

# northbay news

The monthly newsletter of the NorthBay Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

Volume 7, Number 4, April 2000

## In This Issue

- ✿ *Our March Meeting, Part I*
- ✿ *Editorial by our President-Elect*
- ✿ *This Month's Meeting*
- ✿ *Pan-Pacific Conference Update*
- ✿ *Moonlight Rodeo*
- ✿ *Upcoming Events*
- ✿ *Employment Opportunities*

## Last Month's Meeting: Writing for Programmers, Part 1

by Ken Delpit

Andrea Ames is one busy lady. As STC Region 8 Director-Sponsor, she sits on the Board of Directors and undertakes issues such as policies and certification. She has made a commitment to visit each chapter in her region until her tenure is up in 2001. That sounds reasonable enough, until she explains that Region 8 encompasses more than just the western United States. Turns out, the entire Pacific Rim falls under her domain, including Taipei, Singapore, Taiwan, Australia and New Zealand!

On the commercial side, there are Andrea's positions of Principal Technical Writer for Vertical Networks, Inc. and Owner/Consultant of "verbal imagery" (with trendy lower-case spelling).

Despite these many demands, Andrea interrupted her road show and writing duties long enough to stop by at the NorthBay chapter's March meeting and to talk to us about documenting object-oriented programming.



*Writing for programmers means learning their language...and treating them to their favorite pastry.*

*Continues on page 3* ➤

## Editorial: Technical Soup

John Dibs, Vice President

Acronyms fascinate some people and horrify others. When you use them in mixed company, your hearers or readers may either be drawn to the mystery of the techno-babble or repelled because they can't enter the symbolism. Why use these truncated symbol, and who concocts them in the first place?

Well, consider for a moment the stock market. How could the New York Stock Exchange (the NYSE!), for example, function without acronyms (neatly called *symbols* in the investing community)? How many more pages of our newspaper business section would be eaten up if we didn't shorten all those company names? Consider how much programming and electronic traffic support our calls, puts, and clicks. If we didn't abbreviate, both technician and lay reader would be swimming in repeated words and phrases to the point of

*Continues on page 5* ➤

**northbay officers  
and committee chairs**

**president**  
michael meyer  
(707) 765-0618  
mmeyer@sonic.net

**first vice-president  
(programs)**  
john dibs  
(707) 792-1791  
johndibs@fairisaac.com

**newsletter**  
editor, john dibs  
publisher: shelly hoose (hoose@mac.com)  
*newsletter staff:*  
diana abele (diana@emaildrop.com)  
ken delpit (kdelpit@compuserve.com)  
gabriella de serres  
(gabrielle.de.serres@usa.alcatel.com)  
gary hayes (gehayes@ix.netcom.com)  
barbara herbert (barbara@sonic.net)

**web**  
shelley hoose

**membership/telephone tree**  
whitney parker  
(707) 537-1792  
whitneyp@aol.com

**hospitality**  
michael simoni & gabriella de serres

**treasurer**  
carolyne gibson  
(707) 577-2529  
carolyne\_gibson@hp.com

**submitting articles and ads**

We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. Please email simple text to the editor at johndibs@fairisaac.com. For our current advertising rates, please email or phone the editor.

**reprints and distribution**

If you reprint articles from the *northbay news*, please credit them and forward a copy to the editor. Reprints in non-STC publications are subject to the author's approval. Copyright © 2000 *northbay news*. *northbay news* is free to NorthBay Chapter members. Nonmember subscriptions are \$6 per year.

**STC Mission Statement**

*The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.*

**This Month's Meeting****Thursday, April 20****"Come to Terms"***a presentation by Wayne Gibson*

Many industries have their own lingo, often confusing outsiders.

The telecom industry may be the worst offender. With *Newton's Telecom Dictionary*, now in its 16th edition, weighing in at nearly one thousand pages, entering the telecom world can be strange and scary. The endless stream of exotic terms and phrases can trap one in an inescapable quicksand of confusion.

Wielding a rapier wit and the ruthless machete of common sense, Wayne Gibson will show us how to navigate the dense forest of telecom technospeak.

Mr. Gibson has over 30 years of experience in the telecommunications field. He has worked in switching, transmission, and cable and fiber optics, and currently is a senior applications engineer at Next Level Communications in Rohnert Park.

If you've been longing to understand a particular telecom acronym or phrase, or just want to get a start on the road to acronym savviness, this meeting is for you. Take this opportunity to "come to terms."

**Meeting Time & Schedule**

Date:	Thursday, April 20	
Location:	Parker Compumotor, 5500 Labath Dr., Rohnert Park	
Time:	5:30–6:30	Networking, Show and Tell
	6:30–6:45	Introductions, Announcements
	6:45–7:45	Program
	8:00–8:30 ...	More Conversation, Idea Swapping

**Next Month's Meeting, May 18**

Cyd Dunning and Chris Steele from  
PacificTec Progressive Solutions

**Last Month***Continued from page 1*

In Part 1 of this series, we discuss reasons why you might want to consider writing for programmers and the requirements for calling yourself a programming-literate technical writer. You might find yourself saying, “I can do that!”

**Why Write for Programmers?**

*“There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there’s only narrative.”* E. L. Doctorow (b. 1931), U.S. novelist.

Programmers, you might think, spend most of their existence dealing with compilers and debuggers, and speaking in a foreign tongue — the language of object-oriented programming — that most technical writers do not understand. So, you say, what need do programmers engrossed in esoterica have for writers? And, even if programmers need trained technical writers to translate their brilliant designs into common language, how can nonprogramming writers possibly help? There are several reasons and several ways, Andrea assures us.

For one, programmers need documentation too. Anyone who has to work with other people needs two-way communications. Anytime a software project is broken into separate components, each with individual programmers or programming teams responsible, there is a tremendous need for timely, accurate communications.

And customers need documentation, even when customers are themselves programmers. For the same reason that NASA engineers who build the solid rocket booster need to be on the same page as engineers who build the guidance control system, programmers who develop one component need to communicate well with all other programmers.

For another, technical writers who can provide effective documentation for programmers are in great demand — so much so that they can often earn 10-15% more than tech writers who are not programming literate.

For yet another, programmers usually do not make good technical writers. The prolonged groan that came from the audience when Andrea asked, “Well, why not let programmers do the documentation?” told the story. Most in the audience who had encountered documentation written by programmers were more likely to nominate the documents as examples of things not to do, rather than as paragons of effective technical writing.

But, the best reason of all for considering entering this niche of technical writing may be the one that dispelled a common myth about programming-savvy writers — namely that you have to be a programmer in order to write for one. Not so, says Andrea.

**NonProgramming Writers Please Apply**

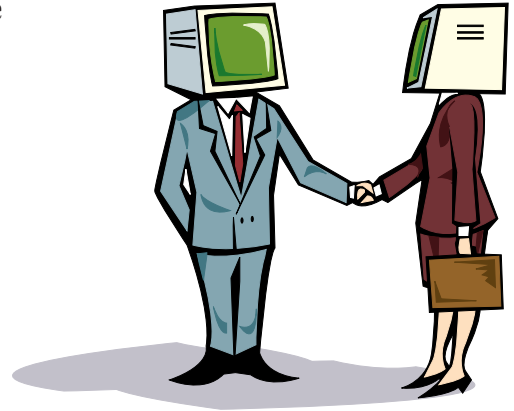
*“You say you are incapable of expressing your thought. How then do you explain the lucidity and brilliance with which you are expressing the thought that you are incapable of thought?”* Jacques Rivière (1886–1925), French surrealist.

Don’t feel bad if you had assumed that you must have had extensive software development experience in order to discuss it. Many potential employers feel that way too, Andrea admits. But they’re wrong. After all, she says, “If I could develop software, why would I want to be a (less-well paid) technical writer?”

Besides, as we’ve seen, programmers usually lack technical writing skills. What’s needed is not more detailed knowledge of a compiler’s inner workings,

but good old traditional writing skills — the abilities to research, organize and describe, for example. In fact, Andrea reminds us, a certain distance from programmers’ secret lives can be an asset in communications.

If you accept that a writer’s primary responsibility is to be an advocate for the reader, then being somewhat naïve about a subject can (or should) encourage you



*OO Programming will introduce you to some objects.*

to ask questions and present topics in a way that’s easily grasped. Subjects that are laid out with easily understood conceptual models, clear explanations, and consistent terminology are much more “digestible” by anyone, even by programmers, than are page after page of technical babble.

**So, I Can Just Fake it, Right?**

Not having to be a programmer does not excuse you from understanding something about programming, however. You certainly need to understand software design and programming concepts. You must be comfortable using programmers’ terms. And you need to be familiar with the environments used by software developers and testers.

Much of your understanding can be obtained from books and magazines. Study the subject in the broadest way possible, Andrea says. Learn about

*Continues on page 5* ➤

“classes” and “objects” in general, not just about C++ classes or Visual Basic objects.

Hang with the programmers. Borrow their magazines and journals. Buy them coffee. Talk to them about their successes and problems. Like anyone else, program-

---

*“If you’re geeky  
at heart,  
writing for  
programmers  
may fulfill other  
needs besides  
financial ones.”*

---

mers enjoy it when people take an interest in what they do, and they usually love to talk about their craft.

Though not absolutely required, knowing a little bit of programming can certainly help, Andrea advises. Taking a class in an object-oriented language, such as C++, or at least in an object-based language, such as Visual Basic, can teach you much about the kinds of things programmers deal with daily. Developing even the simplest “Hello, World” program forces you to contend with the very real issues of compiling, testing and debugging. “Walk in their shoes; feel their blisters,” Andrea counsels.

Being familiar with the programmers’ world enables you better to communicate with them. And if you find yourself enjoying programming, then you may find additional satisfaction. “If you’re geeky at heart, writing for programmers may fulfill other needs besides financial ones,” says Andrea.

## Next: Part 2

In the next installment, we will examine the application development process in more detail, discuss some particulars about object-oriented programming, and discuss career strategies for those interested in writing for programmers.

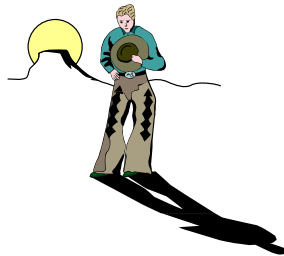



---

## Moonlight Rodeo

by Ken Delpit

Writers are an interesting bunch, I think. It seems like every one has a unique perspective, an unusual interest or a hidden talent, and is not afraid to share them all. Whether interesting people are drawn to the profession, or whether deadline pressures force writers into finding diversions, I can’t say. If you find yourself in the latter category, I can



recommend an enjoyable escape. Try and catch Kurt Huget and his band, Moonlight Rodeo, at one of their appearances in Sonoma or Marin Counties.

Turns out, Kurt is not only a fine technical writer, but a talented guitarist, vocalist and song writer as well. MR is a group of polished musicians with a country-rock sound that goes down as smooth as cherry liqueur. You can doff your Stetson and shuffle your pointed Frye’s along the dance floor, or you can just kick back and let the mellifluous sounds wash over you.

MR recently released their first CD, titled “Moonlight Rodeo” oddly enough, a collection of Kurt originals. A CD release party at Rancho Nicasio played to a packed, enthusiastic audience. In performance, MR plays a variety of country classics and originals, a mix of melodious ballads, love poems, and driving rhythms. A steady bass beat and Kurt’s guitar riffs punctuate the liquid sounds coming from Mayne Smith’s pedal steel guitar.

One caveat, however. Kurt is liable to audition for another part, namely that of stand-up comedian, right in front of you. Apparently, Kurt is hedging his bet about the music thing holding up. One interlude between songs had him describing a recent visit to his dentist, who was eagerly offering him nitrous oxide for a routine cleaning. “Not I,” said Kurt, “I try to transcend dental medication.”




---

## Pan-Pacific Conference Update

The keynote speaker for October’s Region 7/Region 8 Pan-Pacific conference in Hawaii is Martha Baer, former managing editor at *Wired* magazine. Ms. Baer will set the tone and define issues for the exciting three-day gathering of technical communicators from throughout the western United States, western Canada, and the Pacific Rim. (For more information about the conference, scheduled for October 19–21, visit the conference Web site, [www.pan-pacific.org](http://www.pan-pacific.org).)

Ms. Baer draws on a range of experiences, but her primary interest is her connection with technical journalism at *Wired*. She has served as a writer, editor, consultant, producer, and research chief

*Continues on page 5* ➤



**Pan Pacific Conference***Continued from page 4*

for the publication, guiding it to its edgy, preeminent voice while covering technology and Silicon Valley. She also helped launch the website for HotWired, the daily digital companion to the monthly magazine.

"I was at HotWired at a pretty early point," Baer recalls. "I remember when PointCast released its first rev — that was the first animation we saw on the web. At the time, we were really grappling with things like 'Should pictures move?' And if they can only move a little, is it worth it?"

Her job then was a combination of basic journalism and some architecture issues. "We were trying to get every inch of

---

*'Like a ship stuck in a canal' — that's a marvelous way to describe a bottleneck. The best technology writers have a gift for appropriate metaphors.*

---

communications capacity out of some really clunky mechanics," she says. It wasn't always easy, and she frequently came up against the early limitations of electronic delivery.

Some of the issues are quite familiar for technical communicators, such as the

old "format vs. content" battle. Baer promises to speak to those. "Launching *Wired News* we had questions about doing 'extravagant vs. efficient.' There were five updates a day — we were posting new stories even when we weren't in the office."

Another issue she still deals with is the area of writing styles. In short, technical journalists are allowed to have one! For every publications manager who has dedicated valuable staff time to producing a departmental style guide, consider the extreme where individual writing style is encouraged: "At *Wired*, there was no governing voice," Baer says. "It was very eclectic, very respectful of writers' styles. So I have plenty of experience at finding voices that work for the reader. Interestingly, some conventions of prose can destroy clarity. It turns out that using slang and the vernacular is okay for our readers."

For example, in writing simple instructions, from operating blenders to Palm Pilots, what happens if you infuse the instructions with the vernacular? "Magazines resist being reader-driven, and we were supposed to be oblivious. We were always gauging the market — it's a constant struggle. We couldn't narrow down which profession we were pointed to."

Audience analysis for *Wired* "has always been a huge point of debate — the explicit philosophy of the magazine is to never talk down to the reader. But there was this anxiety about knowing what the magazine was saying. We were vilified. People hated that. So we capitulated for a low-brow reader. We had to be careful about using technical terms nobody knew yet."

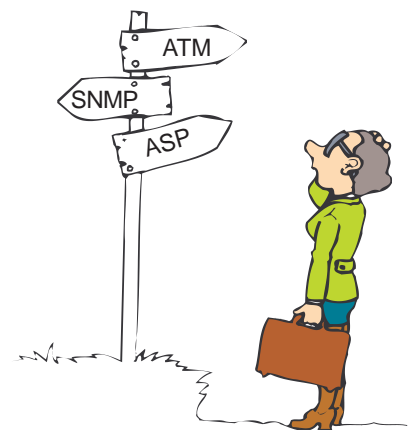
"New leadership was more reader-friendly. Imagine Conde Nast sitting down in front of the owner, Si Newhouse. He's asking, 'Who's Wozniak?' 'What's a megabyte?' 'What's broadband?' We thought we weren't being elitist, but the

New York readership and the Silicon Valley readership are worlds apart."

Another issue in technical journalism is the introduction of metaphors. They're a central explanatory device. Says Baer: "Like a ship stuck in a canal" — that's a marvelous way to describe a bottleneck. The best technology writers have a gift for that. Even the most sophisticated writers start to adopt good metaphors. Like, 'this joint works like an elbow.' Sometimes a little metaphor like that can really help. But it seems to be forbidden in technical manuals."

**Editorial***Continued from page 1*

nausea. Was it the Romans who started the concept with Roman numerals, or was it the Greeks? (That's right. How many letters of the Greek alphabet can you recite?) At any rate, now, any often-repeated word combinations are fair



"Huh?!?"

game, and in our business, that means plenty.

Isn't that one key to understanding the lure of acronyms? I mean repetition. As each community of technically-inclined souls repeat the same words while conversing in their ever-evolving

*Continues on page 6* ➤

**Editorial***Continued from page 5*

techno-language, certain members of that community invent nifty ways to shorten the common words to their bare bone minima. And what makes them bother to truncate their speech, you ask? Well, I suppose for one thing, the human brain must store concepts in such a way that often-repeated chunks of information can be efficiently invoked and understood by their metalabels. And on another level (I suppose again), humans may ultimately desire to spend less time conversing about what they agree on and wish — the known — to save their breath for exploring and arguing about what they disagree on — the unknown.

For the most recent project I've was thrown into, I decided to begin the information collection process by listing and defining the acronyms I discovered during background reading. This gave me an entry point into a sizable cloud of knowledge. By listing them out, the letter combinations were fresh in my mind, and I more quickly gleaned their meanings when interviewing and listening. I admit, it was also fun to stump some of my colleagues with pop acronym quizzes.

Now I've just given an example of the writer's use of acronyms (and one writer at that), but I guess the crux of using acronyms in written communication comes down to the reader. How many of the acronyms will the reader understand, how many do they need to know, and how and where should they be defined?

Wipe them out we can't. Acronyms stick to our ribs like smoked sausage on a Saturday morning. Here are some I've been introduced to lately: ASP, HTTPS, LOS, MTS, MSMQ, SOAP, XML, and XSL. Now just how much longer would this list be without the use of those darn acronyms?



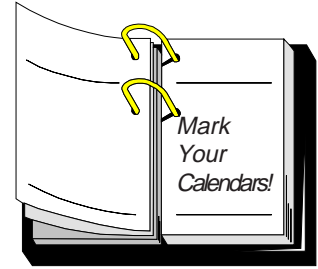
## Coming Soon!

### May

#### **The Society for Technical Communication 47th Annual Conference**

May 21–24, 2000

The conference will feature more than 250 technical sessions covering technical writing, editing, management, Web design, multimedia, and other subjects of interest to technical communicators. Information on the conference is available on the STC office Web site at <http://www.stc-va.org>. A copy of the conference Preliminary Program, including a registration form, can be obtained by calling (703) 522-4114, ext. 200.



### October 19-21, 2000

#### **STC Regions 7 and 8 Pan-Pacific Conference in Hawaii**

For the latest information, see [www.pan-pacific.org](http://www.pan-pacific.org), and Jack Molisani's articles there.

### Technical Writer, San Rafael / Santa Rosa, CA

SBT Accounting Systems is the leading developer of database accounting software systems with 300,000 business users worldwide from single user to client/server environments.

We seek a Technical Writer with project team experience to join our dynamic six-person Technical Publications Department. Accounting and/or database experience is helpful. This is an excellent opportunity to create and maintain quality printed and electronic documentation, and to work with an experienced team. We use FrameMaker, RoboHELP, and Acrobat. You should have strong writing skills, and knowledge of PCs and Microsoft Windows. English majors are preferred, as is FrameMaker experience. Single-source experience, and Help system design experience is a plus! If you are looking for a challenge in a fast-paced environment, while working with a friendly and competent team, please forward cover letter and resume to: [lmor@sbt.com](mailto:lmor@sbt.com).



### Technical Writer, Sebastopol

A-Frame Software in Sebastopol is seeking a tech writer to join a new department. Documentation areas include data mapping, entity relationship diagrams, structure diagrams, processing flowcharts, business rule documentation, and eventually Java code documentation (Javadoc). Experience in SQL, Microsoft SQL Server 6.5/7.0, Java, Visual Cafe, JavaDoc, and Visio are a plus. Requirements include 2+ years tech writing experience, preferably in a software-development environment. We'll teach the technical details to the right person.

To learn more about A-Frame, visit us at [www.a-frame.com](http://www.a-frame.com). Contact Robert Beckett, Client Manager, at [rbeckett@a-frame.com](mailto:rbeckett@a-frame.com) or call (707) 823-4083, ext. 13.

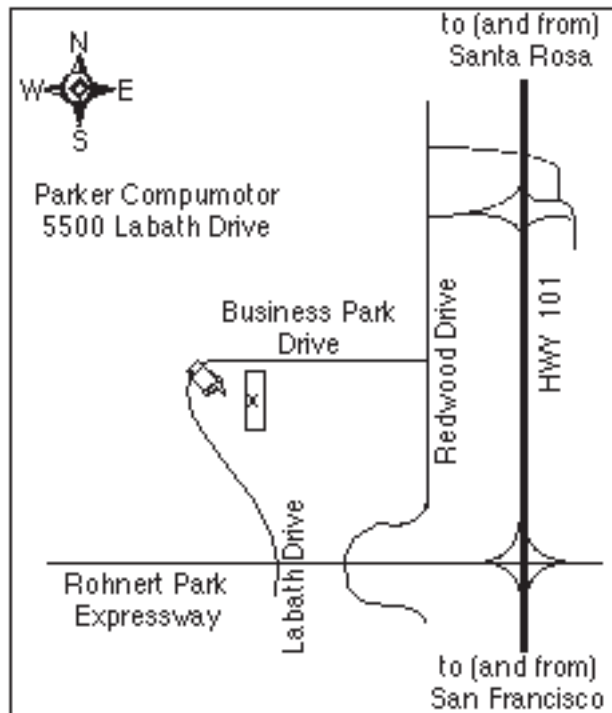
We meet on the third  
Thursday of each month

### Our April Meeting

*April 20, 2000*  
"Come to Terms"  
with Wayne Gibson

Parker Compumotor  
5500 Labath Drive  
Rohnert Park

[stc.org/region8/nbc/www/](http://stc.org/region8/nbc/www/)



### northbay news

c/o  
4389 sonoma highway  
santa rosa, ca 95409