranks of writers. Typically, when a vacancy occurs in the manager's slot, a highly experienced senior writer gets promoted or an experienced manager gets pulled in from outside the company.

Can you get there with five years of experience? Ten? And how do you position yourself to take advantage of an open manager's slot? Sometimes you just have to be in the right place at the right time. Occasionally, we hear about a lone writer on the job for a year or two when the company grows, and the writer gets appointed manager with responsibility for bringing in new writers. That's one way. It's more likely most new managers have five to ten years in the profession, and several years, if not seniority, in the writing department. Probably the best position to be in is to have several years of seniority in a company that is growing rapidly and where you are well-respected by your peers and those above you.

Next, have you had any management training? It's certain you'll need it. For many, this means a certificate in management or supervision, some sort of business school training, an MBA, or experience as a business owner with employees. You'll need skills such as supervising, scheduling, planning, negotiating, public speaking, purchasing, training, and hiring. In my own experience, you have to be very strong at multitasking, and you need an odd combination of sensitivity when it's appropriate and a thick skin when it isn't.

That last sentence leads us to personality traits. Not everybody is a born manager, and even born managers don't necessarily like the job. In past articles, I've written about personality testing and Holland codes. The typical Holland RIASEC code for business managers is ESC, which stands for Enterprising, Social, Conventional. Translating to English, that means you have to be a risk-taker who enjoys negotiating and persuading (E), you have to really enjoy being around people and helping them (S), and you have to have a mind for numbers and structure (C). The Enterprising personality usually goes into sales, the Social person enters helping professions like teaching and counseling, and the Conventional person enjoys accounting and business. You'll have to be a mix of all three: salesperson, teacher/counselor, and accountant/business manager!

Before you launch that short plan to become a manager, you'll have to take all of the above into consideration.

You'll need good positioning, management training, and the right personality. Take an especially close look at your personality. If you fit the profile, you may just be a born manager. If you don't, you may still reach your goal and become a successful manager, but you probably won't be happy. And that's really the bottom line, isn't it?

President's Letter continued |

submitted entries to the chapter's technical communications competition.

Other chapter members also contributed greatly to the success of the evening. **Jessica Livingston** spent hours shopping and cooking to come up with an impressive buffet dinner, with salmon as the main course. **Jim Dexter** brought CDs from his large collection, and manned the P.A. system most of the evening, providing an interesting mix of music that added to the ambiance. Other chapter members also contributed their time and effort on the evening of the event to make sure that everything went smoothly, and I want to thank all of them for their efforts.

It was chapter Treasurer **Deborah del Mazo's** first experience handling the cash box for a meeting: she had only been on the job a couple of days, having

President's Letter continued

taken over from acting Treasurer **Ben Lukas**.

Though this was a party, we did have some business to take care of, in particular acknowledging the volunteers who had helped the chapter in 2005. I gave certificates of appreciation to the following people:

- **Richard Mateosian** for spearheading the chapter's first technical communication

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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

March 2006
What Every Tech Writer Needs to Know about Java

Speakers: David Peyton, Chief Executive Officer of Altadero Systems

March 8, 2006

April 2006
How to Be a Stellar Consultant

Speakers: Val Swisher, President, Oak Hill Corporation

Mary Rosberg, Director of Business Development, Oak Hill Corporation

April 8, 2006

competition in quite a while.

- **Kim Rathbun**, who did a great job as our volunteer instructor for the chapter's RoboHelp class.
- **Eunice Malley**, who worked behind the scenes organizing the RoboHelp class. The class probably wouldn't have happened without her.
- **Jessica Livingston**, our Public Relations Manager. Her work on the technical publications competition certainly contributed to its success..
- Webmaster **Jim Dexter**, who is constantly working to improve the chapter website.
- Employment Manager Caroline Scharf, the person who sends out those notices about open jobs. She helped us earn some unsolicited praise from one employer: "Your STC group is the best one we have ever worked with. Very responsive and a group that cares about its members."
- **Linda Urban** has helped the chapter in several ways. She encourages her students and other people to come to our chapter meetings. She helped Valerie Steele, our former VP for Programs, find guest speakers for our meetings. She has been a guest speaker herself. Most recently she found our new Treasurer.

I also made special mention of former VP for Programs **Valerie Steele** and former Treasurer **Ben Lukas**. They both chose not to run for reelection because other obligations in their lives made it difficult to keep up with STC Berkeley duties. But since no one ran for the vacant offices in last spring's election, they both showed a lot of loyalty to the chapter by continuing to contribute in their old positions, even though they had the right-and good reason-to just disappear.

I think that the January party was such a success that the chapter should consider doing something similar next year. But that will ultimately be someone else's decision: a new chapter president will take over this July.

STC Berkeley and the Gordon Scholarship Fund

The reason that some non-STC people attended the January event was that they had submitted entries to the chapter's technical communication competition. We had all the entries that had won awards on display that evening.

The impetus for the competition came from **Richard Mateosian**. In addition to being active in STC Berkeley, Richard serves as Treasurer for the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship, which gives gives cash awards to students of technical communication. The Gordon Scholarship received its funds from Touchstone, the northern California technical communication competition. Touchstone has been dormant for the last three years, and Richard suggested that the Berkeley chapter sponsor a competition to help fill the funding gap. The chapter leadership board discussed the idea, and agreed that the chapter would provide volunteers and other support for the competition, and would keep fifteen percent of the net proceeds. This chapter leadership board is considering repeating the competition in 2006. If you would like to be involved, please contact me or Richard.

Chapter Elections

As you may know, the STC Berkeley chapter has five elected offices, and the officers serve for one-year terms, July through June. Officers can run for reelection.

I am in my third term as chapter president, and I see this as an indication of the chapter as a whole. We do not have enough turnover either in the elected offices or in other volunteer slots. So I want to encourage all chapter members to consider running for office. If you have the time and energy to spare, it is a great way to help your professional community, do some serious networking, add something interesting to your resume, and maybe even pick up a new skill. If you are shy about running for office (though it's really not that intimidating), you might think about contributing in one of the other volunteer slots available. These are appointed, not elected, so you only need to convince one or two people that you have something to contribute and you are a responsible person in order to get the job.

Chapter members will receive e-mails with details about the elections, and you can contact me at any time about other volunteer positions.

Have a great summer. And please consider running for chapter office.

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.*
7:30	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.

*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://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

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

Allston Way at Shattuck Avenue, Berkeley

Shattuck Plaza Hotel
Location

Speaker: David Peyton

Wednesday, March 8, 2006

What Every Tech Writer Needs to Know about Java

Next Meeting

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

Ragged Left

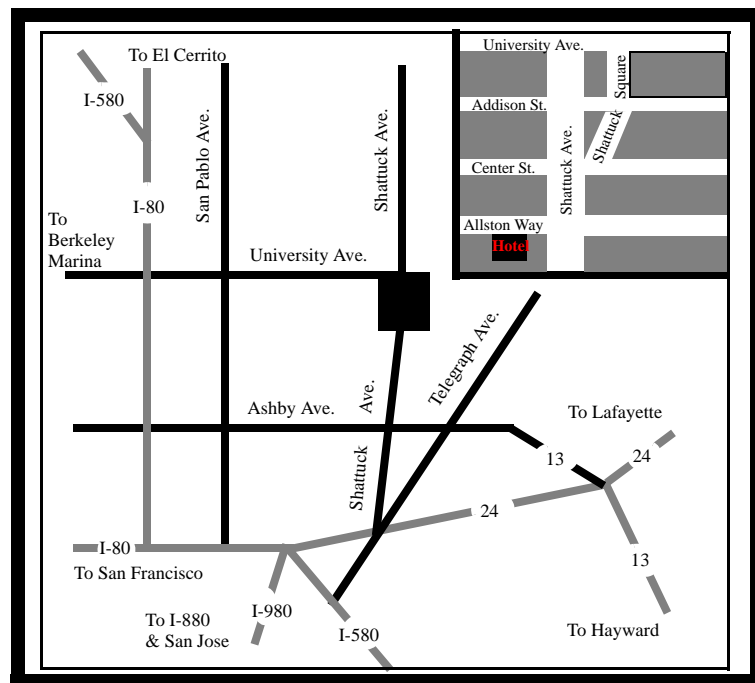## Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions

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

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

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

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