

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Administratively-Write! Communicating in a Business Environment.
 Ron S. Blicq, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Scarborough, 1985. 610 pp.
 ISBN 0-13-008483-2

In Administratively-Write! Ron Blicq does for the world of business what he did for engineers and technicians in Technically-Write! His preface indicates that his aim has been to provide "all the guidelines you need to communicate effectively with management, customers, the public, and other businesspeople." The author is as good as his word.

Instructors familiar with Technically-Write! will discover similar concerns, strategies, and assignments; in essence, Administratively-Write! follows the same pattern. Blicq begins by describing common problems of communication, providing "horrible examples," object lessons to illustrate the dangers and possible consequences. We are then introduced to the personnel of two Canadian companies, a large one, Vancouver Business Systems Inc of Toronto, and a smaller, Floral West Imports Ltd of Vancouver. The business transactions of these firms with customers and suppliers generate both models and exercises. The keynote of Blicq's method, as in the earlier book, is the importance of clear, unambiguous communication in both writing and speaking.

Part One formulates a basic approach to business writing which helps the writer identify purpose, audience, and emphasis. Part Two deals with business correspondence, Part Three with business reports, and Part Four with other miscellaneous, but important, kinds of communication (instructions, evaluations, invoices, and questionnaires). Part Four also includes sections on working with word-processing systems and making various types of oral presentations. As before, useful techniques, like the "six hidden words," are illustrated along the way to help the writer start writing and develop what he or she wants to say in a concise and appropriate way.

Part Five outlines methods of creating a vigorous writing style, from choosing vital language to creating strong sentences to constructing coherent paragraphs. A Glossary of Business Usage offers guidelines for identifying wordiness, forming abbreviations, and using capitals and also discusses how to use metric terminology properly--an obvious benefit for a Canadian audience.

Each of the first four parts progresses from the illustration of simple forms to more complex ones. In Part Three, for example, the discussion of business reports starts by explaining how to write a straightforward incident report and works through to the formal report, complete with cover letter, summary, table of contents, bibliography, and appendices. Each of these parts concludes with practical exercises based on the material presented in the chapter. In terms of detail and range of complexity, the assignments are almost an embarrassment of riches; a few chapters would probably fuel a course on business writing for a year.

A major difference in method from that presented in Technically-Write! is Blicq's development of the pyramid technique discussed toward the end of that text. This device, by means of fairly simple variation, becomes a useful organizing principle for practically all writing in Administratively-Write! from simple letters to formal business reports.

One might call Ron Blicq "the Proust of business and technical writing"; despite the apparent incongruity, the comparison is not entirely far-fetched. To read Administratively-Write! is to enter a fully realized world. The two companies and their employees are described with a thoroughness and detail that makes the revelation of their fictional nature something of a surprise. The advantage for students using the book should be evident. Blicq presents business scenarios that reflect real-life situations and personalities. By so doing, he avoids the facelessness and sense of operating in a vacuum that mar other business and technical writing texts.

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Technically-Write! Communicating in a Technological Era. Canadian Third Edition. Ron S. Blicq. Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., Scarborough, 1987. 428 pp. ISBN 0-13-898776-9.

Reading Technically-Write! is like watching a well-written soap opera. Blicq creates a fictional company, peopled with believable characters and realistic situations. In so doing, he circumvents the problems of most writing texts by providing his readers with the opportunity to play situational roles in the company. Students are thus given a point of view, told what the intended audience will be, and what the writing purpose is. Set down in a task-oriented fictional role, the student approaches each assignment with an eye to his or her position in the company.

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Technically-Write! covers everything from the preparatory stages of composition, to memos, letters, and formal reports. Whereas earlier editions stopped at the delivery of the technical paper, the third edition includes a timely section on the job search, some guidelines for writing with a computer, and a section on the scientific research paper.

Ron Blicq's text genuinely allows an instructor an opportunity to teach from specific guidelines and from precise examples. It is a realistic work that describes, for example, the stages of an outline, not as a prescriptive composition text might do, but as the outline might actually be written. The format of the text neatly summarizes and simplifies the main instructions of each chapter in chart form. The report, for instance, is pared down to four general sections--Summary, Background, Facts, and Outcome--sections easily recalled by a novice writer anxious for structural and organizational aids.

The text is also admirably personal. Not only does Blicq wisely advocate the use of the first person, but he chattily discloses some information about his own writing style ("As I sit at my desk, the heading "Writing the First Draft" at the top of a clean sheet of paper, I find that I am experiencing exactly the same problem that every writer encounters from time to time: an inability to find the right words . . ."). He introduces us to H. L. Winman & Associates in a like friendly manner, though perhaps, in his efforts to make readers comfortable, he goes a bit too far. Do we need, for example, to know what H. L. Winman looks like in order to assume our roles? One advantage of this technique, however, is that it gives Blicq the freedom to attribute ideas to his fictional characters rather than to himself. Judging from the wide range and detailed description of characters, one might ask why Blicq doesn't try his hand at a novel--Murder at the Community College?

Although I doubt that any technical writing course is comprehensive enough to cover this text in depth, any course, particularly one designed for engineers, might benefit from the variety of charts, examples, stylistic aids, and assignments here assembled. I wonder only if it might be less daunting to present less material under one cover. Still, for simulation of writing tasks in the "real world," Blicq's text cannot be improved upon.

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