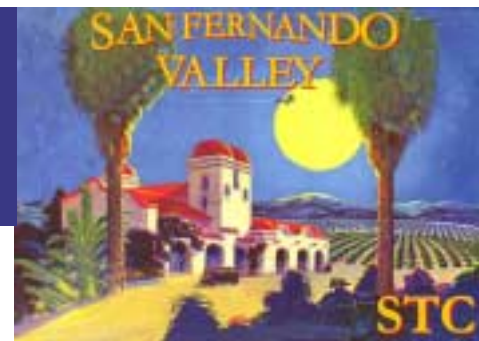


VIEWPOINT

Newsletter of the San Fernando Valley Chapter



Mark Bloom

Contents

January Meeting Preview	Right and page 5
What's In It For Me -	
Region 8 Conference Report	2
The Case for Short Words	3
Chapter Elections on the Horizon	5
Chapter Survey Results	6
Member Websites	6
Adult School Classes	6
Are You a Professional?	7
Usability on a Shoestring	7
Surfer's Advisory - ALERT!	8
STC Authors Have	
Web Opportunity	8
Chapter Contacts	9

Calendar

December 6 – Administrative Council Meeting at Nico's Family Restaurant, 7166 Shoup (at Sherman Way) Canoga Park, 6:30 p.m.

No Dinner Meeting in December

January 10 - Administrative Council Meeting at Weiler's West Hills Deli, 22323 Sherman Way, Canoga Park, 6:30 p.m.

January 22 - Dinner Meeting - Mark Bloom, details at right. The Odyssey Restaurant, Granada Hills. More details on page 5.

January Meeting Preview

Zen and the Art of Online Help

by Mark H. Bloom, Immediate Past President, Orange County Chapter, and Award Winning Help Author

You wanted – or were forced – to write online help, so you learned how to use a help-authoring tool. That's like learning how to write poetry by reading a Microsoft Word manual.

Now you are ready to learn a new way to approach online help development. Mark Bloom will teach you a working knowledge of Zen and how it applies to technical communication. He will present techniques that will reshape how you think about online help. He will provide help options you might have missed. He will leave you with a sense of well-being and optimism. He will do all this without leaving his body.

His presentation is not hands-on, and it's not platform-specific or product-specific. Still, in a Zen-like way that makes the ordinary extraordinary, Mark employs samples and stories, sprinkled with wit and wisdom, that have implications to all facets of technical communication. He introduces, for example, the concepts of information exchange, information transfer, and knowledge engineering.

And of course there is his advice for online help.

Mark addresses the problems of most online help systems. He discusses the theory behind how people learn and how online help fits that model. He focuses on the theoretical skills and intrinsic knowledge that help authors need to produce a help system that meets the needs of its users. Mark's goal is to make help authors aware of their many options, their many challenges, and the enormous impact they can have on their product and their company.

Using the Zen concepts Mark teaches, you will learn how to overcome the limitations implicit in online help to develop truly useful and creatively effective online help. Insights will emerge. Light bulbs will begin to flicker. You might even experience an epiphany.

Mark Bloom is an award-winning online help author with over ten years' experience delivering information online. Until recently, Mark managed a Creative Services team for America Online, Inc., designing the user interface for their You've Got Pictures product. He is taking a year off to pursue a creative writing career. An active member of the Society for Technical Communication, he has presented at international events and is the Immediate Past President of the Orange County chapter.

Originally from Salem, Massachusetts (where independent thought once inspired hangings), he moved to California in 1995, where he and his wife enjoy the climate and the culture. He has been writing professionally since 1988, and he has contributed to four books, the latest of which (*Writing: A Professional Life*, published by Allyn & Bacon) is now available.



What's In It For Me?

A report on the Region 8 Conference
by *Dennis Wilson, Secretary-Treasurer*

I attended the Region 8 conference Nov. 2-3 in Irvine, and I felt it was very useful. The total attendance was small (150 or so), but there were still several topic sessions to choose from at each time slot. Over the two days, I attended seven out of eight sessions and enjoyed three great meals with plenty of networking opportunities.

STC and WinWriters conferences are places for me to check out the latest trends in the field and learn from others' experiences. I expand my knowledge about areas of work that I'm not directly involved in, and I pick up useful advice about everything from using particular tools to polishing my professional portfolio.

At this conference, I learned something about Active Server Pages from Jeff Randolph, an accomplished webmaster who presented an introduction to that topic. I also heard Mark Bloom talk about developing online help; Mark is an acknowledged expert in that arena.

I attended a session by Maria Flores about documenting Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems. I had come across the terms "J.D. Edwards" and "SAP" but knew almost nothing about them. Now I have a clear idea about them, which may be helpful the next time I am interviewing for a position.

Susan Gallagher gave a very thorough presentation about documenting object-oriented code, which is also known as Application Programming Interface (API) documentation. I have not yet encountered this area of work in my own career, but now I know enough to talk intelligently about it, in broad terms.

Sharon Burton-Hardin gave her "Getting Good PDF" presentation, which I attended to find out any new twists since I last heard her talk, when she spoke to San Fernando Valley chapter on this topic more than a year ago. Acrobat 5 has been released since that time, and Sharon was able to incorporate the new version into her presentation.

I attended a panel discussion called "Contracting Survival Techniques," led by three experienced and successful contractors/business owners. They focused on the techniques for survival in a struggling economy, and I picked up some worthwhile tips.

Finally, I attended Lance Gelein's presentation called "Portfolio Bootcamp," in which he shared his guidelines for creating and using a professional portfolio. I will be able to improve my own portfolio by using a few of his tips, and it was interesting to compare Lance's viewpoint with Jack Molisani's on the same topic. I attended Jack's presentation at our local chapter a couple years ago.

The conference was also a good chance to renew professional friendships with a bunch of people I've met before, and to add several new contacts to my networking list. What more could a person desire?

Next year the Region 8 conference will be hosted by the Berkeley chapter at a hotel in Oakland. At this juncture, I believe I'd like to attend that.

The following was written by one of Dr. Lederer's 9th Graders and is referenced in the article at the right.

"What can you say to a boy who has left home? You can say that he has done wrong, but he does not care. He has left home so that he will not have to deal with what you say. He wants to go as far as he can. He will do what he wants to do.

This boy does not want to be forced to go to church, to comb his hair, or to be on time. A good time for this boy does not lie in your reach, for what you have he does not want. He dreams of ripped jeans, shirts with no starch, and old socks.

So now this boy is on a bus to a place he dreams of, a place with no rules. This boy now walks a strange street, his long hair blown back by the wind. He wears no coat or tie, just jeans and an old shirt. He hates your world, and he has left it." — *Charles Shaffer*

The Case for Short Words

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D

Judy Eisikowitz, Contributor, with Dr. Lederer's permission, from Region 8 Conference

When you speak and write, there is no law that says you have to use big words. Short words are as good as long ones, and short, old words — like sun and grass and home — are best of all. A lot of small words, more than you might think, can meet your needs with a strength, grace, and charm that large words do not have.

Big words can make the way dark for those who read what you write and hear what you say. Small words cast their clear light on big things — night and day, love and hate, war and peace, and life and death. Big words at times seem strange to the eye and the ear and the mind and the heart. Small words are the ones we seem to have known from the time we were born, like the hearth fire that warms the home.

Short words are bright like sparks that glow in the night, prompt like the dawn that greets the day, sharp like the blade of a knife, hot like salt tears that scald the cheek, quick like moths that flit from flame to flame, and terse like the dart and sting of a bee.

Here is a sound rule: Use small, old words where you can. If a long word says just what you want to say, do not fear to use it. But know that our tongue is rich in crisp, brisk, swift, short words. Make them the spine and the heart of what you speak and write. Short words are like fast friends. They will not let you down.

The title of this essay and the four paragraphs that you have just read are wrought entirely of words of one syllable. In setting myself this task, I did not feel especially cabined, cribbed, or confined. In fact, the structure helped me to focus on the power of the message I was trying to put across.

One study shows that twenty words account for twenty-five percent of all spoken English words, and all twenty are monosyllabic. In order of frequency they are: I, you, the, a, to, is, it, that, of, and, in, what, he, this, have, do, she, not, on, and they. Other studies indicate that the fifty most common words in written English are each made of a single syllable. For centuries our finest poets and orators have recognized and employed the power of small words to make a straight point between two minds. A great many of our proverbs punch home their points with pithy monosyllables:

- "Where there's a will, there's a way"
- "A stitch in time saves nine"
- "Spare the rod and spoil the child"
- "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush"

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

Nobody used the short word more skillfully than William Shakespeare, whose dying King Lear laments:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
 And thou no breath at all? . . .
 Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips.
 Look there, look there!

Shakespeare's contemporaries made the King James Bible a centerpiece of short words — "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good." The descendants of such mighty lines live on in the twentieth century. When asked to explain his policy to parliament, Winston Churchill responded with these ringing monosyllables: "I will say: it is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us." In his "Death of the Hired Man" Robert Frost observes that "Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in." And William H. Johnson uses ten two-letter words to explain his secret of success: "If it is to be,/It is up to me."

You don't have to be a great author, statesman, or philosopher to tap the energy and eloquence of small words. Each winter I asked my ninth graders at St. Paul's School to write a composition composed entirely of one-syllable words. My students greeted my request with obligatory moans and groans, but, when they returned to class with their essays, most felt that, with the pressure to produce high-sounding polysyllables relieved, they had created some of their most powerful and luminous prose. Here are submissions from two of my ninth graders:

For a long time we cruised by the coast and at last came to a wide bay past the curve of a hill, at the end of which lay a small town. Our long boat ride at an end, we all stretched and stood up to watch as the boat nosed its way in.

The town climbed up the hill that rose from the shore, a space in front of it left bare for the port. Each house was a clean white with sky blue or grey trim; in front of each one was a small yard, edged by a white stone wall strewn with green vines.

As the town basked in the heat of noon, not a thing stirred in the streets or by the shore. The sun beat down on the sea, the land, and the back of our necks, so that, in spite of the breeze that made the vines sway, we all wished we could hide from the glare in a cool, white house. But, as there was no one to help dock the boat, we had to stand and wait.

At last the head of the crew leaped from the side and strode to a large house on the right. He shoved the door wide, poked his head through the gloom, and roared with a fierce voice. Five or six men came out, and soon the port was loud with the clank of chains and creak of planks as the men caught ropes thrown by the crew, pulled them taut, and tied them to posts. Then they set up a rough plank so we could cross from the deck to the shore. We all made for the large house while the crew watched, glad to be rid of us.

— *Celia Wren*

You too can tap into the vitality and vigor of compact expression. Take a suggestion from the highway department. At the boundaries of your speech and prose place a sign that reads "Caution: Small Words at Work."

(See yellow box on page 3 for the other student contribution to Dr. Lederer's talk.)

January Chapter Meeting Location

San Fernando Valley Chapter's January meeting will be held **January 22, 2002** at The Odyssey Restaurants, 15600 Odyssey Drive, Granada Hills, CA 91344.

Telephone: (818) 366-5817 or 366-6444. **Time:** From 6:30 p.m. until about 9:00 p.m. **Topic:** Zen and the Art of Online Help by Mark Bloom, Immediate Past President of STC's Orange County Chapter. Please refer to page 1 for details.

Menu Choices: Chicken Breast with Light Chardonnay Cream Sauce OR Prime Rib of Beef with Garden Salad with Ranch Dressing, Vegetable Medley, New Red Potatoes, New York Cheesecake, Coffee, Tea, or Water.

Vegetarian alternate: Pasta Primavera (exclude vegetable medley and new red potatoes if you choose this option). **Cost:** \$20 for members and \$23 for non-members.

RSVP with your menu choice to Janie McKinney by January 17 at janie.mckinney@earthlink.net or (818) 707-1003. As always, if you make a reservation, you are responsible for the cost, whether or not you attend. Please also keep your own record of what you ordered.

Driving Directions: North on the **405** and take Rinaldi St. exit toward Rinaldi. Left on Sepulveda, left on Rinaldi, right on Blucher. After 3 blocks, left on Odyssey Drive.

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CHAPTER ELECTIONS ARE ON THE HORIZON

by Shirley Parker

I know some of you want to skip right over this article, but please don't! In January, we need to begin construction of a slate of candidates for the election of new chapter officers in April. This is **your** STC chapter and we invite you to step forward so that you will get what **you** need from chapter activities. Numerous benefits ensue from serving either as an elected chapter officer or volunteer chapter board member in STC. You'll have fun, learn new skills, and usually won't get fired if you make a mistake. You can even practice throwing your weight around or kicking butt, though you may find yourself hanging on a doornail as a result. In addition to the personal and professional growth and contacts from which you can choose to learn, you'll have many opportunities to help the other members of this chapter, as well as other STC folks you'll meet. And if there isn't an altruistic bone in your body, perhaps now is the time for you to begin growing that extra rib or two. For better or worse in this deeply-troubled economy, we're all in this industry together, until and unless something better comes along. Who knows when you yourself will be: the next individual laid off, the one needing networking support, the one looking for a local tech comm workshop, Photoshop® class, or help with software idiosyncrasies, or advice on dealing with a pointy-haired boss who just doesn't get it. And lest you think I'm discriminating, not all pointy-haired bosses are male. Do you see her in your mind's eye? I sure do, but she doesn't give me nightmares, not any more. I was confident of my writing abilities long before I became a technical communicator, but I've learned so much from STC in the past 5 years of service to the chapter that a pointy-haired boss is now just another bump in the road who has earned her own reward, whatever that may be.

Several board positions will be vacant this next time around, including those of Secretary/Treasurer and Newsletter Editor/Team. However, nominations or renominations will be accepted for **all** positions, including President, Vice President of Programs, Membership Secretary, Employment Liaison, Webmaster, Education Liaison, Hospitality Chairperson, and any other position that may currently escape my memory. There are no shoo-ins for the next term of office and, contrary to what some members apparently believe, there is no incumbent clique wanting to run the show. Far from it. The more fresh blood we have on the Administrative Council, the newer the ideas will be. The nominating committee hasn't yet been put together, so please let someone on the board know if you are interested in helping. If you want to run for office, or nominate a member for office, please contact Cathy Mills, our current chapter president at cmills@socal.rr.com. Any position for which there are neither nominations nor a sufficient number of write-in votes will remain unfilled next year.

Fall 2001 Chapter Survey Results

By Janie McKinney, VP Programs

When I became the Vice President of Programs for our chapter, I didn't have a clear idea about the details of the post. To bring myself up to speed on what I had gotten myself into, I visited the STC International Web site (www.stc.org) and read the job description. I learned that part of the Vice President of Programs' job is to survey the members periodically to find out how they think the chapter is doing and what changes they would like to see. I adapted the sample survey I found on the STC Web site and sent it out to all 92 STCSFV members on record at the time. A total of 39 members, or 42.4%, responded.

Among the things the survey revealed about us is that many of us are in our 40s and 50s and have been technical communicators 11 years or longer. Our members are sprawled out geographically all over Ventura County, San Fernando Valley, and parts of Los Angeles County. And—except for pockets of 6-8 members in Thousand Oaks and Woodland Hills—only 1 or 2 of us live or work in any one city. One thing that was clear as I studied the data is that we need to hold some of our meetings farther west to accommodate members who travel from Ventura County and the western part of San Fernando Valley. (And, yes, it's just a coincidence that I happen to live in Ventura County.)

Almost unanimously we prefer practice to theory. As a result, we expect our meetings to be useful rather than academic, full of practical tips that will improve the way we do our jobs. Most who responded stated that the most important benefits of STC chapter meetings are the networking (20) and the presentations (10). Most of us expressed the opinion that the chapter meetings are good, but they could be better. While I am your Vice President of Programs, I'll do my best to see if, working together, we can make them better.

The survey results in their entirety are being posted to our chapter Web site at www.stcsfv.org.

Member Web Sites

by Shirley Parker

[This subject was discussed at an administrative council meeting held earlier in the year, but there hasn't been space in the newsletter until now to publish the consensus of the council.]

As a courtesy to San Fernando Valley chapter members, our Webmaster, Al Needell will post a link from the chapter website to your home page/ website. If you are a member of the San Fernando Valley chapter of STC and would like to add your home page to this list, please e-mail your name and URL to SFVSTC Webmaster. Please be aware that this is a courtesy only. The chapter member website may or may not have anything to do with technical writing. We do not have any input into member home pages or websites. However, since we are a professional organization and represent national STC, member websites should not contain pornography or dating services or casinos or anything else likely to be objectionable and reflect poorly on STC's image. Currently, it is the webmaster's judgement that will determine if there is anything objectionable on the member website. Also, please be aware that an STC chapter website is a highly unlikely place for employers and/or recruiters to be looking for technical writing candidates. "Job catcher" websites will produce better results if the links are posted elsewhere, perhaps on www.headhunter.com via your resume or cv, or on similar sites. Even so, such websites, or those that seem to be a combination of job catcher and other member interests, may be linked from the chapter website at the sole discretion of the webmaster.

Adult School Classes

Simi Valley Adult School and Career Institute

3192 Los Angeles Avenue
(Blackstock Avenue and School Street)
Simi Valley, CA 93065
Telephone: 805.579.6200 or www.simi.tec.ca.us

Computer Graphics Center. Start anytime. AutoCAD, graphic design, multimedia, web design. Course fee \$195 (covers a four-month period). Daytime and Saturday morning classes.

El Camino Real-Canoga Park Community Adult School

Telephone: 818.888.1492 for detailed information or watch your mailbox for next semester's schedule of classes. Or visit www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/dace/El_Camino_Canoga_CAS/ (URL may not work.)

*Adobe Photoshop/Illustrator classes are taught at Canoga Park High School, 6850 Topanga Canyon Blvd, Canoga Park, and Hughes Adult Learning Center, 5607 Capistrano Avenue, Woodland Hills. Fee: About \$40 for 20 classes. **CAVEAT:** You must enroll in their Computer Operator/Literacy Course first, so this opportunity is for novices.*

If you are aware of other educational opportunities, please let us know so our chapter members can benefit.

ARE YOU A PROFESSIONAL?

This report has appeared on several websites. *The following short quiz consists of 4 questions and tells whether you are "qualified to be a professional". The questions are not difficult.*

1. How do you put a giraffe into a refrigerator? The correct answer is: Open the refrigerator, put in the giraffe and close the door. This question tests whether you tend to do simple things in an overly complicated way.

2. How do you put an elephant into a refrigerator? Wrong answer: Open the refrigerator, put in the elephant and close the refrigerator. Correct answer: Open the refrigerator, take out the giraffe, put in the elephant and close the door. This tests your ability to think through the repercussions of your actions.

3. The Lion King is hosting an animal conference. All the animals attend except one. Which animal does not attend? Correct answer: The Elephant. The Elephant is in the refrigerator. This tests your memory. OK, even if you did not answer the first three questions correctly, you still have one more chance to show your abilities.

4. There is a river you must cross. But it is inhabited by crocodiles. How do you manage it? Correct answer: You swim across. All the crocodiles are attending the Animal Meeting. This tests whether you learn quickly from your mistakes.

According to Anderson Consulting Worldwide, around 90% of the Professionals they tested got all questions wrong. But many preschoolers got several correct answers. Anderson Consulting says this conclusively disproves the theory that most professionals have the brains of a four-year-old.

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November Meeting Report

USABILITY ON A SHOESTRING

presented by Andrea L. Ames, STC International Board of Directors

Unfortunately, no report was received concerning the November meeting. However, it is said that about 15 chapter members gathered at the Sportsmen's Lodge in Studio City to hear the presentation by Andrea Ames that had been rescheduled from September 11. A number of San Fernando Valley chapter members were unable to attend the meeting, due to traffic and weather problems, as well as scheduling conflicts. The **Usability on a Shoestring** presentation, also given at our Region 8 Conference, is available on Andrea's website at www.ucentrics.com.

Strategies discussed within every phase of her Usability presentation include: Products are Hard to Use; How Usability Issues Affect Documentation; The Solution: Usability; Additional Product Characteristics That Affect Usability; Usability is Not...; User-Centered Design and Development Process; Most Companies Seem to "Get It" Backward; What Objections Have You Heard? How Do You Respond?; No Time, No Money, No Talent; Finding Out About Your Users; Getting More Involved In Design; Determining Whether Your Design is Usable; Guerrilla Tactics; When It's Impossible; and Finding Out More.

Andrea has 17 years' experience designing, developing, and producing usable technical and scientific information for products, software user interfaces, multimedia and online information systems, and print documentation. She is the owner of Ucentrics, a consulting firm that specializes in user-centered information architecture and design, interaction design, and usability. She can be contacted at www.ucentrics.com, which is on its way to completion, or at www.verbal-imagery.com. Her e-mail address is andrea@ucentrics.com and telephone number is 650.365.7520.

STC Authors Have Web Opportunity

The STC office website has a new section (www.stc.org/member_pubs.html) devoted to books about technical communication written by STC members. The site will accept listings for any such books that have an ISBN number and are available for sale in an online bookstore. These include but are not limited to Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com (or bn.com). There are several others.

To post a listing for your book, you'll need to visit http://www.stc.org/member_pub_form.html

Provide the following information:

- your name
- your e-mail address
- the title of your book
- an abstract of your book no longer than 50 words
- your book's ISBN number.

Note: STC reserves the right to review all information submitted. STC will only post information about books on technical communication that are sold in an online bookstore.

Upcoming Meetings

Do you have ideas for topics or speakers? Please let us hear from you!! We want to broaden our topic base. Do you know someone with an interesting occupation who would tell us how they started their own business, what red tape they had to deal with, where realistic funding is available in a tight economy, how they found a two-room office to lease, etc.? They don't necessarily have to be technical communicators to be relevant, but please, no home party plans.

Surfer's Advisory

ALERT ! BUSINESS TAX AMNESTY PROGRAM

For those chapter members operating a business in Los Angeles City (and you know how extensive those tentacles are), you need a business tax permit. LA currently has a poorly-publicized amnesty program that expires on December 31, 2001. Applying for amnesty means you pay back taxes and interest (retroactive to 1998), but avoid financial penalties and possible criminal penalties when LA begins its stated vigorous pursuit of those not in compliance. LA is apparently making no distinction between "regular" businesses and home businesses. Technical writers and editors seem to fall into the Professions/Occupations category, but you'll need to contact the Finance Department immediately at 213.368.7000 to meet the deadline. Check out the amnesty program first at <http://www.lacity.org/finance/offpr1tam.htm>. You'll have to click on another link from there to download the application.

If you haven't been following AB 63 (Cedillo), this enforcement by Los Angeles City is no doubt the result of Franchise Tax Board records being opened to cities in the state of California, effective January 1, 2002. AB 63 has been approved by the governor and passed and enacted by the legislature (in tandem with AB 205), but whether that means it's already signed into law is unclear. It's a somewhat complex situation, as usual, unless you enjoy plowing through legalese. However, our local reps and state senators seem to have no interest in turning it aside. AB 63 is scheduled for repeal after December 31, 2008 but if you believe that, there are also people willing to sell you ocean front property in Nevada. Once these things get on the books, they're generally there forever, and no one lives happily ever after, least of all writers.

You can read up on the assembly bill at www.sen.ca.gov. Click on Legislation and then enter the bill number in the search box. This brings up more than one bill; what you need was authored by Gil Cedillo (D-Los Angeles). LA City is pursuing its business tax enforcement regardless of the outcome of AB 63, of course.



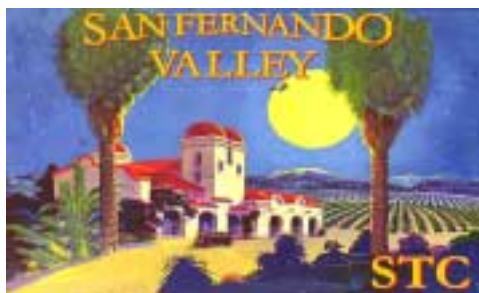
STC Mission Statement

Designing the Future of Technical Communication.

About STC

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is the world's largest organization for technical communicators. Its current membership of 25,000 includes writers, editors, illustrators, printers, publishers, photographers, educators, and students.

Dues for 2002 are \$125 per year, plus a one-time enrollment fee of \$15 for new members. Student members pay \$50 per year, with no enrollment fee. **Please** check the website: <http://www.stc.org> for more details. Membership is open to anyone engaged in some phase of technical communication, interested in the arts and sciences of technical communication, and in allied arts and sciences. See next page for address and telephone numbers.



San Fernando Valley

Chapter Contacts

President – Cathy Mills
(818) 701-7356
cmills@socal.rr.com

VP Programs – Janie McKinney
(818) 707-1003
janiemckinney@earthlink.net

VP Membership – Tom Berryman
(818) 348-0639
tomberryman1@excite.com

Secretary/Treasurer/PR – Dennis Wilson
(818) 379-8400
dwpwrite@pacbell.net

Employment Liaison – Noel Thorp
(805) 484-0620
noel.thorp@worldnet.att.net

Education Liaison – Art Ringwalt
(818) 840-9592
arthur122@earthlink.net

Newsletter – Shirley Parker
(818) 716-7153
saparker@pacbell.net

Hospitality/Greeter – Judy Eisikowitz
(818) 228-3112
judy.eisikowitz@blueshieldca.com

Webmaster – Al Needell
aneedell@nortelnetworks.com

Our Website – <http://www.stcsfv.org>

Region 8 Website information –
<http://www.stcregion.org/region8>

Society for Technical Communication
901 N. Stuart St., Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1822
(703) 522-4114 / (703) 522-2075(fax)
<http://www.stc.org>

Our STC Neighbors (In alphabetical order)

Inland Empire chapter — Brigitte Ohlig
— ohlig@bohdototech.com

Los Angeles chapter — Betsy Suttle,
President (310) 478-5478
bsuttle615@aol.com
<http://www.lastc.org>

Orange County chapter — Elaine
Randolph (949) 380-6128
elaine.randolph@unisys.com
<http://www.ocstc.org/main.htm>

San Diego chapter — Kris Oden,
President koden@invitrogen.com
<http://www.stc-sd.org>

San Gabriel Valley chapter — Kathy
Broman, President (818) 951-7301,
kabroman@aol.com — <http://www.stcsgv.org>

San Luis Obispo chapter — Regina
Brown, President (805) 546-8671
castano@fix.net, or Jan Grammer,
Secretary jkdaley@thegrid.net

Santa Barbara chapter — LeeAnne
Kryder, President
kryder@humanitas.ucsb.edu
<http://www.sbstc.org>

ISBN = International Standard Book Number

Viewpoint

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Shirley Parker, Editor
22909 Ingomar Street
West Hills CA 91304-4513
tel (818) 716-7153
fax (818) 716-7958
email: saparker@pacbell.net

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