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Ragged Left

September-October 2003
Volume 17 No. 5

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

In this issue

Next Meeting

This month Jack Molisani talks about portfolio and interview strategies. In October, it's Eunice O'Malley discussing how to be a successful contract technical writer.

News & Reviews

If you missed Lance Gelein's lively presentation on gearing up your career, be sure to read Chris Gripkey's recap. Check out the chapter's fiscal status with Treasurer Ben Lukas' lastest financial report.

The new *Chicago Manual of Style* was just released. Find out why you need this valuable guide. Guest writer Mike Tarrani reviews *Hot Text, Web Writing that Works* in this month's book review.

If you missed the 2003 national conference in Dallas, Susan Harlan can fill you in. It's not too soon to start planning for the 2004 conference.

Resources

This month we are just brimming over with great resources. Going an online writing theme this issue, visit the tips from MSNBC.com editor Jonathan Dube. Check out the new classes, job markets, and tools. More networking resources than ever before in in this month's networking links.

Monthly Wrap

guest writers   *meetings*
presentations
resources   speakers

Each month rotating guest writers offer a review of the monthly meeting program. This month Chris Gripkey offers a recap of the September meeting.

September Wrap STC-Berkeley

Do you want to know how to find a good job in this fickle economy? If so, you're not alone. There were about 20 people who came to hear former STC president Lance Gelein's lively presentation on "Getting Ready for Your Career," which was brimming with useful job-seeking advice for the green college graduate and the veteran work horse, and everyone in-between.

The first part of the program involved defining the role of the technical communicator, which is as important as it is basic. Simply put, if we can't articulate our own core competencies, we have little hope of selling ourselves to potential employers. Gelein offered this concise definition of technical communicator: "An information intermediary biased towards the needs of the end-user." He went on to list the skills we should make known to potential clients, including the ability to communicate information to the end-user, the ability to identify user requirements, and the ability to specify requirements needed for the technology communicator and the end-user to be successful.

What fields of work, you may ask, need such talent? As Gelein puts it, "Every Field!" Although it may be true that most people have traditionally associated technical communicators with software companies, nowadays no field is left untouched by our profession. If you require proof, take a look at Gelein's career map, and you will discover a range of fields that will at once amaze and overwhelm you.

Given how many options there are, the question we should ask ourselves is, What field should we pursue? Or, Where is our passion? If your mind has just gone blank from considering a response, and not the good kind of blank that Buddhists talk about, that's all right You can find inspiration in many places. Gelein recommends reading newspapers, checking websites such as Monster and Dice, talking with friends and colleagues, joining networking groups and getting involved with organizations. It's also important to get in the habit of telling people what you do, and saying what you are interested in knowing more about. Sometimes casual conversations, even with strangers, will lead to great job opportunities. One of Gelein's best contracts, which lasted over 2 years, evolved from a conversation he had with someone he met on an airplane. You just never know.

It is also an excellent idea to pay attention to current trends. If you notice new products, ideas or technologies being used or sold, you are probably on to something. From what Gelein has seen, the following fields are hot right now: biotech industries, medical systems, medical drug research, manufacturing, security and defense. For every field you consider, ask yourself, "How can I fit in? What information products or training requirements are needed? Is THIS interesting to me?"The

Financial Report

budget treasurer *income*
fiscal summary cash

In spite of a decrease in membership, the financial situation of the Berkeley Chapter of the STC is stable. By converting the *Ragged Left* to an online format, we've eliminated the largest expense to the chapter— the monthly printing and mailing of the newsletter. In this fiscal year, the Berkeley Chapter is acting as treasury for the ongoing series of Leadership Conferences, and of the general Region Eight Conference in Las Vegas in July of 2003.

Chapter Treasurer Ben Lukas is preparing a budget to guide the activities of the STC for the next fiscal year, which started in July, 2003. He and the executive board welcome the input of any Berkeley Chapter member who may wish to contribute constructive ideas. To share any ideas or questions, email Ben.

Summary of Income, Expenses, Cash, and Liabilities
For Fiscal Year 2002-2003 through June 2003

INCOME

Dues refund from Society	$5,760.00
Meetings	$3,681.00
Seminars	$2,500.00
Other - Region 8 Conference Registrations	$7,503.55
Total Income	**$19,444.55**

EXPENSES

Newsletter	$287.66
Seminars	$1,952.65
Scholarship awards	$500.00
Other awards, prizes, or gifts	$720.98
Exec committee	$793.11
Bank fees / credit card fees	$1,087.77
Website	$735.77
Miscellaneous	$48.92
Total Expenses	**$10,945.55**
CASH BALANCE AT END OF FISCAL YEAR	**$16,127.05**

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Book Review

read
write   resources   STC
opportunity   share

Chicago Manual of Style
University of Chicago (Editor), Preface by Margaret D. Mahan

Hardback: 957 pp
ISBN: 0226104036

New Chicago Manual of Style Invites New Users
from *Writing That Works*

Long called the editor's bible, *The Chicago Manual of Style* has targeted editors working in scholarly publishing and intimidated many writers and editors working in other areas. Civilians found it most useful as a doorstop.

The 15th edition still serves its special audience, but run-in subheads, simpler wording of entries and a more comprehensive (and comprehensible) index make it easier and more inviting for all writers and editors to use. Others should approach with caution.

The University of Chicago Press editors also did considerable updating, including integrating online publishing throughout the text, providing extensive guidance on citing electronic resources, rewriting the chapter on preparing mathematical copy and abandoning some style recommendations that didn't "catch on."

For a list of many of the rule changes, visit the new Web site. It also contains several useful features, including a continually updated Q&A, an extension of the FAQ that was on the UCP site. If you can't find the answer to a style question in the 956-page book, ask the editors.

UCP managing editor Anita Samen says book and journal editors worked together as never before in updating the manual, and the staff also called on an outside advisory board for the first time. Samen also stresses the attention she gave to style questions coming to UCP in calls, letters and e-mail. (The 15th prefers e-mail, Web and Internet.)

The manual is online, or soon will be, and the CD version will come out in about a year.

For editors, *The Chicago Manual of Style* remains an indispensable reference book.

A review of the 15th edition and an interview with Anita Samen appear in the August 2003 issue of

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Book Review

read write resources STC opportunity share

Book Review
By Mike Tarrani

*Hot Text: Web Writing that Work*s
by Jonathan Price, Lisa Price
Paperback: 512 pages
ISBN: 0735711518

There are only a few books about writing that I consider classics, and despite the relative newness of this one, it qualifies.

First, the advice on writing online text is on the mark, especially with respect to organizing your message and presenting it with impact. Much of the advice can also be effectively used in paper-based documents. I particularly liked the way the authors presented punctuation because in paper-based text a mark such as a colon is easy to spot, whereas on a monitor it's lost. I've since begun using a dash instead of a colon when developing online content and that small piece of advice works where a colon does not. Of course there are literally hundreds of other tips and advice that will combine to make your content readable and understandable.

Second, the way the authors show you how to organize your thoughts, distill them into a coherent and succinct message, and how to present that message is a strategy that anyone who develops online content needs to carefully read and heed.

Finally, this book covers much more than how to write—it also gives excellent advice on a full range of related topics, including search engine placement using meta tags, humanizing the technical nature of web pages (such as making URLs easy to read and remember for non-technical users), and how to structure your content to find items of interest. The latter extensively uses principles from Information Mapping©. One disappointment was the omission of any mention of Robert Horn, the inventor of Information Mapping©, from the extensive list of cited references and recommended reading because the authors' approach is closely aligned to much of Horn's work.

If you're developing online content you cannot afford to pass this book up. Mine is a constant deskside companion and is likely to remain so for years to come.

Used with the permission of Mike Tarrani, a technical consultant who can be reached via his website.

News

region 8 updates stc
Chapter News industry

National Conference Recap
by Susan Harlan, East Bay Chapter

The 2003 STC Annual Conference in Dallas, Texas offered new insights into the current state of technical communications worldwide. We're in a time of rapid change and new demands, so it was important to hear the speakers and talk with other chapter leaders about our profession.

The conference noted the evolution of our role-we're now calling ourselves "technical communicators" instead of just "technical writers." In the near future, we may refer to ourselves as "communicators" and omit "technical" because it will become redundant: in today's technical world, everything we write about will be technical-if not the product, then the medium. Bits of Wisdom

A panel session titled "If I'd Known Then What I Know Now" provided excellent information. Our Region 8 Director Sponsor Bonni Graham, and Lance Gelein, past president of STC and member of the Sacramento Chapter, were among the panelists.

The panel provided the following bits of wisdom:

If you want work samples, include a statement to this effect in your contractor's agreement.

When a work environment with document reviewers is out of control, consider various options:

- Create a documentation plan. Be sure there is agreement on the document reviewers, time frame, and review criteria.
- Send the document to the reviewers with a cover letter stating your expectations.
- Find out who will serve as the point of contact, the one who will make the decision when six edits come in with different technical answers.

When the deadline is impossible to meet, provide some alternatives:

- Calculate the full-time equivalent (FTE) or number of hours to do a job.
- Use metrics and be wary of using standard numbers. You must know your customer's industry because writing times vary.
- For example, writing procedures for aviation requires 13 hours per page while software requires 4 to 8 hours per page. Be sure to add a little extra for unforeseen circumstances.

In making career choices:

News

region 8   updates   stc
Chapter News   industry

September-October 2003

Catch up on the latest news from the Chapter, Society, and industry. For more information about STC, the Chapter, and contact information for our officers, visit our directory section.

Chapter News

Chapter Financial Report

Chapter Treasurer Ben Lukas delivers an updated look at the Chapter's financial status.

New Chapter Members

by Rob Peterson, VP of Membership

Please welcome new Berkeley members Jerry Franklin and Elliott Stewart.

Jerry is a Brooklyn native who, after a handful of careers, a couple dozen urban addresses, several brushes with fame, and (thankfully) just one wedding, has finally settled down in the Bay Area. He's spent most of the last decade providing new media content for a variety of failed high-tech startups and voracious corporations. He's now happily engaged as the lone tech writer for ZANTAZ, a small private software company in Pleasanton. His specialty du jour is end-user software and system documentation.

Jerry graduated from Northwestern University, lives in Alameda with his wife, two dogs, and two cats, and has had the good fortune of enjoying many memorable temporary occupations, including, improvisational comedy in Chicago, singing at Carnegie Hall with the Chicago Symphony Chorus and Orchestra, and working at the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles directly for Hugh Hefner.

Elliott is returning to STC. Elliot has lived in Alameda and been a technical communicator for almost 20 years. He now works as a consultant for web design and development, graphic design, and technical writing/editing/illustration.

In addition to Jerry and Elliott, William Abernathy, Karen Brothers, Eileen Drapiza, Mark Dugger, Beth Lamont, Kelly Lang, Anthony Mancuso, and Richard Wallis all joined the Berkeley Chapter this Summer.

Some of our new members are new or returning to STC and others have transferred from another chapter. I'll be highlighting other new chapter members in the next edition of the *Ragged Left*.

Society News

Resources

employment Classes
Tools
networking conferences Books

Opportunities and articles to enhance your skills and job search.

Jumping into the School Writing Pool
There is a growing market that many technical writers have never considered. Sacramento Chapter's Allison L. Shaw and Jenni Helfrich guide you to the edge of the pool.

Writing for the Web
MSNBC.com editor Jonathan Dube offers some tips and pointers for writing for online communications. In other web writing resources, some of the best tips for web writing to ever appear in *Writing That Works* have been consolidated into this new report.

Books and Software
Every month we look for guest writers to keep us updated on books, software and other resources for our industry. This month Guest writer Mike Tarrani reviews the definitive guide to developing online content, *Hot Text, Web Writing that Works.* You'll also want to read up on the latest edition of the Chicago Manual of Style that just came out this summer.

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.

Networking
It really is all about who you know. Networking is important tool in our industry. Before you head out to visit other chapters, visit our networking links to locate the opportunities. This month we found some new online resources as well. If you're tired of driving all over the Bay Area to network, the Silicon Valley Chapter has started some new online special interest groups (SIGs).

Education
UCLA Extension is pleased to offer a $50 discount for STC members enrolling in online courses in the Technical Communication, a 9-course certificate program. Fall quarter courses begin in October 2003.

Courses include:

- Foundations Skills of Technical Writing, 10/9 to 12/11
- Technical Writing, 10/7 to 12/9
- Technical Editing, 10/8 to 12/3