

Reporting Technical Information

5^{TH EDITION}

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Preface

IN THE 1970s, the teaching of technical writing grew rapidly and steadily. Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, approximations based on the sale of textbooks in the field indicate that the number of students per year taking technical writing has jumped from about 25,000 in 1968 to over a quarter million in 1982. Another indicator is the growth of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing from a nucleus of ten charter members in 1972 to an organization with over a thousand members. Currently, five summer workshops in technical writing enroll over 150 students a year. Ten years ago such workshops did not even exist. Numerous panel discussions about technical writing are now regular features at national meetings of English teachers. Why has this discipline come so far so fast?

We suggest that one answer lies in the nature of technical writing itself. If there is one thing that all technical writing practitioners and teachers can agree upon, it is that technical writing makes things happen. As Professor Thomas L. Warren puts it, "The purpose of any piece of technical writing is to inform so that the reader can act. . . ."¹ Certainly, there is a sense of both practicality and power in technical writing. Technical writing is practical because it is situational. It addresses itself to a particular purpose and audience. Technical writing is powerful because it makes things happen. Without manuals, plans, and instructions, our machines, factories, and ships would not get built. Without the instructions that come with a computer, it would be a collection of worthless boxes. Old scientific theories fall

before newly published scientific theories. If our energy crisis and economic and environmental problems are one day resolved, it will be because the solutions were set down in technical writing. Students and teachers alike enjoy the power and technical writing's rational practicality.

Teachers and students alike see technical writing courses as being worthwhile because—like tennis and unlike football—they have a high carry-over value beyond the college days. A survey conducted by Professor Richard M. Davis among persons listed in *Engineers of Distinction* led him to the following facts and conclusions:

- The respondents spent an average of 24.35 percent of their time writing.
- The respondents spent 31 percent of their time working with other people's written materials.
- Most of the respondents felt that the ability to write effectively is either very important or of critical importance to them.
- Almost all reported that as their responsibility increased, so did their need to write.
- Almost all felt that the ability to write well had contributed to their advancement.
- In advancing subordinates, almost all considered their writing ability.²

Information from other fields, such as agriculture and business, provides similar direct evidence: graduates need to be able to communicate effectively with workers, supervisors, and the general public. Other evidence, more indirect but perhaps even more powerful, supports the need for good writing skills. Everywhere we turn these days, articles and ads proclaim we are entering "The Information Age." Is this merely hyperbole to sell us word processors and communication equipment, or are those of us in the developed countries truly entering an age in which information will be our major product? Evidence seems to indicate that we are, indeed, entering something very like an "information age."

In a recent talk, John Naisbitt, publisher of *Trend Report* and a perceptive observer of changes in society, stated that the developed countries are rapidly shifting "from a mass industrial society to an information society." In Naisbitt's words, "The final impact will be more profound than the 19th century shift from an agricultural to an industrial society." Naisbitt points out that in 1950, 65 percent of the work force of the United States was in industry; now that figure stands at 30 percent. In 1950, the proportion of people in information occupations was 17 percent; today the proportion is over 55 percent. Naisbitt defines information occupations as "those involved in the creating, processing, and distribution of information. . . ."³

Much supports Naisbitt's position. For example, the major resource for the entrepreneur in the past has been capital. Now it

may be knowledge and data. Small firms are springing up all around us, many based on some form of microcomputer technology, itself a part of the information explosion. These small firms have as their major resource not money but rather the information in the heads of the young people who founded them. Because information about new technology has become so vital, a lack of information can be as harmful as a lack of machine tools. Recently a computer firm near one of us halted production on one of its new models because the needed user information for it had not yet been produced.

The growth in the numbers of students in our technical writing classes, then, would seem to be a sign of the times. We are filling a need that profound changes in our society are bringing about. As more and more people had technical information that they had to report, technical writing classes began to attract students from many disciplines—agriculture, business administration, economics, forestry, medical technology, psychology—to join the engineers who once were the primary audience. With this change in the student body came a change in the teaching of technical writing. Once it had heavily depended on teaching from models of existing reports, primarily engineering reports. But the new student body, representing many disciplines with many models to choose from, caused the teachers of technical writing to look beyond the models for the process that produced the models.

We are happy to say that we anticipated this change in our 1972 second edition with our Part 1 "Process of Technical Reporting" and our introduction of audience analysis as part of the process. The models were by no means disregarded. They remained in a section called "Applications." However, in that section in the second edition, and now in this fifth edition, we used applications such as correspondence, instructions, proposals, and feasibility reports that seemed common to all the disciplines present in our classes. We want the readers of this book to understand the process that underlies good report writing, but we also want them to know that there are models that can be useful to them. Writers have always used models, whether the models are sonnets, heroic couplets, three-act plays, or well-constructed feasibility reports.

Our continuing interest in process has led in this edition to a new chapter called "Getting Started" (Chapter 2) that deals with the beginning of the process—that rather terrifying moment when the writer is trying to get from nowhere to somewhere. We show the writer how not only must topic be considered but audience, purpose, and writer's role as well. With these as the building blocks, we take the writer in later chapters through audience analysis, gathering and checking information, organizing, and writing and revising the report. We make it clear many times, through statement and exam-

ples, that the writing process is a back-and-forth process. Although the end result may be a piece of writing with a hierarchy of information that can be read in a linear fashion, the actual process is more like the putting together of a jigsaw puzzle. The parts are fitted together in little chunks here and there until finally, after a good deal of trial and error, a total picture falls into place. In other words, we introduce the reader to the world of the real writer who knows all too well that ideas do not usually come in a well-ordered 1-2-3 fashion.

What, then, will the reader find in this 5th edition?

Part 1, "Process of Technical Reporting," covers the basic process from getting started to organizing, writing, and revising the report. Interspersed with the process chapters are chapters on the report writer's tools such as the library, the rhetorical modes, graphics, and such formal elements of reports as abstracts, introductions, conclusions, tables of content, and headings.

Part 2, "Applications," covers advanced and extended applications of the basic principles. Here we show how to write correspondence, proposals, progress reports, feasibility reports, and the like.

Part 3, "Handbook," provides a ready reference when questions of grammatical usage, punctuation, and mechanics arise.

The appendixes include an extended student report, additional guides to library research and computerized information retrieval, and a bibliography of books that can lead the writer to other books about the many subjects we cover in this book.

What other changes have we made for this 5th edition?

- We have unified examples when this seemed to be a change that would aid the learning process. For example, we have created a new, contemporary, and, we hope, lively and realistic example for a report project that runs through both Chapter 2, "Getting Started" and Chapter 5, "Gathering and Checking Information." By using the same example we show how a report can grow from a small idea, barely conceived, to a fully grown body of material ready to be organized and written. In a similar way, we carry one project through Chapters 15, "Proposals," 16, "Progress Reports," and 17, "Feasibility Reports." Again, the reader should be able to see how the report grows from the original concept to the finished product.
- Our Chapter 9, "Achieving a Clear Style," has benefitted greatly from the significant research being carried on by Dr. Janice Redish and her colleagues at the American Institutes for Research in Washington, D.C. Their work has caused us in some matters to modify our views and in others to state previous positions even more strongly. In any case, as such research continues, we can all be a bit more confident about what makes one report more readable than another.
- We have combined two chapters, "Prose Elements" and "Mechanical Elements" into one, Chapter 11, "Formal Elements of Reports." By so doing, we can treat the elements in the order in which they appear in a

report without regard for whether they are a prose element such as an introduction or a mechanical element such as a table of contents. We think the information will be more useful in this form. Also, we have covered more thoroughly than ever the reasons underlying the use of a format. In both Chapter 8, "Organizing Your Report," and Chapter 11, we emphasize the importance of using a format that allows for selective reading of a report.

- We have revised Chapter 15, "Proposals," to make it more useful for the student. We have added examples of student-sized proposals and proposals for reports that should be useful in the classroom.
- Our 4th edition chapter on "Physical Research Reports" is completely updated. Because the changes made should make the chapter useful to writers in the social sciences as well as the physical sciences, we have changed the name of the chapter to "Empirical Research Reports."
- The University of Chicago Press style manual continues to be our guide. Consequently, we have modified slightly our own documentation practices and our instruction on documentation to conform to the 13th edition of this fine book, now called *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Also, we have pulled footnotes out of our chapters and gathered them all together in "Chapter Notes" on pages 527–533. We hope we have accomplished two things with this change: cleaned up the format of our pages and provided many note examples in one place for the student.

In addition, we have made numerous smaller changes. We have refreshed the book with many new examples. We now offer more in-depth explanations of certain writing practices, such as how to construct a report title and how to use tense properly in an empirical research report. Those of you who have used this book over the years know our touchstone, expressed in every preface, that all writing is subject to infinite improvement. We truly believe that statement about our own writing and welcome the opportunity that each new edition offers for improvement. However, in researching for this 5th edition, we came across a short passage that we feel perhaps cannot be improved. Its three short imperatives express the philosophy of this book and we would like to leave them with you:

1. Know your reader
2. Know your objective
3. Be simple, direct, and concise⁴

We acknowledge all the many sources we have drawn upon in writing this 5th edition. Detailed acknowledgments can be found in "Chapter Notes." However, we acknowledge here a number of people who have been particularly helpful. We are grateful to those reviewers who have read earlier editions of this book and this edition in manuscript and provided insights and suggestions for improvement, including Paul Anderson, Miami University; Carol M. Barnum, Southern Technical Institute; Virginia Book, University of Nebraska; C. William Brewer, Texas Tech University; Russell Briggs, Kalama-

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Donald J. Barrett, Chief Reference Librarian, United States Air Force Academy, has once again revised Appendix B, "Technical Reference Guides" for us, and Professor James Connolly, University of Minnesota, has again contributed the section on visuals found in Chapter 19, "Oral Reports and Group Conferences." For that we thank them deeply.

Finally we express our love and gratitude to our wives Lois and Anne who are as much a part of this book as we are.



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Contents

PART 1 PROCESS OF TECHNICAL REPORTING 1

1 An Overall View of Technical Reporting 3

Some Matters of Definition 3
The Nature of Technical Reports 4
The Substance of Technical Reports 6
The Attributes of Good Report Writers 8
The Qualities of Good Reports 8
A Day in the Life of Two Report Writers 9
Exercises 11

2 Getting Started 13

Selecting a Topic 14
Determining Audience, Purpose, and Writer's Role 15
 Audience 15 Purpose 16 Writer's Role 16
Exercises 18

3 Analyzing Your Audience 20

- A Lay Audience 21**
 - Human Interest 22 Background 25 Definitions 26*
 - Simplicity 28 Graphics 29 A Challenging*
 - Audience 31*
- Executives 32**
- Experts 36**
- Technicians 40**
- The Combined Audience 45**
- Exercises 47**

4 Finding Your Way in the Library 48

- The Card Catalog 49**
- Reference Works 54**
- Periodicals 59**
 - Commercial Magazines 59 Newspapers 60*
 - Professional Journals 62*
- Government Publications 64**
- Computerized Information Retrieval 67**
- Conclusion 71**
- Exercises 72**

5 Gathering and Checking Information 74

- Calling upon Your Memory 74**
- Searching the Literature 75**
- Generalizing from Particulars and Particularizing from Generalizations 80**
- Inspecting Local Sites and Facilities 83**
- Preparing and Administering a Questionnaire 84**
 - Drafting the Questions 85 Administering the*
 - Questionnaire 87*
- Checking Readers' Attitudes and Requirements 89**
- Interviews 90**
- Letters of Inquiry 92**
- Performing Calculations and Analyses 93**
- Reviewing the Information Already Gathered 95**
- Exercises 97**

6 Technical Exposition 99

Topical Arrangement 100
Exemplification 102
Definition 103
Classification and Division 107
Comparison 112
Causal Analysis 114
Effective Exposition 118
Exercises 120

7 Technical Narration, Description, and Argumentation 124

Narration 124
Description 132
Argumentation 141
Persuasive Strategy 144
Exercises 146

8 Organizing Your Report 148

The Organizational Process 148
 Brainstorming 150 Organizing Your Material 152
The Formal Outline 156
 Reasons for Outlining 156 Outlining Conventions 157
Report Format 161
 Using a Functional Format 161 Revealing Your Organization to Your Reader 163 Using Standard Formats When Appropriate 163 Providing for Selective Reading 163 Integrating Graphics 16 Example Formats 164
Exercises 165

9 Achieving a Clear Style 167

The Paragraph 168
Listing 171
Clear Sentence Structure 172
 Sentence Length 173 Sentence Order 174

<i>Sentence Complexity and Density</i>	175
<i>Active Verbs</i>	179
<i>Active and Passive Voice</i>	180
<i>First-Person Point of View</i>	182
<i>A Caution</i>	182
Specific Words	182
Pomposity	184
<i>Empty Words</i>	184
<i>Elegant Variation</i>	185
<i>Pompous Vocabulary</i>	186
Summary	187
Exercises	189

10 Writing and Revising Your Report 192

Writing the Rough Draft	192
Revising the Paper	195
Checklist	198
Exercises	199

11 Formal Elements of Reports 200

The Functions of Format	201
Prefatory Elements	201
<i>Letter of Transmittal and Preface</i>	202
<i>Cover</i>	203
<i>Title Page</i>	205
<i>Table of Contents</i>	207
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	208
<i>Glossary and List of Symbols</i>	210
<i>Abstracts</i>	214
Main Elements	218
<i>Introduction</i>	218
<i>Body</i>	221
<i>Ending</i>	222
Supplementary Elements	227
<i>Appendixes and Annexes</i>	227
<i>Headings</i>	228
<i>Numbering System</i>	229
<i>Pagination</i>	231
Documentation	232
<i>Notes and Footnotes</i>	233
<i>Bibliographies and Reference Lists</i>	239
<i>Copyright</i>	241
Exercises	242

12 Graphical Elements of Reports 246

Tables	247
<i>Informal Tables</i>	247
<i>Formal Tables</i>	248
Graphs	252
<i>Bar Graphs</i>	253
<i>Line Graphs</i>	254
<i>Circle Graphs</i>	258
<i>Pictograms</i>	259
<i>Table-Graph Relationship</i>	259

Drawings, Photographs, and Diagrams	260
<i>Drawings and Photographs</i>	262
<i>Diagrams</i>	263
A Closing Word	269
Exercises	269

PART 2

APPLICATIONS 275

13 Correspondence 277

Style and Tone	277
Format	282
<i>Heading</i>	285
<i>Date Line</i>	285
<i>Inside Address</i>	286
<i>Subject Line</i>	287
<i>Salutation</i>	287
<i>Body</i>	287
<i>Complimentary Close</i>	287
<i>Signature Block</i>	288
<i>End Notations</i>	288
<i>Continuation Page</i>	289
Letters of Inquiry	289
<i>Identification</i>	290
<i>Inquiry</i>	291
<i>Need</i>	291
<i>Choice of Recipient</i>	292
<i>Gracious Close</i>	292
<i>Sample Letters</i>	292
Replies to Letters of Inquiry	293
Letters of Complaint and Adjustment	295
The Correspondence of the Job Hunt	300
<i>The Letter of Application</i>	300
<i>The Resume</i>	305
<i>Follow-up Letters</i>	309
Letter and Memorandum Reports	311
How to Write a Business Letter	317
Exercises	317

14 Instructions for Performing a Process 318

The Introduction	319
Theory or Principles of Operation	321
List of Equipment and Materials Needed	324
Description of the Mechanism	325
Performance Instructions	331
<i>Style</i>	331
<i>Graphics</i>	334
<i>Organization</i>	334
<i>Format</i>	338
Troubleshooting	338
Putting It All Together	341
A Final Word	348
Exercises	348

15 Proposals 350

- Basic Plan of Proposals 352**
- Project Summary 353**
- Project Description 353**
 - Introduction 354 Rationale and Significance 354*
 - Plan of Work 357 Facilities and Equipment 359*
- Personnel Qualifications 360**
- Budget 360**
- Appendixes 361**
- Urge to Action 361**
- Student Proposals 362**
- Exercises 368**

16 Progress Reports 369

- The Beginning 371**
- The Middle 371**
 - Time Plan 371 Task Plan 372 Combination Plans 372*
- The Ending 373**
- Additional Considerations 374**
 - Physical Appearance 374 Style and Tone 374*
 - Originality 374 Accomplishment and Foresight 375*
 - Exceeding Expectations 375*
- Sample Progress Report 376**
- Exercises 378**

17 Feasibility Reports 380

- Logic of the Feasibility Study 380**
- Routine of the Feasibility Report 384**
 - Introduction 385 Discussion 388 Factual Summary 394 Conclusions 398*
 - Recommendations 400*
- Exercises 402**

18 Empirical Research Reports 403

- Introduction and Literature Review 405**
- Materials and Methods 408**
 - Design of the Experiment 408 Materials 408*

<i>Procedure</i>	409
<i>Methods for Observation and Interpretation</i>	411
Results	412
Discussion	413
A Final Word	415
Exercises	415

19 Oral Reports and Group Conferences 416

Oral Report Preparation 416

<i>Choosing Delivery Techniques</i>	417
<i>Organizing Report Content</i>	419

Report Delivery 423

<i>The Physical Aspects of Speaking</i>	423
<i>Audience Interaction</i>	426

Visual Aids 429

<i>Criteria for Visual Aids</i>	430
<i>Visual Design—What and How?</i>	432
<i>The Tools of Visual Presentation</i>	434
<i>Summary</i>	441

Group Conferences 441

<i>Conference Behavior</i>	442
<i>Group Roles</i>	443
<i>The Problem-Solving Conference</i>	445

Exercises 449

PART 3 HANDBOOK 451

Common Errors 453

Conventions 463

Appendixes 487

A. A Student Report	489
B. Technical Reference Guides	505
C. A Selected Bibliography	523

Chapter Notes 527

Index 535

Part 1

Process of Technical Reporting

Part 1 serves as an introduction to the process of technical reporting. Following the overview of technical reporting given in Chapter 1, we introduce you to the process from the inception of an idea for a report all the way to the finished product. Interspersed with the chapters on process are chapters on the tools you will need for technical reporting, such as the library, the rhetorical modes, and graphics. If you wish to read the process chapters through before dealing with the tools, read in sequence Chapters 2, “Getting Started,” 3, “Analyzing Your Audience,” 5, “Gathering and Checking Information,” 8, “Organizing Your Report,” and 10, “Writing and Revising Your Report.”