

Ragged Left

The Monthly Newsletter for the Berkeley Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

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September 2002 Volume 16 No. 8

In this issue

Next Meeting

Usability problems cost companies millions of dollars each year in technical support, returned products, and lost sales. [Join us](#) on September 11, when Elaine Randolph presents *Usability 101*.

Proving Our Worth

"People don't understand what we do, how we do it, or why we do it." That is the first hurdle technical writers need to overcome in order to improve people's perceptions of the value of our services, according to Bonni Graham. Check out Joe Devney's in-depth recap of June meeting with Bonni Graham in the [Monthly Wrap](#).

News & Reviews

Keep up with the latest trends in the Chapter, Society and Industry with our [News](#) section. Ever wonder who is running the asylum? Check out Richard Mateosian's [review](#) of Alan Cooper's book *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity*.

Networking

A great way to get noticed in this tepid job market is to get out and about to other meetings. Visit our [networking links](#) to locate other opportunities.

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Next Meeting: Wednesday September 11, 2002

Usability 101
Elaine Randolph

Usability problems cost companies millions of dollars each year in technical support, returned products, and lost sales.

OCSTC Immediate Past President Elaine Randolph will discuss the importance of usability and how technical communicators can become usability advocates. Elaine will provide information about various usability methods and when to use them during the engineering lifecycle. She will also share success stories about how technical communicators have been gradually introducing usability methods at Unisys Corporation. Finally, Elaine will revert to her past life as a librarian and present a modified "book talk" so that you can read more about usability.

Elaine Randolph is a Senior Member of STC who has been a technical communicator for 20 years. When Elaine first began working with mainframe computers in the early 1980s, she became aware of how unintuitive the interfaces and documentation were. As the world gradually switched to the Windows operating system, she noticed that interfaces were still difficult to use and that she had to invest heavily in third-party documentation to be able to use software effectively. She has always been a user advocate, because she feels that we are all end users of products, computer-related and otherwise.

Join us and learn how to write for your users!

STC-Berkeley Chapter Meeting Details

Vo's Restaurant in downtown Oakland, is within easy walking distance to BART, is wheelchair accessible, and has both street and nearby garage parking.

Networking and conversation start at 6:00 p.m., and dinner at 6:30 p.m. If you want to eat dinner, reservations are required and must be received no later than 12:00 noon the Monday before the meeting. Reservations are necessary so that we can order the right amount of food. Do not contact the restaurant.

RSVP Online

Use your credit card to order meeting reservations via the chapter [Website](#). The meeting fee with dinner is \$18 for members, \$15 for student members, and \$21 for nonmembers. If you come for the program only, starting at 7:30 p.m., the fee is \$12 for members and nonmembers, and \$10 for students. If you are not eating, payments may be made at the door.

RSVP by Mail

Send checks to Berkeley STC, P.O. Box 1007, Berkeley, 94701.

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September 2002 Monthly Columns

Notes from the Editor

Learn the Latest News about the Ragged Left, STC-Berkeley's Monthly Newsletter, from Editor Jessica Livingston.

President's Message

A Few words on the state of the Chapter from President Kathryn Munn.

Director Sponsor Message

Catch the latest scoop from Region 8's Director-Sponsor Bonni Graham.

Monthly Recap

Each month a guest writer writes a recap of the previous meeting. Great way to refresh, or find out what you missed.

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**Editor's Column
September 2002**

Welcome to the new online *Ragged Left*. It's been an exciting opportunity for me, as editor, to redesign the *Ragged Left* from scratch. The new format allows me to bring you more interesting articles and resources than ever. The changes in the industry these past couple of years have brought new challenges to all technical communicators, and I hope that the *Ragged Left* will continue to provide you with means to enhance and expand your career.

As always, I'm in search of articles for our monthly columns, so peruse the list below to see if any of our needs match your skills. This fall I'm working on issues to submit for the National STC competition, so your work might be read by a wider audience. In the coming months we'd also like to expand the *Ragged Left* staff with more volunteers. If you're interested in contributing to our industry, while expanding your portfolio, contact [me](#).

See you at Vo's,

Jessica Livingston
Ragged Left Editor

Ragged Left Topic Needs

Below is a list of the articles we are most often searching for.

Monthly Recap

Each month we look for a volunteer to write a recap of the speaker's presentation at our monthly meeting. The length of that article should be around 350 words, although if it was a particularly engaging topic we can run a longer article. Attendance at the meeting would be necessary.

Resource Column

Every month we run a monthly resource column. Suggested topics include a review of software; new, new version, or related: a Website or other online resource related to our industry: books or other tools you found useful: a process, language, or class that was beneficial. To insure that your topic has not been recently covered, please clear the topic in advance with the [editor](#). Suggested length: 375-750 words

Introduce New Members

Periodically we write a paragraph or two about new members in our chapter. This involves contacting the names we provide, interviewing them about their interests and involvement in the industry, and meshing it all into a cohesive article. It will take a bit longer to get the responses back, so this feature takes more lead-time than most.

Feature Articles

We're open to articles on unsolicited topics.

Please send articles as an attached document, preferably in MS Word, with no formatting.

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President's Message

Greetings STC-Berkeley chapter members and friends! Welcome to the electronic *Ragged Left*. As planned, the STC-Berkeley Chapter newsletter is now available exclusively online. Congratulations and a big thank you to *Ragged Left* Editor Jessica Livingston for her hard work in taking the newsletter from print to Web. With this more flexible and cost effective medium we will be better able to deliver your monthly dose of news, resources, and the exceptional writings of professional colleagues. For the next few months we will be sending a postcard to remind you to go to the Web site for the Ragged Left. Give us some feedback about the newsletter and our new delivery model. Better yet, do some writing for the *Ragged Left*. Impress a potential employer with an article you wrote published on a professional organization's website. Contact Jessica by [email](#) to arrange for an article soon.

At our July meeting we reluctantly accepted the resignation of our Treasurer, Susan Marchionna. New job and personal life commitments demanded more of her attention. Susan did a fine job recruiting and training a replacement. Ben Lucas joined the Executive Committee as our new Chapter Treasurer just in time to assist in the annual budget planning process. Please join me in welcoming Ben to his new role when you check in at the next chapter meeting.

Be sure to make plans to attend the September 11, 2002 meeting. Visiting from Orange County, our speaker Elaine Randolph will be presenting *Usability 101*. Learn about the importance of usability to a company's bottom line and how you can become a usability advocate.

As always we want to hear about what the Chapter can do to support you in your professional goals as a technical communicator. [Email](#) me with your ideas, suggestions, and especially any ways you might be willing to contribute your own talent and time. See you at the September 11, 2002 meeting!

Kathryn Munn

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Director-Sponsor Column September 2002

To Conference or Not to Conference, That is the Question

Bonni Graham, Region 8 Director-Sponsor

Many of you have emailed me asking when the 2002 Region 8 Conference will be - enough so that I figured a column spent on it would not be inappropriate.

The best answer I can give you is: I don't know.

We have most of a committee ready to work on implementing a conference vision. We have a volunteer coordinator, Kathryn Munn, who knows what additional talent we need and is ready to organize and manage it. We have interested attendees. What we don't have is a conference manager. What we don't have is a location, or a theme (things usually at least decided on by a manager).

The original manager had to step down due to personal reasons. I applaud this person for that decision; recognizing when is a good time to step down is a mark of maturity, and is difficult to do. However, it leaves us without a leader. In an ironic twist on the old saw, we have too many Indians, and not enough chiefs.

The original location returned an unacceptable contract. I applaud the hospitality committee for rejecting this contract - it was the responsible choice.

I think a conference is still possible. Not in November, of course, our traditional timeframe. But a conference in late winter or early spring can be done. We have a startup budget, thanks to the exemplary work performed by De Murr, the Conference Manager for 2001's highly successful Guerilla Conference. We have equipment, also from this conference that can be carried forward. We have a web address (thanks, Jeff Randolph, for renewing that!) to publicize it.

We need a Conference Manager with a vision of theme and the willingness to see it through. It is not something you have to do alone. We also have an advisory committee consisting of the top Conference Management talent from past years. There has never been a better opportunity for someone to step forward and try running a conference. We have never been better prepared.

But it's up to you. The conference is a grassroots effort. It is not a requirement imposed from the top, it is not an event that "someone else" will start up. If you want a conference, someone will have to step forward and manage it.

Will it hurt the conference to skip a year? Not at all; we have before and we can again. However, I would love to see us continue this effective educational experience. Attendees routinely praise the knowledge and connections they acquire at the regional conference (and who, in this economy, can turn down connections?). And I can tell you from extensive personal experience that you get far more out of a conference you work on.

If you're interested in volunteering to help with the conference at any level, contact [Kathryn Munn](#) or [myself](#). We'll be happy to answer any questions you may have and get you set up to move forward on the safest management opportunity you'll ever have!

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Monthly Wrap

Each month rotating guest writers offer resources that benefit the technical writing industry. If there is a topic you would like to cover for a future edition, email the editor.

Proving our Worth

Bonni Graham at the June Berkeley chapter meeting

by Joe Devney

"People don't understand what we do, how we do it, or why we do it." That is the first hurdle technical writers need to overcome in order to improve people's perceptions of the value of our services, according to Bonni Graham.

Many of the attendees at the meeting already knew Bonni in her capacity as the Director/Sponsor of STC's Region 8. This evening, though, she was speaking as an experienced technical writer and the founder of a documentation company Manual Labour. Her presentation was titled, "*Psst! Wanna Buy Some Doc? Selling Content Development to Clients, Co-workers, and Management.*" She was there to talk about marketing for tech writers—often in the first person plural, to include both herself and her audience.

Marketing and selling don't come easy to technical writers, Bonni said. She cited several reasons, having to do with the profession and the types of people attracted to it—often introverts who are uncomfortable drawing attention to themselves. But we need to work on sales skills nonetheless—marketing ourselves and our work is important to our professional success. Too many people, she said, think that "we write documentation the way they wrote term papers in college," that is, late at night before the paper is due, with little or no preparation.

This perception of our writing skills and technical knowledge is inadequate. The work we do places us in a unique position between the engineering and marketing arms of a technical company, and the skills we bring to the job help us act as a bridge between the two areas.

More important, the value we add to the final product can contribute to its success or failure. Bonni said that the technical writing profession is at a crucial point in its history. To make her point, she first explained the "technology adoption bell curve." She described this as a bell curve with a long tail, that could be split into five stages: innovators, early adopters, mainstream, mature, and declining. She used the wired telephone as an example of a technology that has been through these stages in the last century, and is now declining as wireless phones gain more and more prominence.

The important point in this progression, she said, is the "chasm" between the early adopter stage and the mainstream stage. (This concept comes from Geoffrey Moore, a "guru of high-tech marketing," according to Bonni.) It is at this point that the technology must improve substantially in order to become widely adopted. The qualities that appealed to the first two groups—innovators and early adopters—will turn away mainstream buyers. New and slick and esoteric won't wash. Most people want the technology to work easily and well.

Technical communication as a profession is on the brink of this chasm, Bonni said. We have already sold our services to everyone who understands them. To cross the chasm, we need to create a "whirlwind of demand," to use Moore's phrase.

A company that had successfully crossed the chasm, said Bonni, is Microsoft. The use of Microsoft as an example we should emulate caused a noticeable discomfort in Bonni's audience. People objected that Microsoft reached its position by unethical means, by strong-arming, by monopolistic practices. This did not seem to be the message that people wanted to hear.

Bonni persisted. She acknowledged that Microsoft was "not a shining example," that it was indeed a monopoly, in trouble with the government for its marketing practices. But they weren't always like that. she pointed out. She wanted to talk about the earlier history of Microsoft. when

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[Networking](#)

Visiting other STC chapters and other writers' groups is a great way to expand your knowledge and networking circle.

[Employment](#)

It's a tight job market out there, so make sure that your resume gives you the competitive edge. Each month we offer free resume reviews before the monthly meeting. Book your appointment with our [Employment Manager](#). STC Berkeley also operates a free job list, which you can [sign up](#) for.

[Trends In Technical Writing](#)

Mytified about the industry changes? Check out East Bay Chapter President Susan Harlan's insights on how to keep the competitive edge in this month's [feature](#) article.

[Education](#)

UCLA Extension would like to extend a professional discount to STC members for one year, beginning with the Fall 2002 semester. The discount amounts to \$50 off an online course; this offer cannot be combined with another discount offer and is limited to one online course per quarter. For more information on the program choices, contact Program Representative [Helen Williams](#).

[Book Review](#)

One of the books referred to in Bonni Graham's [June presentation](#) at the Berkeley STC Chapter meeting was ***The Inmates Are Running the Asylum: Why High-Tech Products Drive Us Crazy and How to Restore the Sanity*** by Alan Cooper. Senior Member Richard Mateosian shares his thoughts on this popular book in our [book review](#) section.

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Catch up on the latest news from the Chapter, Society, and Industry

Chapter News

Annual Planning Initiative

During the meeting break in August, the STC-Berkeley Chapter Executive Committee met over two evenings to plan out a calendar of events and initiatives for the 2002-2003 fiscal year. Using the National STC Chapter Achievement Award guidelines as a planning tool, the Executive Committee mapped out a plan with the added benefit of qualifying the chapter for an achievement award at the annual National conference next year in Dallas. Recruited to the newly created job of Projects Manager, Gary Hayes will be joining the Executive Committee this year to track and document chapter accomplishments. Highlights of the plan for the year include:

- * Provide interesting and relevant presentations at chapter meetings.
- * Host a social event to recognize and celebrate the contributions of member volunteers
- * Publicize chapter activities and resources
- * Recruit and orient new members to the chapter
- * Co-host a series of [Leadership symposiums](#) with the other Northern California STC chapters
- * Recruit member participation and support the annual Touchstone competition
- * Submit the Ragged Left to the National competition

To successfully implement this ambitious plan we will need every member of the chapter to make a contribution. We are actively soliciting the talent and time needed for a successful year. Interested in supporting any of the initiatives outlined here? Have another idea you would like to see implemented? Contact an Executive Committee member and volunteer:

- President: [Kathryn Munn](#)
- Vice-president of Programs: [Paul Sinasohn](#)
- Vice-president of Membership: [Ruth Wright](#)
- Treasurer: [Ben Lucas](#)
- Secretary: [David McCoard](#)
- Employment Manager: [Madeleine Adkins](#)
- Education Manager: [Karen Hill](#)
- Web Manager: [David Alt](#)
- Projects Manager: [Gary Hayes](#)
- Ragged Left Editor: [Jessica Livingston](#)

Society News

Election Results

STC has announced the [results](#) of the 2002-2003 elections and provides an introduction and background information on all of the new officers.

50th Annual STC Conference

STC's 50th Annual Conference will be May 18-21, 2003, in Dallas, TX. STC's annual conference is the largest conference in the world focusing

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Chapter Activities

September

Monthly Meeting, Wednesday, September 11th

October

Monthly Meeting, Wednesday, October 9

November

Monthly Meeting, Wednesday, November 13

December

Leadership Symposium

Mills College, Oakland, Saturday, December 7

A day for local STC Members to meet and discuss, chapter-to-chapter networking, ideas, resource sharing and team building. This will be the first in a series of three related sessions. Anyone thinking of running for an office in the future or just interested in helping out would greatly benefit from this session.

No meeting Monthly Meeting in December -- Happy Holiday Season

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