REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Technical Writing Style

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> Technical Writing Style, *Dan Jones, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1998,*
> *301 pages.*

What is the essence of good style in technical writing? How can a technical writer present ideas not only clearly and concisely but also in a manner that is effective, appropriate, vivid and engaging? How does one develop and project a personal style that is appropriate for a particular text, purpose and audience? These are some of the questions the reader hopes to find answered in Dan Jones's *Technical Writing Style.*

Technical writing has long had the reputation of being mechanical, impersonal, dull and characterized chiefly by its specialized content and terminology and its functional nature. In recent years, however, with the emergence of a new rhetorical view of science, technical prose has been recognized as being far more complex and heterogeneous than some had assumed; it is fundamentally rhetorical, encompassing a wide range of styles and levels of technicality and reflecting the discourse of the communities in which and for which it is written.

This book is intended for readers who have some knowledge of technical discourse and who wish to improve their style, whether they be students, teachers, practitioners or technical professionals. It presents knowledge distilled from the author's research and practical experience in the field of technical writing and combines both research-based insight and experienced-based instruction. Each of the twelve chapters contains both explanatory material and exercises; each begins with an overview of its learning objectives and concludes with a chapter summary, a series of exercises, questions and topics for discussion and, in some cases, a case study. Some chapters, particularly the opening ones, are well rooted in research and make for informative reading. Other chapters echo standard writing principles found in most writing manuals; this is understandable, given that, as Jones ac-

knowledges, "Technical writing is first and foremost writing, and…writers of technical prose face many of the same difficulties as do writers of any other kind of writing" (p.7).

The first four chapters lay the groundwork for the rest of the book, examining fundamental terms and concepts and giving the reader an overview of considerations that define, shape and determine technical writing style. Style is an elusive quality, hard to define and categorize; the term itself has a variety of meanings and interpretations. In the opening chapter, the author attempts to circumscribe style, examining the many uses of the term and quoting from various other writers: "Style can mean a great many things" (Jacques Barzun); "…it is…the dress of thoughts…." (John Walter); "…it is a living, breathing thing…." (James Kilpatrick). Jones defines style broadly as encompassing not only the choice of words and phrases, unity, coherence, clarity, accuracy, conciseness, tone and projected persona, but also considerations of audience, purpose and context. He debunks the myth that technical writing style is always objective and impersonal and explains that technical writing, although chiefly expository and functional, encompasses a wide range of styles, degrees of formality and levels of technicality. To Jones, technical writing is creative, imaginative, persuasive and fundamentally rhetorical.

Chapter Two focuses on the style of discourse communities. Again, some of the most salient passages are Jones's quotes from other writers: "Style is a way of belonging to a community, and each community has its own style, not simply its own diction and format but…its own values, emphases, ways of seeing and thinking" (Mary Rosner). Jones describes political considerations and issues, such as credibility within the discourse community, which affect writing style, and he contrasts the differences between writing for one's own discourse community, for a lay audience and for another discourse community. The case study of the Challenger disaster is presented and analysed as an example of miscommunication between discourse communities.

In Chapter Three, the author addresses the issues of prescriptive and descriptive approaches to style, examining notions of good and bad style and appropriate and inappropriate style. He gives a brief overview of some principal styles, rather arbitrarily categorized. In Chapter Four, Jones examines the role of technical prose as persuasion; he presents and explains the new rhetoric of science, in which scientific language is seen as expressive, involving rhetorical choices and strategies.

Chapters Five to Eight mark a switch from theoretical concerns to more pragmatic ones and mainly address points found in many writing manuals: diction, sentence structure and paragraph development. Chapter Five focuses on levels of

diction, denotation and connotation, and what the author calls "strategies" of accuracy, voice, appropriateness, clarity, conciseness, consistency, simplicity and sincerity. Jones outlines common faults of diction, discusses the use of literary devices in technical writing and finishes the chapter with a section on euphemisms. Chapter Six continues to focus on issues of diction: the author looks at technical and specialized language and terminology, and he devotes part of the chapter to defining and illustrating the meanings of the term *jargon* and to examining some of the challenges of word choice in specialized fields. Chapter Seven reviews the basics of sentence structures, examines some of the elements of style in prose (emphasis, rhythm, sentence variation) and concludes with a review of a number of common sentence faults. Chapter Eight focuses on the paragraph and describes the standard methods of paragraph development; included in this paragraph are sections on coherence and consistency in the paragraph and in larger segments of text.

The next three chapters pick up some the conceptual threads found in the opening chapters.

Chapter Nine focuses on tone and explores such issues as the ethos of writing, the development of appropriate tone and the use of humor in technical writing. Chapter Ten focuses on bias and political correctness in writing, including a discussion of gender-neutral language. Chapter Eleven is devoted to ethics: ethical concerns in technical communication, unethical language and the ethics of style.

The concluding chapter of the book deals with editing and, more specifically, editing for style; Jones defines the editing process and provides a checklist for the editor.

This book offers a wealth of information for the reader interested in the rhetoric of technical writing. The book's solid foundation in the research done in the field and the abundance of references and quotes make it highly informative reading for writing teachers and students. In fact, Jones's extensive references to and quotes from authorities in the field at times overshadow his text; he quotes so extensively from others, particularly in the more theoretically oriented passages, that the references seem to replace his own voice, with the text reading like a research report.

Jones combines the theoretical with the practical. In addition to the extensive references to research in the field, the book provides hands-on applications and exercises that would be useful in the classroom. His case studies, which are found primarily in the earlier chapters, would also make for interesting class discussion. He presents a variety of cases that are becoming classics in contemporary American rhetorical analysis: the Three Mile Island disaster, the Challenger catastrophe, the

Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Ruby Ridge incident and the Apollo 13 "successful failure".

Unfortunately, some weaknesses are evident in the organization and prose of the text. The arrangement of some material is questionable: for example, the case study of the Three Mile Island disaster, a most useful case for analysis, is given prematurely in Chapter One, before concepts key to his commentary, such as discourse community, have even been mentioned. To proceed to this most important case study at this point, before having introduced some of the underlying concepts and terms involved, is inopportune.

Similarly, the sequence of some of the chapters seems rather erratic; by organising section and chapter topics more coherently around themes, the writer could have made the text and its contents more accessible and could have eliminated the repetition of topics in a number of chapters. Similarly, the relationship between sections within chapters is sometimes unclear: for example, the relevance of the paragraph entitled "On Punctuation, Spelling and Grammar" in the chapter on discourse communities needs to be made explicit.

And finally, the author's own writing style is at times uneven. Early on in the book the reader cannot help but notice that the writing fails to provide a consistent model of good prose style, as a book on style implicitly promises to do. The very elements of sentence style he describes — rhythm, sentence variety, elegance, conciseness, clarity and precision — are sometimes lacking in his own prose. The weaknesses in his writing style include repetitive sentence structures and overuse of vague words such as "factors", as well as occasional wordiness and lapses of diction. The following provide a few examples of Jones's sometimes clumsy wording:

> "So the confusion about style in technical prose — yes, it has a style because all prose does, but it seems to lack style because it's often handled so poorly — is a problem" (p.4).

> "Concerning the fault of poorly organised documents, people read for different purposes at different times" (p.11).

> "For the important style elements of unity and coherence in your paragraphs and larger segments, 'Chapter 8: Structuring Paragraphs and Other Segments', addresses not only these issues but also many different ways to develop technical paragraphs" (p.3).

Nevertheless, the book brings together an abundance of interesting material and useful applications. Jones offers insight into the essence of style in technical discourse, by description if not always by example. *Technical Writing Style* would be a valuable addition to the library and classroom of a technical writing teacher.