Reviews

The Teaching Portfolio. **Peter Seldin. 1991. Boston, Massachusetts: Anker Publishing Company, Inc., paperback, 91 pages, approximately $17.**

The quality of academic teaching has received national attention in recent years. More than 10,000 studies, according to Peter Seldin, have been published on teaching effectiveness. They indicate effective teachers, among other traits, are knowledgeable, organized, clearly state information, motivate students, and show imagination. But how do those traits get translated into a document that supports your efforts for promotion, tenure, or these days, finding a new position?

A promising solution, according to Seldin, is the "teaching portfolio." In *The Teaching Portfolio*, Seldin documents the process of putting a teaching portfolio together and provides examples of portfolios from different disciplines.

It is an organized way to document all aspects of a faculty member's teaching. It should contain current evaluations as well as selective documents supporting the faculty member's teaching performance, that involves the process of teaching and its contents as well as the results. In essence, the portfolio is used to demonstrate how teaching is carried out.

As professional communicators, we are familiar with the portfolio concept as a useful tool for displaying communications material. However, it is a new tool for the academician. Seldin says the portfolio can be used to: (1) gather and present hard evidence and specific data about teaching effectiveness; (2) provide structure for self-reflection; (3) course syllabi, curriculum development, collect and summarize evaluations; (4) provide peer evaluations and consultation notes; (5) provide student evaluations; (6) document articles and talks presented on instruction; and (7) to advise faculty regarding improvement in their teaching. For either advisement or evaluation, the portfolio can include videos of teaching.

Those ACE members on academic appointments may find it increasingly difficult to translate non-credit courses and training or instruction into understandable terms for the regular faculty who sit on hiring, promotion, or tenure committees. The portfolio could help translate your performance into something understandable by showing how research results were used to develop a training program, publication, press release, or video script, for example.

If you are in the job market, you probably have run into requests for student evaluations and other evidence of teaching ability. Across the country, as well as Canada, about 100 colleges and universities are experimenting with various forms of portfolios. In essence, the trend for documenting teaching ability is growing. But for many, the only proof at hand showing them to be credible instructors may be student course evaluation forms. Student evaluations do not, according to Seldin, provide sufficient information for accurate evaluation of teaching performance. Promotion and tenure committees often do not know how to evaluate

teaching when they examine credentials on scholarship and professional activity from diverse programs and teaching methods. Seldin (Seldin and Annis, *The Journal of Staff Program and Organization Development,* 1990, p. 197) says, "At bottom, perhaps, the core problem is the lack of hard information and evidence about the quality of teaching performance."

To get started, Seldin advises the instructor to evaluate what is taught in relationship to the instructor's personal goals and projections. He cautions the instructor to be selective because the portfolio is a vehicle that does more than just show and tell what has been accomplished. By using samples from several instructors, Seldin is able to show the versatility of the portfolio approach in his 90-page publication. The first 25 pages contain basic information with the rest containing sample materials.

Unlike the production portfolio of the graphic designer, this teaching portfolio looks at measures of effectiveness, teaching responsibilities, peer reviews and notes, and samples of personal writing on instruction (objectives, goals, articles). The actual length of portfolio's narrative may only be 5 to 7 pages with samples in an appendix. The length is short because its contents only involve your statements on teaching objectives, goals, summaries of evaluations or peer consultations, and your efforts at self improvement in teaching. Actual syllabi and reading lists, assignments and exams, handouts, student evaluations, video or audio samples of teaching, plus other support items go in the appendix.

For ACE members ready to move up or out, the teaching portfolio may be a useful tool. (An abbreviated version of the book is provided in *The Journal of Staff Program and Organization Development,* 1990.)

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The Handbook of Technical Writing: Form and Style. **Mary Lee, Gloria Stephenson, Max Anderson, and Lynn Allan Lee. 1990. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (HBJ), paperback, 487 pages including index, approximately $25.**

This book is similar to many standard handbooks on English grammar in format, and to a point, content. It stresses the essentials of grammar, punctuation, mechanics, diction, and sentence structure. It goes beyond the standard text, however, by including material specific to scientific and technical writing and drawing examples from various types of technical and scientific communication.

The first half of the book is devoted to the tools of grammar, including seven sections on sentence structure alone. The rest of the work deals with the "Larger Elements." These include business letters, memos, job-hunting correspondence, abstracts and summaries, reports, proposals, graphics, and more. These latter sections make this publication a useful reference for professional writers.

In their preface, the authors imply that this handbook is intended equally for students and professionals. That was a noble goal, but the book

probably is weaker because of it. One result is that the two halves seem to be aimed at different audiences.

As a grammar text, this handbook doesn't measure up to several others that are widely used in college writing courses. As a technical writing text, it isn't nearly as good as Paul V. Anderson's *Technical Writing*, also published by HBJ.

Still, *The Handbook of Technical Writing* could be of significant value to professionals dealing with scientific and technical subject matter. Publications editors will find its chapter on graphics useful, particularly the sections on constructing tables and charts and on effective diagrams and illustrations. Chapters on reports and proposals also are likely to be especially useful. The latter chapter includes a comprehensive proposal for project funding that serves effectively as a general model.

One practical aspect of this book that is a real strength is the "key point" summary that begins each chapter. These often include, specifically or by implication, "Know your audience." That's a very good starting point for any discussion of writing.

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Technical Writing: A Reader-Centered Approach (Second Edition). Paul V. Anderson. 1991. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, paperback, 824 pages including index, approximately $35.

This book is developed on a simple but important premise: "Writing at work differs from writing at school." Even though it is intended primarily as a text book, *Technical Writing* builds on this premise in ways that make it quite valuable as a reference for professional writers who deal with technical subject matter.

In the second edition, Anderson has added new chapters on persuasive writing, using the library (including computerized bibliographies), and collaborative writing, as well as case-study problems. All are important additions.

The title accurately reflects the author's main advice. "When writing," he says, "think constantly about your readers." He emphasizes the personal dimension of writing throughout the book.

Anderson insists that written communication, to be successful, must affect the individual to whom it is addressed, in specific ways. This is the essence of his reader-centered approach. He offers no magic formula, merely a process that begins with "defining your communication objectives" and continues through final revision.

Samples of reader-centered writing are easy to come by. Anderson offers resumes and job application letters as an introductory form. He also provides general frameworks, he calls them "superstructures," for several other types, including reports of various kinds, proposals, and instructions.

Technical Writing devotes a full 16 chapters to detailed discussion of the writing process. These extend to visual aids and page design. One entire

chapter is devoted to word choice.

This book has a pleasing emphasis on reviewing, evaluation, and testing communication objectives. It pays less attention to revising material once it is written, but does offer helpful guidelines. Correcting mechanical problems, the author warns, always heads the list: "The working world is very intolerant of them, particularly errors in spelling and basic grammar."

Anderson provides chapters on collaborative writing and preparing and delivering oral presentations. These, like the rest of the book, emphasize the reader-centered approach to communication.

Technical Writing is a thick book , more than 800 pages , with valuable appendices and a comprehensive index. It is amply illustrated and includes appropriate examples of most of the types of technical communication it covers.

If I were teaching a course in technical writing, this probably would be my choice for a text. Beyond that, I recommend it as a worthy addition to the professional communicator's reference shelf.

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"Learning to Use Simplified English: A Preliminary Study," by Margaret Thomas, Gloria Jaffe, J. Peter Kincaid, and Yvette Stees in *Technical Communication: Journal of the Society for Technical Communication*, (First Quarter, February 1992), Society for Technical Communication, 815 Fifteenth St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, p. 69-73.

Documents written in "Simplified English" (SE) are easier to read than those written in standard English, especially for readers whose first language is not English. Because writing in simplified English is difficult for experienced technical writers, the University of Central Florida is developing a software tool, the Simplified English Analyzer (SEAN), to help writers prepare documents in SE. The authors report on research conducted to see how accurately writers detect violations of SE writing rules and what sort of mistakes are likely when text is rewritten in SE. The research shows that while SE is easy to understand, it is difficult to write without a lot of training and practice. Training tools such as SEAN can ease the procedure. The authors describe the software package under development.

The importance of simplified English grows as business and industry become more global because English already is the second language for many world citizens. Considerable interest has been shown in "Controlled English" as the *lingua franca* of technical applications because of the time, cost, and personnel necessary for multiple high-quality translations. Computer-based programs facilitate the training of writers by providing individualized feedback.

What Is Controlled English?

Controlled English refers to writing systems that contain limited choices of standard English words. These systems restrict acceptable sentence structure. Ambiguities, colloquialisms, and synonyms are not permitted.

Consequently, non-English readers can understand technical documents written in Controlled English after relatively brief training.

Controlled English can be traced to C. K. Ogden. In the 1930s and 1940s, he hoped to popularize a general purpose "Basic English" that would be an international language as well as serve as a foundation for standard English. A dictionary was published including some 20,000 common words defined in terms of an 850-word Basic English vocabulary. However, basic English was a novelty that never got off the ground.

In the 1970s, controlled English was used in technical writing. In 1971, the Caterpillar Tractor Company developed a 900-word vocabulary it used for writing product documentation for worldwide distribution. In 1979, the Douglas Aircraft Company devised a 2,000 word dictionary it uses for its technical manuals.

What Is Simplified English?

SE is one type of Controlled English developed for technical use by the Association Europeene des Constructeurs de Materiel Aerospatial and the Aerospace Industries Association. It includes a core vocabulary of 1,500 words and a set of 40 writing rules for style and grammar. Each word has only one meaning and can be used as only one part of speech. Technical names or names of manufacturing processes can be added when necessary. SE was developed for writing documentation on aircraft maintenance.

Writing in SE

Writers skilled in English with an extensive vocabulary have difficulty writing in SE because they must learn to restrict their syntax and vocabulary. To help writers overcome this difficulty, The University of Central Florida's Institute of Simulation and Training is developing SEAN, software which monitors compliance with SE writing rules and use of the approved vocabulary. Some rules are subjective and cannot be automated, but SEAN can incorporate one-half of them. When the program flags a word that is not part of the SE vocabulary, it consults a reverse thesaurus and suggests an SE alternative. The thesaurus consists of a database of approximately 15,000 non-SE words. It has a parsing routine that detects the misuse of a word with respect to its allowed part of speech.

What is interesting are not the particulars of the study, but the parameters of simplified English and how we can use them to make our publications more readily understood. Notice how closely the SE Writing Rules (below) parallel what seasoned journalists learn from crusty editing professors or city editors.

Grouping Words

1. Break up noun clusters that have more than three nouns.
2. If possible, put an article or a demonstrative adjective before a noun.

Verbs

1. Use the following verb forms:
   - infinitive
   - present tense
   - past tense
   - simple future tense
   - past participle as an adjective
2. Do not use the *'ing'* form of the verb.
3. Use the active voice.

4. Do not use the past participle with a helping verb to make a complex verb.

Sentence Length

1. The maximum length of a sentence is 20 words.
2. To determine sentence length, the colon and the dash count as a full stop, each word in a hyphenated group counts as a word, text within parenthesis is a separate sentence.

Simplified English

General

1. Write only one instruction per sentence, unless two actions must be done at the same time.
2. Write the verb in the imperative (commanding) form for instructions and warnings.
3. If you start an instruction with a dependent clause, you must separate that statement from the rest of the instruction with a comma.
4. Do not leave out a verb to make a sentence shorter.

Even though test subjects had copies of the rules, they overlooked rule violations, mandatory commas after introductory clauses, and the imperative verb form in instructions. One quarter of the time, they failed to notice the passive voice and nonallowed verb tenses/forms. Also, the subjects missed the straightforward adherence to the word count 37 percent of the time. The highest level of accuracy was the detection of noun clusters; only eight percent were missed.

Notice the difference between the unedited version and the SE version of the following sample.

Unedited — Place the water heater in a clean, dry location as near as practical to the area of greatest heated water demand. Long uninsulated hot water lines can waste energy and water. Clearance for accessibility to permit inspection and servicing such as removing heading elements or checking controls must be provided.

SE Version — Put the water heater in a clean, dry location near the area where you use the most hot water. If the hot water lines are long and they do not have insulation, you will use too much energy and water. Make sure you have access to the heating elements and the controls for inspection and servicing.

The sample size was small (11), and the participants were advanced technical writing students, not experienced professionals. Students reinforced the assertion that SE, while easy to understand, is difficult to write. Adherence to the writing rules improved with training. Much training time is necessary for writers to become fluent in any controlled English system, but SEAN has the potential to lessen that time. The authors believe that SEAN is a valuable training aid that will be helpful in meeting the future needs of international communication.

The simplified English article is part of a special section, "Communicating With and Through Computers." The section contains 11 articles, most of interest to writers and editors who interact with a computer.

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