

## Reviews

text comprehension. And Charles Peters, in Chapter Six, analyses the extent to which prose comprehension research has been used in instructional materials and the development of such materials at secondary level. The use of basic and applied data is seen by Mr. Peters as being minimal. No wonder, if all the data have been so badly written about as in these articles.

In Chapter Seven Thomas Fitzgerald comments on Mr. Peters' chapter, but takes a slightly different perspective. He points out that many teachers are becoming "material bound" to the neglect of the textbook. Presumably, subject matter is being neglected in favour of so-called "reading aids." In the last chapter Gwendolyn Johnson and Lester Lefton assume, so the preface tells us, a "bottom-up" position. They describe "information extraction capabilities based on the physical characteristics of text and reading necessary to effect the change from print to purpose." Your guess as to what this could mean would be of great interest to me.

Some of the findings and ideas expressed are of a minimal interest. However, the obstacle to the stated goal of transferring information is the way most of the articles have been written and set up. The book is loaded with jargon. What can a "competent reader" make of "top level structure", "advance organizers", "fluent and not so fluent readers", "concept attainment", "inference generating", "micro and macro propositions", etc? None of this is illuminated by the deadly dull analogies about cancer and forests, and by diagrams which would defeat an engineer. Don Nix, in his "Links" article, states unequivocally that "reading comprehension is notoriously difficult to teach, regardless of the education level or age of the student." Perhaps it would not be so difficult (if indeed it is) if those whose business it is and whose concern it should be to think and write clearly had not forgotten or lost that capacity.

Rather than attempt the customary review, I have tried to let this book speak for itself through the quotes; to do otherwise would have been as futile as praising an Emperor's new clothes.

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**Dwight W. Stevenson, editor.**

**COURSES, COMPONENTS, AND EXERCISES IN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION**  
Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1981.  
230 pp.

Why can't Johnny, B.Eng., M.B.A., write?

The current "literacy crisis" is of concern to educators at all levels and in all fields, from elementary school to the engineering

classroom. However, the extent and nature of the problem and the appropriate pedagogical response to it remain much debated questions. Fueled by the often hysterical popular media, the public demand has been for a return to some pre-crisis methodology which would stress the supposedly forgotten "basics" of language. Scholars in fields related to writing, rejecting this nostalgic response, have evolved a body of theory and practice designed to meet contemporary problems in writing instruction; indeed the teaching of composition has experienced a renaissance of sorts in the last decade. Courses, Components, and Exercises in Technical Communication reflects many of the concepts and concerns of this rebirth.

As the title suggests, the book is a practical guide to activities and exercises in "technical writing," a term which usually refers to the writing done in engineering, business, and the sciences. Ideas and suggestions for classroom work in all of these disciplines are included.

While the book should be read carefully, cover to cover, by anyone involved in teaching writing in any discipline, it also deserves a close reading by teachers of technical courses. If **what** a student writes and **how** he writes it are inextricably bound together, then interaction between technical content courses and writing courses is essential. Faculty-wide involvement in writing is practised as well as preached in Stevenson's collection, for its contributors include professors of the Humanities, English, Education, and Linguistics, teachers of technical content courses, technical writing teachers, a professor of Engineering, and a manager of Marketing.

The need for creativity and imagination in technical communication is an assumption shared by most of the contributors. Whereas the final product should be clear and concise, the process of creating good technical writing, like all composition tasks, is an often messy and confusing business. This book offers a repertoire of strategies meant to help the student through that confusion to clear technical prose. In his preface, Stevenson claims that "Students taught by the method suggested in this collection should be unusually well prepared to assume the writing tasks they will encounter in their careers beyond graduation" (p.ix). If that is so, it will be due to the many imaginative and thoughtful assignments presented, such as case studies, collaborative writing projects, simulation games, and writing for publication.

In a chapter entitled "Technical Writing Class: Day One," Dean Hall describes a first day activity which is amusing and probably effective. Each student places three sheets of paper on his or her desk. One sheet is used to make a paper airplane; the second sheet is used to write instructions on how to build the plane the student has just made; the third sheet is used to build another plane following the written instructions of a fellow student. Another intriguing idea is presented by Herman Estrin, who describes how he had engineering

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students write books for children about difficult, technical subjects. The students reportedly enjoyed the challenge of adapting highly technical language for young children, and the books were donated to a library; some were published.

The technical writer in professional situations often faces a bewildering array of information and of possible audiences. In order to simulate real writing contexts, the case studies described here provide all the necessary memos, letters, and background information that an interested instructor needs for classroom use. The students involved in these case studies must then select pertinent details and potential audiences from the material provided. Many of the cases require a range of written responses that includes interdepartmental memos, informal reports, and a variety of letters, and to help identify the successful writer, some of the contributors suggest procedures for evaluation. Lawrence Johnson, Linda Flower, and Peter Klaver in particular describe useful cases and simulations.

The majority of chapters in the book are interesting, and some are excellent. Only two (8 and 9) are disappointing and seem strangely archaic, because the author encourages the use of published technical literature as models or examples of good writing. The technical writing student should certainly have access to good technical writing, but currently there are some persuasive arguments against the use of models.

Another disturbing aspect of the book is the number of skills implied to be the responsibility of the technical writing instructor. In the one semester normally granted to courses in technical writing, can a teacher who is building a repertoire of writing strategies, preparing case studies, reading and responding to assignments, and stage-managing simulation exercises give the necessary time and effort to teaching technical illustrations, oral reports, and library research as well? The technical writing teacher thus could become, like the high school English teacher, solely responsible for all instruction in language and communication. That eventuality would run counter to the spirit of cooperation in this very useful book. The discerning writing teacher will have to pick and choose from it those exercises which can realistically be included in a one semester course, and must urge his or her colleagues in the technical fields to participate wherever and however they can.

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