Technical Communication: Strategy and Process. Lilita Rodman. Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.

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Lilita Rodman's **Technical Communication: Strategy and Process** is a good introductory text to technical communication. Well organized, clearly written and visually appealing and consistent, the text is user-friendly. At least, that's what my students tell me in their journals.

For two years now I have been using Rodman's text in English 210A, Business and Technical Writing, at the University of Waterloo. I selected the text for its North American (rather than Canadian or American) content, and because it looked like a text that students could use without a lot of instructor commentary and interpretation. To date, **Technical Communication** has indeed proved a good resource for the course.

The organizing principle of the text reflects current, and sometimes conflicting, notions of composition pedagogy. The first section emphasizes style and graphics, two of the important skill sets that technical communicators require. The second section looks at technical communication from a more rhetorical or process-oriented perspective. This section reflects the invention, arrangement, style and delivery canons of classical rhetoric (although these terms are not directly used). For example, Rodman asks students to consider the rhetorical context of their task--the audience, purpose and genre (invention); then she explores outlining (arrangement); revision (style); and finally she reviews presentation of the copy (delivery). In the third major section entitled "Basic Writing Strategies" Rodman focuses on several tasks such as defining, describing mechanisms, and writing about procedures central to technical communication. From a classical perspective, this focus on specific types of arrangement makes sense. The next few sections

deal with varying genres of technical communication: the report, memo, letters, and other types of documents such as proposals. These genre chapters reflect a more product-oriented approach to teaching. The text concludes with a useful chapter on technical speaking.

Perhaps because the text is attempting to appeal to different pedagogical traditions--skill-based, rhetorical or process-oriented, and product-oriented--it encounters a few organizational problems. For example, a first-rate review of research techniques is placed in the genre section in the chapter on report writing. From my perspective, research is a part of invention, and I would have preferred that the section discussing rhetorical context relate more closely to the research chapter. Also the division between style (in section one) and revision (in section two) seems odd since style is best taught in the context of revision.

I must admit I do not use the text the way it is organized. But then Rodman urges instructors to re-organize it according to their needs. Because I work from a rhetorical perspective, I normally begin with a thorough exploration of the rhetorical context for every assignment. The context itself has to generate the content and stylistic and visual requirements. Consequently, I tend to work more with the material at the centre of the text--the chapters on strategies and on rhetorical context.

I also use the text in a different way than Rodman suggests. My course has become a sort of shadow research organization--The Innovative Development Group (IDG)--in which students design products or services of value to students and/or faculty at the University of Waterloo. Rodman's text is an important resource for students as they compose a letter of application to get into the company, draft a project proposal, write a research report, and design customer letters and user manuals, and compose a final feasibility report. In fact, Rodman's clear style, consistent visual presentation, and thorough coverage of most topics means that the instructors in the course have more opportunity to act as consultants and facilitators while students design their projects. In workshops, when students ask a purely technical question regarding graphics or stylistic choice, we ask them if they have consulted Rodman. If they haven't, we send them back to the text. Workshop time can

then be more productively spent developing ideas for content or making design decisions.

In general, students express satisfaction with the text. In their journals they praise the specific examples, especially in the strategies section; approve of the consistent use of document design techniques; comment on the clear, readable style; and assert that they will keep the text as a reference source.

Both my students and I have suggestions for improving the text. We would like to see more information on document design. Technical communicators need a good background in the principles guiding the interaction between the written and visual features of texts, especially as we move into more on-line environments. Students need to be able to use the language of fonts, serif versus san serif, widows and orphans, etc. We would also like to know more about the various ways documents are now constructed in organizations. Students need information about and practice in the group processes that now structure documents. Moreover, we would like to see more examples of technical communication, taken not from student writing, but from the professional worlds that students will be joining. In our course, for example, we looked at sample manual pages and consumer material written by various computer companies such as Olivetti and IBM.

Finally, as an instructor, I would like to see a more consistent focus on audience. (As one of my students put it, "This course ought to be called "Audience 'R Us".") The sections on memos and letters are somewhat prescriptive to satisfy, perhaps, the more product-oriented instructor. From the student's perspective, these sections seem to offer formulae. I sometimes found it difficult, for example, to convince students that a memo could be longer than a page since the examples are, in fact, fairly limited and prosaic. I realize that the text doesn't really offer formulae as evident by the discussion of status and hierarchy in the memo section. Yet the emphasis on specific types of discourse, such as letters of inquiry, leads some students to hope that formulae exist that they can simply copy. But my experience has been that a memo or letter can serve virtually any rhetorical purpose and must be audience sensitive to achieve its purpose. Even memos, as all of us know, can be political

hot potatoes in an organizational context.

None of these suggestions detracts from my original recommendation. Although not designed for a case approach for teaching technical communication, Rodman's text worked well especially for its student users who found it accessible, readable, and helpful.