

REVIEW:

**STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL
WRITING**

and

ELEMENTS OF PRACTICAL WRITING

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In his preface,¹ Kevin Harty suggests three ways to use his book: as a supplement to a standard business or technical writing text; as a supplement to a general composition text or handbook; or on its own as a text or reference book. Only an especially creative instructor could successfully use Harty's book "on its own," since it does not include the necessary "how-to" material found in handbooks and rhetorics. Instead, Harty has collected here 28 wonderfully opinionated but practical articles on writing for the professions—all written by people working or consulting in business and industry.

This real world strategy gives the book a credibility lacking in many technical/business writing texts. For example, when Malcolm Forbes, Editor of *Forbes Magazine*, explains how to write an effective business letter, students sit up and take notice. His forceful advice to use the active voice and to "annihilate unnecessary words" is more believable than similar advice from an English professor. Similarly, when David Ewing, Executive Editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, or Harold K. Mintz, Senior Tech Editor for RCA, talk about better functional writing, people listen.

Tucked among these contributions from business and industry are articles by Linda Rower, Peter Elbow, J. C. Mathes and Dwight

Stevenson—writing teachers who also consult extensively in the business world. The practical combination of writing theory with on-the-job applications is a long overdue strategy for teaching effective written communication.

But the flip side of this generally successful format is that the articles do not present a cohesive instructional model capable of standing alone as the only classroom text. The varied opinions presented in the book serve more to reinforce the teacher's own "how-to" material or a standard writing text than to exemplify the process of writing for the professions.

Harty's selection of articles provides excellent coverage of the important elements of technical writing. Beginning with the composing process (pre-writing), the book moves through sections on language problems, specific applications (memoranda, reports, proposals), to sound advice on writing cover letters and resumé's. The final section contains an annotated bibliography of over 275 sources for more information on business and technical writing. This segment adds to the tremendous value of Harty's text as a reference book.

If there are weaknesses, they are within a few of the articles themselves, not in the book as a whole. Stuart Chase's essay on "Gobbledygook," for example is an unproductive rehashing of the jargon problem among specialists and it serves little purpose here. The section on resumé's and job applications gives good advice for professionals but is geared down to the undergraduate level, limiting the scope of an otherwise valuable chapter.

STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL WRITING is a genuinely useful book, containing practical advice for writers in business and industry. It speaks to the intended readers in language they can understand and respect. As a reference book or as a supplement to a more traditional text, it is invaluable for the undergraduate or the working professional.

On the other hand, Ralph Voss' ELEMENTS OF PRACTICAL WRITING: A GUIDE TO PROFESSIONAL WRITING is standard fare as a business and technical writing handbook. According to Voss, "practical writing" is the rhetorical situation in which the writer knows what to write but needs help on how to write it. His book is prescriptive in its approach to helping the business executive who needs to write a memorandum and the student who must write a report. Unfortunately, the book has problems which limit its usefulness for both the professional and the student writer.

First, the text skims the surface of the elements necessary in a technical writing handbook. Although it covers everything from business letters, proposals, and reports to sentence style and word usage—including a chapter on typing skills and one on proofreading—each subject gets cursory attention. The book is more of a list of rules than careful explanations. As a result, this handbook is simply too brief to do justice to its contents, and it only emphasizes *how* to write not why such writing strategies work. Students are locked into situationally specific patterns. For example, the section on technical reports contains three pages of rules and an eight-page sample feasibility study. Voss assumes his readers will not only take his advice but will also understand how to apply it in various situations and will not question its validity.

The book's second weakness is its obvious focus on the undergraduate market. While the examples used typify professional writing samples, the level of the brief explanatory material falls below most business and technical professionals. The discussion of what "cc" means at the bottom of a letter or the description of the standard method for addressing envelopes, for instance, are appropriate in the undergraduate classroom but are too elementary for the working executive.

Another serious omission for both the professional and the student writer is the lack of any mention of word processing skills. In today's fast-paced business world, a writing handbook must deal with the innovations caused by the computer industry. Voss' suggestion to "put a fresh ribbon in the typewriter" is nearly outdated.

Although ELEMENTS OF PRACTICAL WRITING covers all the traditional bases, that fact is its major flaw. It remains a static text in a rapidly changing field.

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Note

¹STRATEGIES FOR BUSINESS AND TECHNICAL WRITING, 2nd edition, Kevin J. Harty (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985, 287 pages, \$11.95), ISBN 0-15-583925-X; and ELEMENTS OF PRACTICAL WRITING, Ralph Voss (Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1985, 274 pages, \$13.95). ISBN 0-03-062523-8.