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Ragged Left

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

Fall 2011
Volume 24, Number 3

Editor's Notes

by Gwendolynne Barr

Dear readers, would you like to eat eclairs and sip champagne while working on your documents? So would the technical writers in France. With our Fall issue, we bring you a new series on STC global chapters; or more precisely, we bring you a series on *non-U.S. chapters* and begin with STC France. Do not hesitate to let us know what you think!

We are also starting a section on Employment & Training. To kick it off, we have some guidance on how to read the STC Salary Database more effectively. If you did not fully understand the difference between the median and the mean, you will now, whether you like it or not. And for our Student Corner, we are expanding upon a recent LinkedIn conversation about online technical communication programs.

As always, please do not forget to read about our past programs at STC Berkeley. Richard Wallis writes about Greg Urban's thoughts on the color blue—it isn't yellow, that's for sure; and Patrick Lufkin informs us that, according to Judy Herr, we are all perfectly capable of following directions.

Finally, a word on our publication schedule. In May we announced a quarterly schedule and in July we returned to bimonthly. Well, in Berkeley, September is a lot like May and we are once again publishing on a quarterly schedule. Doing so gives us more time to provide articles that are in-depth rather than repeating what you already know from Twitter. Look for our winter issue in January 2012.

As always, we welcome volunteers—in fact, we need volunteers for the monthly summaries and other articles. We are also looking for an assistant editor. Specifically, we are looking for someone to help gather content so that we can continue to add new features and write articles on something other than the monthly program. Please send us an email if you are interested.

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President's Notes

by Richard Mateosian

This is my last column as president of the Berkeley Chapter. The next issue of Ragged Left will appear next year, when my term will have ended. When I took office five and a half years ago, STC was in turmoil, our jobs had gone to India, and the economy showed signs of weakening. That's all better now (just kidding), and I'm ready to retire from the position.

Our election is coming right up, and I hope someone runs. If not, the chapter will continue to thrive anyway. We have a great group of volunteers, with a good blend of experience and enthusiasm. They will keep things going with or without a president. Technical communicators need a community, and face-to-face interactions have a unique role to play.

STC membership has declined. If you're a lapsed member, STC wants you back. Recently, headquarters has announced programs to encourage you to return. If you're considering joining for the first time, STC will give you the rest of this year free when you sign up for next year.

If you're just starting out in the profession, you have a great future ahead of you. The economy will come back, and there will be plenty of good jobs that require the skills that technical communicators have. Stay

Chapter Job List:
employment@stc-berkeley.org

Address, phone, or email changes:
membership@stc-berkeley.org

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

STC Membership is open to everyone. Classic membership is $215 per year with an additional $25 per chapter and $10 per SIG. STC also offers Limited, E-Membership, and Student Membership options. To receive additional information and an application form:

- E-mail membership@stc-berkeley.org

- Send snail-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. **The 2012 STC Summit will be held in Chicago, May 20-23,**

flexible, embrace change, and look for pragmatic solutions. Don't tie yourself to one approach. The media and tools will change, but good communication will remain a core competency of every successful enterprise.

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Program Notes

August 2011 Program Notes

Rules of Thumb for Using Color in Your Content

Presentation by Greg Urban

Article by Richard Wallis

We listened, watched, and spun color wheels at the August meeting as Greg Urban delivered an information-packed presentation on the use of color in technical documents. There was indeed something for everyone, from the elementary theory of color combining to analyzing the color choices of popular websites.

From Theory to Practice

Greg—himself an artist and former consultant for people choosing colors for their homes—stressed the objective of using color effectively in technical documents. Appropriate choices and uses of color contribute to a writer's success in the following key areas:

• Directing the reader's attention

• Pointing out levels of complexity

• Unifying document design

• Producing a suitable emotional affect or response

Throughout Greg's talk, he used the basics of color value and theory to support recommendations and tips for technical communicators. To illustrate the theory, he distributed sturdy color wheels that described and classified the colors of the spectrum according to their measured and perceived values. He showed us how to find different types of color combinations: complements, analogs, split complements, and triads.

We repeatedly saw that the value of a color (the strength of its relative lightness and darkness) was the critical factor in determining how well it functions by itself and with other colors. By learning how colors and their values can work with and support each other, writers can create design schemes that catch the eye and focus it on the right content at the right time.

And here's a useful nugget of information about the complementary (opposite) colors blue and yellow. Blue has a "long" range of values, which means that there are many shades of blue that work well for display and contrast. On the other hand, yellow has a limited value range, making it a difficult color for achieving contrast and readability. This is the theoretical explanation of why blue seems to show up well in almost any viewing situation—with any type of display, on the Web, and on both color and monochrome printers. By comparison, the values of yellow are generally too low to provide effective contrast and visibility; as a result, we avoid using yellow to convey primary information in online or print content.

Thinking About Readers and Contexts

It is critical to check how a page or graphic that uses color will look in black and white because of these facts about readers and reading contexts:

• Monitors frequently render colors differently.

2012. 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 sponsors research grants and scholarships in technical communication.

STC publishes the 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 *Ragged Left*.

Subscriptions

This newsletter is free to the public.

Advertising rates

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 15th of the last month in each quarter (March, June, September, December).

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.

• Most documents are still printed in black and white.

• There are now many more devices for reading, including laptops, smartphones, and tablets.

• Not all of our readers have the same quality of vision.

Here's where our newly obtained knowledge about blue came in handy. Using different shades of blue will often be better than using several different colors if the latter hues don't contrast well. And those shades of blue will also convert to much more clearly differentiated shades of gray in a black-and-white context. Blue shows up well in almost any viewing situation or visual medium. Greg's tip? "Blue is your friend!" No wonder it's the most commonly used color for content in technical documents as well as on websites.

Several members of the audience also mentioned that color blindness is one of those "quality of vision" factors that must be addressed when we choose colors to communicate. Now that we understood the underlying theory of color value and contrast, we could see why color blindness was an issue and how to address it in our color selections.

Everyone now saw the reasoning behind Greg's original advice: After checking a black-and-white version, you can make adjustments to improve the contrast and potential readability of the chosen color scheme on almost any monitor or printer.

Copying, Borrowing, Stealing, and Adapting

Our discussions of color theory and use were full of instructive examples. Greg's advice to writers was not to create color schemes from scratch but to use examples from successful documents and sites and then "tweak" them for the task at hand. We analyzed and critiqued the effectiveness of many examples of text, images, and Web pages in terms of their effective use of color.

Did you know about Rainbow Color Tools, the Firefox add-in that quickly extracts and displays the color scheme of any webpage? It also enables you to try out and apply different schemes on the same page by dragging a color from the picker or the library. Many of Greg's examples displayed the Rainbow analysis that he had already run.

We saw which types of color combinations can be highly effective, from the "bright" triads of MSN to the "muted" triads of Slate. We saw less effective combinations on a page from the HP site, where the colors were a bit too close in value and, therefore, might not appear with adequate contrast on all devices or in grayscale. We saw how two different sites for flower sales created successful color palettes that were just as effective in black and white as they were in color.

And we saw how such taken-for-granted sites as craigslist and Wikipedia rely primarily on the effective use of blue—by now our old friend—to promote maximum readability and usability for pages that are heavy with text.

Summary: Rules of Thumb

• Make color combinations lively but readable and contrasting.

• Blue is your friend!

• Value is the most important aspect of color.

• Expect to do a lot of tweaking to find the "sweet spot."

Greg Urban *was a color consultant for house colors. He is also an artist, specializing in water color portraits. He has found that the same strategies he uses for selecting colors for houses and portraits can be used to select color in documents and on the web.*

Richad Wallis *has been an editor for 30 years and is currently on the staff of Oracle Corporation.*

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September 2011 Program Notes

Proposal and Grant Writing 101

Presentation by Judith Herr

Article by Patrick Lufkin

Technical communicators follow many specialties. Some write guides to help others do their work, and some help others find and fund the work they do; those who do the latter are grant and proposal writers.

In September Judy Herr, who has long specialized in grant and proposal management and consulting work, spoke to the Berkeley chapter about the field.

Judy Herr is well known within the STC, where she is active both at the local and Society levels. Locally she has served in many leadership positions in the East Bay Chapter and is a stalwart in Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communication competition. At the Society level, she is an STC Fellow and a recent member of the STC Board of Directors. She is a Society Fellow, and won the Society President's Award in 2007 for her long-time championship of STC communities and her work on the Community Affairs Committee (CAC).

She has been in technical communication for more than 30 years. She has worked across multiple industries, including information technology, public health, environmental services, occupational safety, and scientific research. She has BA in Sociology and Communication and a Masters in Public Health. Her consulting practice is called Well Chosen Words.

Judy believes that most technical communicators have the skills to participate in grant and proposal work, and that they should appreciate how valuable they are to the field.

Responding to a government Request for Proposal (RFP) is the way companies seek government contracts. Making grant applications is the process that non-profit organizations use to seek funding for projects.

While there are important differences, the proposal and grant processes share many similarities. Each requires the ability to organize, write, edit, and publish large amounts of material under tight deadlines. Requirements are usually complex and exacting and deadlines are strict.

Judy spoke mostly about the proposal process. The process usually starts when a government agency issues an RFP. The RFP spells out the work the government wants done and invites companies to respond with a proposal to do the work. Among other things, the proposal must explain how the organizations will approach the work; name who will do the work and give their backgrounds and resumes; it must also supply evidence of past performance, and say how much the company will charge for the work. The proposal must also meet any other requirements specified in the RFP.

There are always lots of details to handle, Judy said. There will be information to gather, meetings to coordinate, resumes to edit, cover letters to prepare, desk-top publishing to be done, covers to be designed, and so on. Often a proposal will run to multiple volumes and several hundred pages.

Often organizations turn to outsiders like Judy who have the expertise to manage the project and to supply some of the personnel to do the work. This makes sense for many reasons. An organization may not have the specialized expertise needed in writing or in proposal preparation, or it may not be able to divert key staff from their regular duties to put them on proposal work.

Another reason for using an outsider, Judy said, is the government encourages smaller companies seeking government work to team up and work together. Often companies that work together on one project may find themselves in competition on the next. The people putting the proposal together see a lot of sensitive information that companies may not want to share with each other. The problems can be lessened by using a trusted outsider who can make decisions about what to reveal in the proposal.

In addition to doing much of the writing, technical communicators can help with editing and organization, Judy said. Subject matter experts tend to focus on what they know, but may not respond to what the client needs or wants. For example, they may go on forever about the science of nuclear waste, when the client really wants to know that the company has the right people and the past experience to do the required work. As

writers and editors, technical writers play an important role in cleaning up what others produce.

Judy said that writing and editing are not the only areas where technical communication skills are valuable. Many RFPs now require that the people who will actually be doing the work make oral presentations. This often means that engineers and other subject matter experts may need to be trained to polish their presentations skills. This training can often be done by technical communicators.

As proposal mangers, technical communicators are also valuable for their user advocate and organizational skills. Judy said that technical communicators are the ones who point to the requirements in the RFP, and see that the directions are followed. "We are the experts at this. This is the one kind of task that we are better at then anyone else. We can read the directions and follow them," she said.

Judith Herr has thirty years of experience in technical communication. She has done extensive work managing teams as they prepared highly complex proposals and oral presentations that have won government contracts. She has worked in a broad range of disciplines, including information technology, public health, environmental services, occupational safety, manufacturing, and scientific research.

Judith holds a BA in Sociology and Communication from the University of Texas and a Masters in Public Health from Tulane University. After working in a number of different jobs in both non-profit and for-profit arenas, Judy started her own consulting business, [Well Chosen Words](#).

Having raising her hand to volunteer at her first STC meeting 20 years ago, Judith Herr became an STC Fellow in 2006 and received the STC President's Award in 2011. She has served in every chapter leadership position, directed the STC technical communication competition Touchstone, and was STC's SIG Advocate, helping the STC SIGs gain recognition as viable virtual communities. Judith served from 2008-2011 on the STC the Board of Directors for the Society.

Patrick Lufkin is an STC Associate Fellow and Chair of the Kenneth M. Gordon Memorial Scholarship for Technical Communication. He is currently co-manager of 2010-11 Touchstone, the Northern California Technical Communication Competition.

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Special Series on STC Global Chapters

STC France

by Gwendolynne Barr

Globalization was a hot topic at the summit in Sacramento this past May. As a new member of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), I knew little about our global chapters and decided to write a series of articles on each (or as many as possible) so that I could learn more. For the Fall issue of *Ragged Left*, I am starting with France.

Many thanks to [Ray Gallon](#) for help with this article. Ray is the [current president](#) of [STC France](#) and spoke to me by phone. Thanks also to [Steve Skojec](#), the [STC Director of Community Relations](#).

Le Métier de Rédacteur Technique

What is it like to be a rédacteur technique, or technical writer, in France? Ray told me that in many ways, things are not entirely different. Technical documentation needs are similar—API guides, help systems, product manuals. And technical communication principles taught in the United States, such as knowing the audience and purpose of your work, apply to French writers as well.

One difference, however, is that in the U.S., you do not need to know a second language to become a technical writer. It is useful but not required—we have translators and localization specialists for that. Ray says that in France, it is increasingly necessary to know both French and English. Many documents are written in English but there is also a significant market for technical communicators who work in French.

In fact, it was once possible to be a unilingual Anglophone technical writer in France. One reason for the change is a [1994 French law](#) that requires French companies to produce official

documentation in French even if it means translating from the English. Also, with iterative software development and embedded documentation, writers have become more involved at the design phase and are expected to communicate with engineers directly. This is obviously more effective if done in the engineer's native language.

Writing in French is not simply about understanding the words. Your keyboard must handle special characters. In fact, the default keyboard in France has an AZERTY layout but isn't required. French punctuation can differ too. Whereas the Americans and the British argue about whether to punctuate within or without quotation marks, the French set off entire conversations within a single set of guillemets («»), including non-speech. They differentiate each speaker with an em dash or tiret. The French also use the decimal comma so that your glass of Sancerre is 8,50€ (or even 8€50) and not 8.50€

Professions Intellectuelles Supérieures

As in in the U.S., rédacteur technique is an official métier (trade) or profession. According to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE), rédacteur technique is categorized under "professions intellectuelles supérieures." If you are self-employed, however, the French social security administration, URSSAF, considers you "profession libérale" like a doctor, lawyer or accountant.

There are two common ways of becoming an independent, or freelance, technical writer in France: start your own business or work through an umbrella agency called Portage Salarial. Actually, the portage system makes you semi-independent: you have some control over the companies for which you work and what you earn but you are employed, or salaried, by the portage.

If you have your own business, you probably work through a dedicated agency (not temp agency) who contracts directly with their clients (the "employer") for your services. Ray says that most agents work only with independents, though some will take on salaried employees. Portage Salarial is an alternative for people who don't really want the hassle of the paperwork, bureaucracy, and financial management necessary to be a full independent. But it is not either-or—people who work through agents also can use Portage Salarial. By the way, our former STC president, Mark Clifford, runs a dedicated agency called Clifford Sells.

Ray believes that a high percentage of technical writers work independently (both self-employed and portage). The comparison isn't great but the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) says that in 2008, "two percent of [U.S.] technical writers were self-employed" where self-employed appears to mean independent but unincorporated.

Becoming a freelancer can be a highly bureaucratic process, says Ray, and you cannot do so in any profession you choose. When he moved to France from New York, he was an independent radio producer and hoped to continue as such. The French government, however, said that radio producer "is a salaried job." To get the required government code to work independently, he became a "consultant en communication."

Like their American counterparts, French freelancers have to pay for their own benefits. And according to URSSAF, to start an independent business, you must pay certain social charges even if you do not earn any money and even if you are working a salaried job at the same time. What is good about the portage system is that you do not pay social charges between jobs when you are not working.

l'Assurance Maladie

Everyone in France is required to have healthcare. The French government pays roughly70% of most costs, and to fill in the gaps, many people have a policy with a private insurer called a mutuelle santé. Between the public and private policies, almost 100% of their costs are covered. I say "almost" because with the bad economy, everyone is now required to contribute 1€ per visit.

What you contribute to the program is related to what you earn. The more you have the more you pay—with a cap. Salaried employees contribute through les cotisations sociales which are FICA-like payments that Ray says are mostly covered by the employer. The steepest cost is the mutuelle for which you might pay 35€ ($47) per month. But again, if you are salaried, the employer covers most of it.

As with a Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) in the U.S., you choose a primary doctor but have the freedom to see anyone. In contrast, everyone carries a government ID card called a Carte Vitale which gives doctors access to your digitized and centralized medical records (something about which the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH) is not happy). The beauty of the card is that every doctor in France has access to your records so that you can get medical care everywhere, which is the whole point. Also, as medical bills must be paid in full up front, the card allows you to file claims automatically. Even so, Rays says that routine appointments only cost about 23€ ($31).

l'Union Européenne et Télétravail

I asked Ray about cross-border job opportunities within the European Union. Can French writers apply for jobs in other European countries the way Americans can across states? Yes and no. It depends upon your immigration status. Residency permits are not portable. If you have citizenship in an E.U. member country, you can work in all 27 countries, almost as easily as in the U.S.

There are differences, however, between teleworking and working on-site. Working on-site can cause double taxation complications for cross-border activity. For example, if you live in France but you work in Germany, to whom do you pay your taxes? France or Germany? Ray says it is possible but the paperwork can get messy. If you telework from France—that is, if you work from within your tax home for a German company—it is easier to declare German income and pay French taxes.

Within each European country, telework is becoming more and more popular. In 2005, the Czech Republic and Denmark led the way with 1 in 7 working away from the office. In France, telework has increased thanks to policy enacted in 2000 that resulted in broadband coverage across the entire country. Ray himself lives in a small village in southern France called St Étienne Estréchoux where he has all the connectivity he needs.

Le Chapitre

STC France has 56 members. By comparison, the state of California has 915 STC members (in 2011), or 16% of the 5,820 technical writers employed there (in 2010). Unfortunately, there does not seem to be data on the number of technical writers in France.

Not all members of STC France are French. Some are from the U.K., Canada, Hungary, Nigeria, Latvia, India, and the U.S. While some non-French members call themselves "expats," some do not. Ray says he did not ex-patriate. He patriated—he has become a French citizen and considers himself local.

And not all members live in Paris. Ray lives in southern France. This can make holding in-person meetings challenging so they sometimes hold webinars. When they do meet in person, they might do so at a café near Pont Neuf in Paris.

As in the U.S., one of the biggest challenges for STC France has been maintaining members and recruiting volunteers. In response, STC France introduced a mentoring program in cooperation with the Université Paris Diderot where Ray teaches. The university subsidizes student memberships for those in their final year of the graduate and undergraduate technical communication programs. The university and STC France have also presented special technical communication research days for academics and professionals.

Ray says that an added difficulty for the non-U.S. chapters is that some STC benefits are not directly applicable to them—for example, the jobs and salary databases as well as the discounted insurance program. The jobs database *could* be useful, says Ray, but it mostly lists U.S. positions. STC is aware of these challenges and in 2010 created a temporary global audit task force to investigate the needs of its non-U.S. chapters. You can read about their findings in this GATF report.

In the meantime, STC France developed its own jobs database. And because the French government does not gather statistics on technical writers, STC France conducted a salary survey at its own expense. They estimate that in 2006, the average salary for technical writers was 42,446€ or $60,392. In the U.S., the mean wage in 2006 was $60,850.

Given some of the challenges of being a non-U.S. STC chapter, I asked Ray why STC France did not disband and join TEKOM or the Conseil des Rédacteurs Techniques (CRT), both of which are members of TCeurope. He admitted that the landscape is changing as TEKOM becomes increasingly international, but the two organizations have different objectives and membership profiles. And Ray believes that they share the same membership struggles. In the end, Ray says, STC is still the only truly international technical communication organization.

This does not mean that European organizations cannot and should not collaborate. STC France has begun working with the CRT to support the technical writing profession in France and they plan to organize a joint event in 2012. Everyone is welcome so visit the STC France website and stay tuned!

Gwendolynne Barr is a technical writer at Thomson Reuters in San Francisco.

If you have experience working as a technical communicator in France, feel free to send me your comments at newsletter@stc-berkeley.org. I would love to hear from you!

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Student Corner

Online Technical Communication Programs

For this issue, we would like to pick up on an STC LinkedIn discussion about online technical communication programs. Someone asked about programs that are entirely online and offer a Masters degree. We thought it would be useful to publish that list plus some online certificate programs. If you know of other online technical communication programs, both in the U.S. and abroad, shoot us an email at newsletter@stc-berkeley.org. You might also join the "Society for Technical Communication" LinkedIn group to see which programs people prefer!

Online Masters Degree Programs

United States

- Mercer University: http://www.mercer.edu/mstco/
- East Carolina University: http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/engl/graduate/tpc.cfm
- Minnesota State University: http://english.mnsu.edu/techcomm/tcma.html
- New Jersey Institute of Technology: http://msptc.njit.edu
- Utah State University: http://distance.usu.edu/degree_programs/?_d=35
- Texas Tech University: http://www.english.ttu.edu/tcr/

Non-U.S.

- Sheffield-Hallam university: http://www.shu.ac.uk/prospectus/course/141/

Folks on the LinkedIn group also mentioned Auburn (U.S.) and Swinburne (Australia) but I was not able to find *online* Masters programs, only resident programs.

- Auburn University: http://www.cla.auburn.edu/mtpc/
- Swinburne University: http://courses.swinburne.edu.au/courses/Master-of-Information-Technology-I091/international

Online Certificate Programs Only

- Brooklyn College: http://www.prismnet.com/~hcexres/brooklyn/index.html
- Louisiana Tech University: http://www.latech.edu/tech/liberal-arts/english/html/technical_writing/courses_offered.shtml
- Techwriter-Certification.com: http://www.techwriter-certification.com/
- UC Berkeley Extension: http://extension.berkeley.edu/spos/techcom.html (Professional Sequence, not a certificate)
- UC San Diego Extension: http://extension.ucsd.edu/programs/index.cfm?vAction=certDetail&vCertificateID=113&vStudyAreaID=13
- UC Santa Cruz Extension Silicon Valley: http://www.ucsc-extension.edu/programs/technical-writing

Attend an STC Meeting for $3

Students who are non-members are welcome to attend our meetings at the student-member rate. In October, we are hosting a panel on management; in November, Tom Aldous from Adobe will talk to us about the latest and greatest from Adobe.

Build Your Portfolio

Even if you are not yet working in the technical communication field, you can start building a portfolio by writing for *Ragged Left*. We need writers for articles and columns. If you are curious, email *Ragged Left* at newsletter@berkeley-stc.org.

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Employment & Training

Tips on Reading the STC Salary Database

by Gwendolynne Barr

If you haven't heard, the STC came out with its 2010-2011 salary database in August. It provides salary data across industries and geographies, based on Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), so you can figure out where your skills may be worth the most.

One Report, Three Spreadsheets, A Free Excerpt, and a Podcast

There are four parts to the STC Salary Database: three Excel workbooks of statistical data (the spreadsheets) and one PDF that includes all the data in static tables plus an analysis of what it all means (the report). The advantage of the spreadsheets is that they allow you to play with the data by applying functions, highlighting, sorting, etc.

All members pay the same rate of $10 per part or $30 for all four. Because the report has all the data that is in the spreadsheets, you can order it for $10 and get everything you need. By the way, you have to go through the ordering process to see the member rate—at some point, you are asked to login.

To pique your interest, STC published a free excerpt. They also produced a podcast with host Kevin Cuddihy, Richard O'Sullivan, who wrote the database report, and Mark Clifford, former president of the STC and owner of the employment agency, Clifford Sells.

Interpreting the Data

There are many ways to interpret distributed data. The report recommends that you start by reading a short BLS document with a long title: "How Jobseekers and Employers Can Use Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) Data during Wage and Salary Discussions." How Jobseekers explains some basic statistical concepts and the effect of industry and location.

Even so, the beginner may need a bit more. In this article, I focus on how to interpret the mean and the median. Using the free excerpt, I explain how it is important to look at an entire distribution because both statistics can sometimes be unreliable on their own. The aim is to help you read the Salary Database more effectively.

The Mean and the Median

The **mean** is the average value of a set of numbers. For example, the mean of {1,1,2,5,6} is 3: the sum of the set is 15, divided by five (because there are five values) equals 3.

The **median** is the value in the middle of a sorted distribution. Say you have the following set of values: {1,1,2,5,6}. The median is 2 because it sits between {1,1} and {5,6}. If you have an even distribution of values, the median is the mean of the middle two. For example, the median of {1,1,2,3,5,6} is 2.5 because the two middle values are {2,3} and their average is 2.5.

The median represents the 50th percentile of a data set. That is, 50% of the values in that set fall below it. If the median salary is $80,490, then 50% of all wage earners in that set make less than that (and 50% make more). If $113,540 is the 90th percentile then 90% make less than this number (and 10% make more).

In fact, the values above are the 2010 salaries for technical writers in the Utilities industry (across the U.S.) which you can see on page 70 of the free excerpt. What it means to you is that if you are a senior technical writer in the Utilities industry, you can expect to earn around $114K.

The median is often a useful summary statistic that avoids being skewed by outlier data. For example, if nine of ten people make $10K per year (where "K" = thousand), and one makes $5 million, the mean is a deceptive $509K and the median a sensible $10K. That one person who earns $5 million is an outlier and is skewing the mean. The median is more meaningful in this case because you know that you have a % chance of earning $10K. In fact, you have 90% chance of earning $10K.

Wage Distribution Example 1

Let us take a quick look at the document, "How Jobseekers." The first example demonstrates the value of looking at an entire distribution rather than relying on the mean or median (or the standard error which we will not address here).

Chart 1 shows us that film and video editors are paid the lowest in the 10th percentile and the highest in the 90th percentile. This means that if you are a junior film editor, you probably make one of the lowest salaries of everyone across all of the occupations in this sample; but if you are *senior* film editor, you probably make one of the highest salaries.

The range of salaries for film and video editors, then, is highly variable. By contrast, salaries for signal and track repairers are the least variable because the difference between those paid in the 10th percentile and those in the 90th is the smallest when compared to the other occupations.

Wage Distribution Example 2

Now let us return to page 70 of the free excerpt and compare salaries in the Utilities and Entertainment industries. The table on this page is entitled, "2-Digit NAICS Economic Sectors (Annual)."

> NAICS stands for "North American Industry Classification System" and is one of many industry taxonomies. The NAICS salary table displays 2010 salaries for technical writers across sectors. Top level-industries are often referred to as sectors. For example, Utilities is a sector that is composed of multiple industries: Electric, Natural Gas, and Water. If you work for Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) in San Francisco, CA, your top-level 2-digit sector code is **22** for Utilities, and within this grouping, your more specific code is **22**1121 for Electric Power Generation.

The average salary for a technical writer in these two industries is roughly $77K. But the median salary for a writer in Utilities is $80K and $67K in Entertainment—that's a difference of $13K. The median tells us that 50% make $80K or less in Utilities but only $67K or less in Entertainment. If their medians are so different, why are their averages so similar?

Utilities	Entertainment	Distribution
$79,570	**$75,470**	**mean**
$48,150	$36,310	10th percentile
$63,390	$53,210	25th percentile
$80,490	**$67,470**	**50th percentile (median)**
$99,910	$87,350	75th percentile
$113,540	**$116,710**	90th percentile

As in our earlier example about the nine who make $10K and one who makes $5 million, the Entertainment mean is skewed and artificially high. Look at the 90th percentile. Even though every other percentile makes less in Entertainment than in Utilities, those in the 90th percentile make more. If the 90th percentile made a more proportionate $100K, the mean would be lower and more sensible. These data tell us that there are a lucky few in Entertainment who make more than everyone else and it is skewing the average. Hello, Oprah?

In sum, be careful when relying on any single statistic, including the median. Try to incorporate all of the available data to build a more accurate picture of each salary environment.

Gwendolynne Barr is a technical writer at Thomson Reuters in San Francisco.

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Upcoming Programs

October: The Management Perspective

Panel: Van Shackelford (EFI), Valerie Steele (NetSuite), and Katherine Wenc (Apple)

Date: Wednesday, October 12, 2011, 7:00-8:30pm

Location: Highlands Country Club, 110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

This month we are pleased to host a panel of managers of technical communication groups from around the Bay Area. They will tell us about the challenges they face, what types of changes face them in today's market, and what skills and abilities they value most in the people they manage.

We've asked them to think about questions like these:

- What are the biggest challenges you face? (What keeps you up at night?)

- What is the biggest change you see coming over the next 12 to 24 months?

- If you could add one skillset to your team, what would it be?

- What do you value most, from people on your team?

- What changes can technical writers, editors, and other team members make, to help technical publications groups be successful today?

- What question have we forgotten to ask, that we should be asking you?

Join us to learn from these managers. Find out what issues they face in managing technical publications groups today, and learn what qualities and expertise they need from their teams, to be successful. There will be time for questions, answers, and discussion.

Panel

Van Shackelford worked his way up from Novice Technical Writer out of San Jose State University, to Director of Publications at both Visa International and later at Aircraft Technical Publications. He was the President and sole proprietor of Vash Consulting, a Technical Writing company, for 7 years and is currently Manager of English Technical Communications at EFI, Inc. in Foster City. Van holds a B.S. degree in Organizational Behavior from the University of San Francisco.

Valerie Steele has been a manager of small Technical Publications teams for over 15 years. She has extensive experience managing remote technical writers and enjoys the different perspectives and cultural diversity each writer brings to the job. She has worked with localization of technical documentation but still has a lot to learn. Valerie has been a Senior Member of STC since 2000.

Katherine Wenc has been Developer Publications Manager at Apple since 2001. She manages writers who produce reference documentation and conceptual guides for the iOS, Mac OS X, Safari, and iAd JS Developer Libraries. This work includes coordinating with cross-functional teams to devise documentation strategies and interacting with editors and art directors to ensure adherence to departmental standards and guidelines.

Prior to Apple, Katherine was Technical Writing Manager at Avaya/Lucent and worked as a technical writer at ViewStar, cc:Mail, and other technology companies. Her first job in

California was Press Research Assistant for California Governor Jerry Brown, in the second term of his first administration.

Katherine studied Science Communications at Boston University School of Public Communication and received her Bachelor of Science, in Biology, from Simmons College. She currently lives in Berkeley with her pampered pets Glinda and Teresa and travels to the East Coast frequently to visit family and catch the latest Broadway plays.

November: Tom Aldous from Adobe

Speaker: Presentation by Tom Aldous

Date: Wednesday, November 9, 2011, 7:00-8:30pm

Location: Highlands Country Club, 110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

To be determined. Visit the Berkeley STC website for the latest updates!

Speaker

Tom Aldous is the Adobe Product Evangelist for the Technical Communications Suite, which includes FrameMaker and RoboHelp. Prior to joining Adobe, Tom was the President of Integrated Technologies, Inc. and implemented XML solutions at many Fortune 500 enterprises. Tom is a certified Adobe FrameMaker, Acrobat and LifeCycle Forms Instructor. He is a popular speaker and a well-respected technologist.

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2011-12 Technical Communication Competition Seeks Entries

by Patrick Lufkin

Touchstone, the Northern California technical communication competition, has issued a call for entries for the 2011-12 competition.

Touchstone primarily serves Northern California, but also accepts entries from elsewhere. Touchstone is accepting entries in the technical publications, technical art, and online technical communication categories. For detailed instructions on how to enter go to http://www.stc-touchstone.org

The competition takes its name from "touchstone," a fine-grained stone used by ore assayers. The term has come to mean any test or criterion by which the qualities of a thing can be recognized or measured.

Touchstone is co-sponsored by the Northern California chapters of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). Proceeds help support chapter activities and the STC Dr. Kenneth M. Gordon Memorial Scholarship, which provides grants to students enrolled in technical communication programs in Northern California.

Entries that win Touchstone's highest award levels go on to the STC international technical communication competitions.

Winning an award in an STC competition can bring recognition from professional peers and increased visibility with employers and clients. Toward this end, Touchstone holds a public

awards ceremony, and also offers to present awards at entrants' workplaces. These workplace presentations are often attended by entrants' peers, managers, and company executives.

Touchstone also seeks to advance the technical communication profession by providing useful feedback to entrants. Whether an entry wins an award or not, Touchstone's experienced judges provide feedback to help entrants improve their work. Many entrants regard this feedback as a major benefit of entering.

The deadline for entries is Saturday, October 1, 2011. Winners will be announced at a ceremony in January, 2012. For more information, visit http://www.stc-touchstone.org/2012Competition.html

Patrick Lufkin is a long-time STC member, is active in the Touchstone leadership, and is chair of the Dr. Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship for Technical Communication.

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Meeting Logistics

The Berkeley STC meets the second Wednesday of every month. Each meeting consists of an optional dinner, short business discussion, and an hour-long program on a topic of interest to technical communicators. All are welcome.

Pricing

We use three-tiered pricing:

- **Lowest prices**: Anyone for whom the higher prices are a hardship--students, unemployed, underemployed. This appears on our website as "student/low income." Anyone can choose to pay this price. We trust that nobody will abuse the privilege.

- **Discounted prices**: STC members.

- **Regular prices**: Non-members (except those who choose the student/low income price).

Former STC members who intend to renew when their finances improve can choose whichever of the three rates they feel most comfortable paying. We do not want anyone to feel shut out of the STC Berkeley community.

Reservations must be made at least one day prior to the meeting. Walk-ins also welcome, however, dinner may or may not be available. We order dinner for the number of reservations plus a few for walk-ins.

Program and Dinner (Reservation / Walk-in)

- Students/Low Income: $6/$10

- Members: $12/$16

- Non-members: $20/$24

Program Only (Reservation / Walk-in)

- Students/Low Income: $3/$10

- Members: $6/$10

- Non-STC-Members: $10/$14

Special cost notes

Non-members are always welcome to STC meetings at non-member rates.

Non-member students are welcome at the *member* student 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.

Location and Directions

Highlands Country Club 110 Hiller Drive Oakland, California. [Google Maps]

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

If you need a ride from BART, email rides@stc-berkeley.org at least one day prior to the meeting.
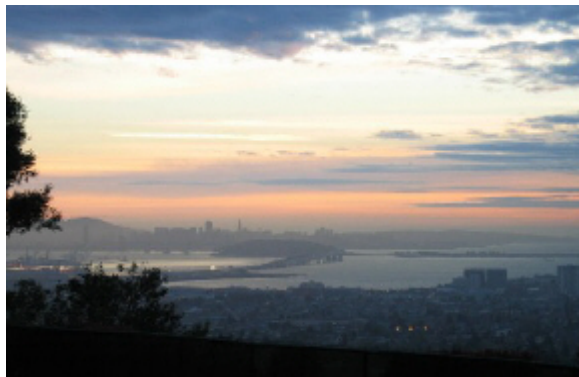
View from the Highlands Country Club
Photo courtesy of Rhonda Bracey

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Other Local STC Chapters

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

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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://mtdiabloastd.org

American Society of Indexers, Golden Gate Chapter. http://www.asindexing.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3616#golden

Association for Computing Machinery. http://www.acm.org

Association for Women in Computing. http://www.awc-hq.org

International Association of Business Communicators, San Francisco chapter. 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

Writer's UA. http://www.writersua.com

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Ragged Left is published four times a year at the beginning of every quarter.

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