



society for technical communication Viewpoint

Recap of January Meeting

“The Value of STC” by William C. Stolgitis, Executive Director, STC

Reviewed by Janie McKinney, SFV Newsletter Team

On January 17, 2001, at The Castaway in Burbank, William C. Stolgitis, Executive Director of STC, addressed a joint meeting of the San Gabriel and San Fernando Valley chapters. During his informative and insightful presentation, Stolgitis held up a mirror to show us who we are and what we find important in our STC membership. Citing several polls and surveys, Stolgitis painted this vivid profile of the typical STC member. If audience reaction is a reliable indicator, many of us recognized ourselves.

Personal Characteristics

Typical STC members see themselves as artistic and investigative. They view themselves as expressive, intuitive, and complex, preferring to work alone in fields that require originality. They enjoy gathering information and formulating theories, and they tend to see themselves as “persistent, self-controlled, analytical, scholarly, and achievement-oriented.” They are more comfortable with words than with numbers. Their primary interests are writing, art, and science, but as a general rule shun business management, merchandising, and sales.

Motivation to Join STC

In a recent Gallup Poll of a number of professional societies, the reasons for joining were, in order, (1) keeping informed through journals and newsletters, (2) adding support to a group of



professionals, (3) developing professional contacts, (4) building reputation and career credentials, and (5) having a forum to express ideas. When the STC asked its members their reasons for joining, reason (2) dropped to last place, probably, as Stolgitis suggested, reflecting the independent streak that technical writers as a group evince.

Personal Involvement

A whopping 65% of the STC members surveyed characterized themselves as “not very active,” with 24% reporting themselves as “somewhat active” and 11% as “very active.”

Moreover, 45% of them said they had never attended a chapter meeting and probably never would. Another 24% said they attended one or two meetings a year, and 31% said they attended three or more meetings per year. These percentages have held steady over the past 15 years.

Attitudes about STC

The vast majority of those surveyed said that STC provides a venue for networking (93%), gives a positive

(Continued on page 6)

Contents

January Mtg Recap	Left
Director-Sponsor’s Column	2
February Meeting	3
Doer’s List	3
Designing Your Web Site for the Blind	4
eWriter in the Workplace Conference	5
PCC Scholarships	6
Chapter Contacts	7
San Luis Obispo Chapter	7
National Conference Locations	8
SETIathome	8

Calendar

February 20 - Dinner Meeting at the Radisson Hotel

(formerly the Chatsworth Hotel)
9777 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Chatsworth, 6:30 p.m.
See page 3.

March 1 - Administrative Council Meeting

at Denny’s, 8330 Topanga Cyn. Blvd., West Hills, 6:30 p.m.

March 20 - Dinner Meeting.

Presentation on advanced RoboHELP techniques by Silke Fleischer, eHelp Corp. Location: TBA

April 5 - Administrative Council Meeting

at Denny’s, 8330 Topanga Cyn. Blvd., West Hills, 6:30 p.m.

January 2001 Director-Sponsor's Column:

You Must Renew to Vote—Don't Miss Your Chance to Vote for the New DS!

by *Andrea L. Ames*

STC Region 8 Director-Sponsor (1998-2001)

(Excerpted comments only due to space limitations)

Happy New Year, everyone! If you've not already received it, there's an STC membership renewal form in the mail with your name on it. The sooner you renew, the sooner you'll get your 2001 STC election ballot. You can't vote if you aren't a member, and the "polls" close in March, so don't be late with your renewal form.

Here's how it works. By mid-March, all members who renewed their membership before February 28 will receive a ballot. All you have to do is read the ballot statements of all the candidates, and vote! You'll be voting for a new Second Vice President who will, according to STC bylaws, go on to become First Vice President, then President, and then Immediate Past President. You'll also vote for a new STC Treasurer—who will serve a two-year term—and two of the four members of the STC Nominating Committee.

The part of the 2001 election that affects each of us and our chapters most directly, however, is the election of a new Region 8 Director-Sponsor. As we learned in November during the US Presidential election, every vote DOES make a difference, and your new DS will be representing you for three years, so don't sit out this election! You have a difficult choice to make, as we have two excellent candidates: **Alison Reynolds**, from the New Zealand chapter, and **Bonni Graham**, from the San Diego chapter.

Alison Reynolds

Alison Reynolds has been a technical communication educator at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology in the South Island of New Zealand since 1995. Alison is a senior member of the New Zealand Chapter where she served as President and has been a competition judge for the last five years. She has presented papers at the Annual Conference in Anaheim in 1998 and the Region 8 conference in San Ramon in 1998, as well as attending the Annual conference in Seattle in 1996. Alison was fortunate enough to meet STC members and attend chapter meetings in the San Francisco area in 1998. Alison has developed the only online technical communication qualification in Australia: the Graduate Diploma of Technical Communication. This was a pioneering adventure five years ago when online education was just beginning. She is currently developing an online course in usability testing and a degree in Information Design.

When I asked Alison about her vision for Region 8 over the next 3 years, she said, "I'm very impressed by past Director-Sponsors' abilities to link regional members, organize STC business, be available when needed, answer those tricky questions, provide expert advice and direction, as well as their ability to be approachable and ensure a sense of enjoyment and community throughout the region. I would like to build on these solid foundations. I would like to use my strong international links and expertise to enrich and enable the growth of the international community that we have in Region 8."

Bonni Graham

Bonni Graham has spent 10 years as a practicing technical documenter. In 1994, she started Manual Labour, a technical documentation outsource provider. She has created manuals for clients like

Sony, Kenwood USA, and Nissan North America (with Technical Standards). She is a Senior Member of the San Diego Chapter, and in the past she started and managed the Southern California Unified Technical Publications, Art, and Online Competitions and managed a regional conference. Her most recent STC effort was serving as the Deputy Chair for Region 8 for the Pan-Pacific Conference. She is currently the Chair for the International Technical Publications Competition. In her copious free time, she performs improvisational comedy with the Creative Urges.

I asked Bonnie what she thinks is the most pressing issue in the Region and how she might deal with it: "I think the most important issue facing our region is the changing status of our profession...I think we will see explosive growth in our field over the next few years. Much like the IT/Information Management profession was five years ago, we are poised on the brink of a revolution in visibility and status. I think as the importance of information grows, the importance of information providers and developers (i.e. us) will grow as well. We as a Society need to be ready to shape and foster that growth, and I hope to help Region 8 be at the forefront of this development."

Read your ballot statement for more information about the outstanding qualifications of these candidates. Region 8 can look forward to excellent leadership and representation during the next three years, and I'm certain that the Society can look forward to significant future contributions from both of these candidates—no matter what the election results.



Doer's List

Profiles of Chapter Members

From the Editor

We'd like to start a regular column that profiles members of our chapter, not just from the standpoint of how you earn your living, but getting to know you as an individual. Ideally, we would request some information from each new member as they join. But since this hasn't yet been done, we have no database from which to pull. It would be very nice to kick off the column with one of the usually silent majority instead of one of us on the Administrative Council. However, if the council members send in their profiles first, theirs will be published first.

It's definitely not our intent to pry into people's lives, so if you prefer to remain invisible, that's OK, too. Otherwise, please take the time to tell us where you work, what you do, your e-mail address (or the least annoying method of contacting you), how you got into technical writing, and what your career goals might be. (Keep in mind, of course, that your manager might come across our newsletters on the website, even if not currently an STC member.) If you'd like to add additional information about your hobbies and interests, a book you can recommend, your favorite websites, and/or something about your family, we'd be delighted. We'll publish all profiles received by the editor, as space allows and as soon as possible.

There are many excellent technical writers out there who are afraid of STC. They think we're all geeks or stuffy perfectionists, too busy documenting infinitesimal details to be real people with a life outside of our work. Let's prove we're flesh-and-blood human beings whose eyes and ears are aware of the rest of the world and who sometimes dream in more than 16 colors. Unfortunately, even some members feel they don't need us as long as they're working. But, fellow writers, when the big hammer knocks the world out from under your feet, it's a good feeling to know you have a network that recognizes your name and can help you get back up again. If you don't keep in touch with your peers, the world can be a cold place, even on a February morning in Southern California. So let's hear from you and by the way, don't forget to renew your STC membership before February 28, if you haven't already done so! We need your votes in the upcoming national elections.

Driving Directions for the Radisson Hotel Chatsworth

From the 118 Ronald Reagan Freeway, exit Topanga Canyon Boulevard and go south.

From the 101 Ventura Freeway, exit Topanga Canyon Boulevard and go north.

The Radisson Hotel Chatsworth is on the west side of Topanga Canyon Boulevard, between Plummer and Lassen Streets.

FEBRUARY CHAPTER MEETING

San Fernando Valley Chapter's February meeting will be held **February 20, 2001** at the **Radisson Hotel**, 9777 Topanga Canyon Boulevard, Chatsworth, in the Devonshire Room. (This is the former Chatsworth Hotel.) **Telephone:** (818)709-7054. **Time:** 6:30 p.m. until about 9:00 p.m.

(Driving directions are at the bottom left side of this page.)

Menu Choices: Penne Pomador Sauce (vegetarian), Boneless Breast of Chicken, Fruita de Mare (pasta and seafood). **Cost:** \$20 for members and \$23 for non-members.

RSVP to Art Ringwalt at (818) 840-9592 or via e-mail at arthur122@earthlink.net by February 16. **Also be sure to keep your own record of your menu selection.** As always, if you make a reservation, you are responsible for the cost, whether or not you attend.

Our featured speaker will be Deirdre (De) Murr, our Chapter President, speaking on **Editing Your Own Work**. Come and learn how to identify and correct some of our more common mistakes. De will give an overview of some tenets of editing, including its five levels. She will also review some common mistakes we all make, and will share her ideas on building lists of the mistakes that commonly elude us.

In addition to being President of the SFV Chapter, De is an Associate Fellow in the Society of Technical Communication. She is manager of the Technical Publications Department for Walt Disney Imagineering and has been in the technical communications field for 20 years.

Designing Your Web Site for the Blind

by Guy Ball

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You might wonder about the logic of designing a Web site for the blind and visually impaired. After all, Web designers seem to be moving toward visually rich sites that often embrace some sort of flash and dazzle to keep viewers interested – or at least to point them in the direction that they need on the site.

Yet those of us who are fully sighted forget that as we make the Web our main information vehicle, we may be cutting out millions of customers or potential customers. And these millions (5 to 10 million in the U.S. alone, by some estimates) have every moral and legal right to have access to that information.

For instance, Unisys, my employer, is an computer and electronic services company with support sites where we post our latest documentation. We also have scores of sales and marketing sites with information on our latest products. Are these sites accessible to an audience (blind or visually impaired) that cannot actually see the site but can only “read” it through the use of special software?

Obviously, the implication is even greater for consumer sites like Amazon.com or Buy.com. Are they ready to ignore a few hundred thousand customers who would use their site – but can’t because of poor or incomplete design? If these companies would change their site design even slightly, they may gain 50,000, maybe 100,000, new customers all because their site design *encouraged* rather than *discouraged* viewers with impairments. And many of these impaired visitors

stay loyal once they find a site that works well for them.

A recent article in *PC World* magazine (September 2000) compared two sites using screen-reader software. The first, Hewlett-Packard, did well. All links worked properly and were easily recognizable (Investor Information, Drivers, HP Store, for example). Then the writer visited the Gap Online. Many of the links sounded like programming gibberish (Link , shorts_men.asp?wdid=300, Map: wdid=301, Map: gapstore/cs_returns.asp). One would suspect that the Gap has lost a large number of potential customers who will never return to the site.

The Problems

The blind and visually impaired use what are called screen readers to navigate the Web. These software programs look at the HTML file that creates a Web page on a computer. Then they synthetically speak exactly what that file tells them. The better readers will ignore or “understand” specialized HTML codes and speak the content that a sighted Web viewer would see. The result is content as accessible to a blind person as to a fully-sighted one.

At least that is the desired result.

Some of the problems occur when the Web designer includes graphics. If the navigation bar has the text link “software downloads,” the screen reader will speak those words. But if the navigation bar uses graphic buttons with no “alt text” description, the reader will ignore it or just speak the word “graphic.” If that’s the case, the visitor is now lost on the page and will not know where to go next.

In other situations, poor or incomplete HTML formatting will confuse the reading software, causing it to skip content and links. Animation will cause the screen reader to jump around within text on a page, pulling words from different parts of the page and making nonsensical sentences.

The Law

We’re starting to see the impact of three laws: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act. More on these laws and their impact can be found at the Microsoft.com site (among others), but they are important for us all – especially when we deal with the federal government (Section 508, particularly). Companies such as AOL, H&R Block, Intuit (Quicken), and Bank of America have already been subject to government and legal action. Even the recent Sydney 2000 Olympics web site was sued because it was not accessible to the visually impaired.

Are Ugly, Text-Only Sites the Answer?

No, and neither is a duplicate page with no graphics. There are some very easy things that we, as Web designers, can do to make a graphics page work for the blind. Most include using the tools we already have to add some alternate text. Others are just a change in habits, with us doing something a bit different. With a little re-training, we can produce an accessible page with little additional work.

How to Fix it

Below are a number of quick tips. We don't have the space in this article to give details or specific examples for each tip, so I recommend that you check out the sites listed under Additional Information below.

- Images and animation – Use the alt text or alt attribute function to clearly describe the function of each visual.
- Image maps – Use client-side Map and use alt text for hotspots.
- Multimedia – Provide a text description of video content.
- Page organization – Use consistent structure and use cascading style sheets (CSS) for layout and style when possible. This allows users to modify their browser at one time to affect their entire visit on the site.
- Formatting options – Use heading tags with font attributes, as opposed to calling out specific fonts in each usage. This allows the visually-impaired visitor to modify styles and font sizes to meet their needs.
- JavaScript, applets, and animation – Provide alternative content in case the active features are not accessible through the screen reading software.
- Check your work! Try your site using the validation tools, checklists, and guidelines available at sites like <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WCAG/>

Additional information

The following sites offer quite a wealth of information, as well as good examples and tips:

- <http://www-3.ibm.com/able/overview.html/> - IBM Accessibility Center (with downloadable trial version of their Home Page Reader)
- [http://www.awarecenter.org/-Accessible-Web-Authoring-Resources and Education \(AWARE\) center \(web site accessibility news and resources\)](http://www.awarecenter.org/-Accessible-Web-Authoring-Resources-and-Education-(AWARE)-center-(web-site-accessibility-news-and-resources))
- <http://access.adobe.com/> - Adobe Access for People with Visual Disabilities (and information on PDF accessibility)
- <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/dev/web/default.htm/> - Microsoft Accessibility (Web Guidelines)
- <http://www.cast.org/bobby/> - Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offering Bobby, a free program to check your site's HTML code
- <http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/> - Designing More Usable Web Sites (from the University of Wisconsin at Madison)
- <http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/WAI-homeA.html/> - Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C)

Guy Ball is a senior technical writer and information engineer with Unisys in Mission Viejo, CA. He is also a senior member of the Society for Technical Communications. When he isn't hard at work writing Unisys hardware documentation, Guy has been writing on Web accessibility for City Line, Intercom, WebReview.com and other publications. He is the webmaster for <http://www.SantaAnaHistory.com/>

Guy has also just completed his third book, "Santa Ana in Vintage Postcards," to be published by Arcadia this month.

Looking into the eFuture at the eWriter in the Workplace Conference

The Society for Technical Communication and American River College announce the eWriter in the Workplace conference. This one-day event on February 24, 2001 is at American River College and offers communication professionals the opportunity to learn about the latest trends, tools, and career opportunities available in today's fast-moving eworld environment.

The eWriter in the Workplace (eWIW) conference theme is **Looking to the eFuture**. "This is an event unlike one we've ever had before," said Lance Gelein, conference organizer. Speakers include leading visionaries from industry, academia, and government.

The conference has three stems: eCareers, eProfessional Development, and eTools. Each stem offers various talks covering topics that include: The Language of eCommerce, XML The Latest Frontier, Planning Your Employment Strategy, Web Usability, and Writing for the Web.

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 1)

January Meeting

overall impression in the working world (88%), provides information to keep abreast of trends in the profession (86%), and provides resources to improve job skills (84%). However, somewhat less than half (46%) said that STC provides solutions to work-related problems.

Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with specific adjectives to describe STC as an organization. The majority of respondents agreed with the adjectives Valuable (83%), Competent (82%), Relevant (82%), Accessible (80%), Career-enhancing (78%), Organized (76%), Capable (74%), Member-driven (63%), Trustworthy (59%), and Supportive (59%), but relatively few characterized the organization as Bold (19%).

Just what do the members of STC consider valuable about their STC membership? At the society level the majority cited the magazine *Intercom* (94%), the journal *Technical Communication* (88%), the STC Web site (83%), the annual conference (67%), and special interest groups (64%). At the chapter level, the majority cited chapter employment information (87%), chapter newsletter (87%), chapter Web site/listserv (83%), chapter meetings (81%, even though 45% admit they don't attend them), chapter seminars (75%), and regional conferences (63%).

On the individual, anecdotal level, individual participants expressed gratitude for the practical skills STC participation gave them, such as budgeting, negotiating, public speaking, and serving in positions of leadership. Others expressed appreciation for the employment information, helpful articles, networking opportunities, and professional recognition. In short, STC's real value is that it creates professional opportunities for its individual members.



(Continued from page 5)

eWriter Conference

"Previous conferences have focused on the writer in the workplace and covered a very wide range of communications skills. With organizations doing more and more business over the Web, we felt that it was vital to shift the conference's focus more towards the eFuture," says Gelein.

The conference will be held at American River College on Saturday, February 24, 2001 from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The address is: 4700 College Oak Drive, Sacramento, CA. For additional information contact ARC at 916/484-8643 or visit the website at www.sacramento.org.

Gelein estimates that attendance will be better than in previous years. "We're looking at attendance numbers reaching 200 this year," he says. "We really see how important e-communications is becoming since the Internet exploded onto the scene several years ago."

The fee to attend the conference is only \$95, but attendees can save \$20 by registering before February 15th. For more information and to register for the eWIW go to: <http://www.stcsacramento.org> and download the conference brochure and registration form.

STC's Practical Communication Committee is again accepting applications to send 10 high school teachers to the Institute of Technical Communication, to be held this year in Myrtle Beach, SC, June 17-22. The deadline for applications is March 10, 2001. For more information and applications, visit the website at <http://www2.stc.org/pics/pcc/pcmain.htm> or email at stc_prac_comm@hotmail.com. Or contact Mitzi Harris at Carthage Senior High School (417) 359-7020.

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Our Website: <http://www.stc.org/region8/sfv/www/index.htm>

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Los Angeles chapter -- Betsy
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<http://www.stc.org/region8/lac/www/lahome.htm>

Orange County chapter -- Bob
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rmcourtney@aol.com
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San Diego chapter -- Kris Oden,
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San Gabriel Valley chapter -- Kathy
Broman, President (818) 951-7301,
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<http://www.stc.org/region8/sgv/www/contact.html>

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.stc.org/region8/snb/>

A Big **WELCOME** and
Congratulations to **San Luis
Obispo**, our newest STC chapter! If
you know technical communicators in
SLO county, please have them contact
Regina Brown, President or **Jan
Grammer**, Secretary, as shown above.

STC About STC

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is the world's largest organization for technical communicators. STC's almost 24,000 members include writers, editors, illustrators, printers, publishers, photographers, educators, and students. Dues are \$110 per year, plus a one-time enrollment fee. Membership is open to anyone engaged in some phase of technical communication, or interested in the arts and sciences of technical communication, or in allied arts and sciences. You can reach STC headquarters by writing or calling

Society for Technical Communication

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Arlington, VA 22203-4114
Tel (703) 522-4114
Fax (703) 522-2075
e-mail: stc@stc-va.org

Society Job Listings

The STC maintains job listings on the Internet. You can download listings from the Society's Web site at www.stc-va.org.

Viewpoint

Viewpoint is published **bimonthly** September through June by the San Fernando Valley chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (SFV STC).

Articles published in Viewpoint may be reprinted in other STC publications if credit is properly given and one copy of the reprint is sent to the Viewpoint editor. Rights to articles appearing in Viewpoint revert to the author upon publication. Reprinting articles in non-STC publications is subject to the author's approval.

Deadlines are the 25th. of the month preceding publication. Send articles, queries, and information to:

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Subscriptions are available at \$10 per year to members of other STC chapters.

Submissions may be edited for clarity, length or appropriateness.

Advertising Rates (per issue):

1/4 pg \$25, 1/3 pg \$30,

1/2 pg \$40, full pg \$50.

The person who does
not read is no better off
than the person who
cannot read.

Selected Locations for STC Upcoming National C o n f e r e n c e s

Start planning and saving your pennies! STC works with a professional conference planning organization to determine appropriate sites for the national conference each year. This takes considerable looking ahead, but here are the selected sites and dates. We have a wide geographic selection of conference locations scheduled.

2001 Chicago

2002 Nashville

2003 Dallas

2004 Baltimore

2005 Seattle

2006 Denver

2007 Minneapolis

We are indebted to **Deborah Sauer**, current Assistant to the President for Conferences, for graciously providing us with this information.



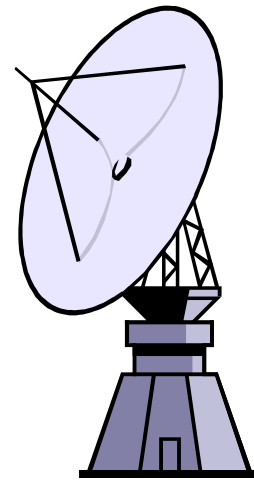
Surfer's Advisory

SETIathome

by Sharon Burton-Hardin

To show support of the sciences (and to have fun!) you can become part of the **Seti@Home** project. SETI@home is a scientific experiment that uses Internet-connected computers in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI). You can participate by running a free program that downloads and analyzes radio telescope data. This program runs in the background when your computer is on but not being used. Perhaps your computer will be the one that finds that non-natural signal Seti is looking for.

We have a Society for Technical Communication group set up that you can join. Go to <http://setiathome.berkeley.edu>, download the software, and then follow the directions to find and then join a group. Join the STC group. All the analyzed data units are counted towards the group.



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