

Reporting Technical Information; Designing Technical Reports; IBM Dictionary of Computing

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Reporting Technical Information; Designing Technical Reports; IBM Dictionary of Computing

Abstract

Book reviews of *Reporting Technical Information*, by Kenneth W. Houp and Thomas E. Pearsall; and *Designing Technical Reports*, by J.C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson; *IBM Dictionary of Computing* (Ninth Edition), International Business Machines Corporation.

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Reviews

Reporting Technical Information (Seventh Edition). Kenneth W. Houp and Thomas E. Pearsall. New York: Macmillan, 1992. 685 pages.

This book, in various editions, has been around for more than 20 years. Its longevity can be attributed in no small part to the fact that it is generally an excellent resource. It's a thick book because the authors keep adding new and useful information. Principal additions to the 7th edition include a chapter on document design that relates specifically to the use of word processing technology, a chapter on collaborative writing, and the inclusion of planning and revision checklists at the end of most chapters.

Other changes that may be less obvious include an expanded section on documentation and an expanded and better organized grammar "handbook." Documentation material is based on the Modern Language Association system, which the authors see as "the simplest of all the major systems and, therefore, the easiest to learn." The grammar "handbook" includes new sections on acronyms and non-sexist language. The latter, though straightforward and useful, is somewhat superficial. It would have been better to include this topic in the body of the text and treat it in greater depth.

A final important addition to the new version is a color insert on computer graphics. The authors recognize that the use of computer graphics, often in color, is becoming common in technical reports.

The book is organized in six parts. The first part covers the basics of technical writing, with chapters progressing from the beginning of the composing process in situational analysis through the gathering of information and the final polishing of the report. Part II deals with the techniques of technical writing. It covers organizing materials to inform, to define and describe, and to persuade. Part III treats document design and Part IV covers extended applications of technical writing (e.g., instructions, proposals, and progress reports). Oral reports are subject to separate treatment in Part V, which has an appropriate emphasis on presentation graphics. Part VI is the grammar "handbook."

Appendices include a sample report, an excellent guide to technical reference sources, and a bibliography. A comprehensive and useful index is included.

The success of this book begins with the authors' understanding of technical writing as a problem-solving process. They treat this process as a means to an end that may range in size and complexity from a simple memo to a series of books. Their approach makes the book, designed as a classroom text, a worthwhile addition to the professional writer's reference shelf. For example, each of us would do well to review Chapter 6, "Achieving a Readable Style," from time to time. It reminds us to use active verbs, to avoid noun strings and empty words, and to care about good sentence and paragraph structure. But it also warns against being too concerned about following the rules. Writing, the authors recognize, is a craft, not a science. I am inclined to compare *Reporting Technical Information* with Paul Anderson's *Technical Writing* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2nd edition 1991). I prefer Anderson,

because of his reader-centered approach. But Houp and Pearsall have stood the test of time precisely because their work is a standard in the field. This new edition improves on a classic by updating both content and format. Every writer working with technical subject matter can benefit from it.

Robert G. Hays
University of Illinois

***Designing Technical Reports (Second Edition)* J. C. Mathes and Dwight W. Stevenson. New York: Macmillan, 1991. 506 pages.**

This book is mis-titled. I expected it to be something of a companion to Houp's and Pearsall's *Reporting Technical Information*, above, with an emphasis on designing technical reports once they had been written. Not so. Mathes and Stevenson, in their words, "treat writing as a design task, one which requires pre-design analysis and decisions and then moves in a deliberate way through a logical sequence of design decisions." The title notwithstanding, the primary emphasis of this book is on writing and editing.

On a more positive side, this book clearly targets a specific audience. It assumes that "practicing professionals and managers on the job" in industry, business, and government have written communication responsibilities for which they're not always prepared. Who can argue with that?

Designing Technical Reports includes much of the standard fare you'd expect (once you get past the title). It also has some interesting additions to the typical content of such works. For example, a section on "additional issues" includes a chapter on writing in the multinational context and another on accepting legal and ethical responsibilities. In the cross-cultural communication process, the authors note, the function of written communication can change dramatically. They don't treat the multinational context in depth, unfortunately, but they do offer some practical examples of business correspondence in French, Spanish, and Japanese, with appropriate attention to subtle differences mandated by different cultural settings.

The chapter on legal and ethical responsibilities is good. Its premise is that technical and professional documents are by definition ethical acts, a fact the writers who produce them should never lose sight of. The basic message to the writer is, "You are accountable."

Another strength of this book is the quality of examples it offers. Sophisticated technical reports, proposals, memoranda, and correspondence from government agencies, business, and industry are used throughout to demonstrate effective communication techniques in various contexts. The professional communicator will be encouraged to see that sound, tried and true communication principles still work in even the most complex technical situations.

While this work continues the first edition's focus on engineering, it also draws examples from such diverse fields as banking, health care, social service, and insurance. The emphasis also shifts more appropriately to the short, informal report. Topically, it still gets down to important elements of communication: identifying audiences, addressing audience needs, defin-

ing purposes, and such nitty-gritty things as sentence and paragraph structure, clarity, and economy of language.

The final chapter is devoted to electronic communication tools. Unfortunately, it offers little information not available in much more comprehensive form through other sources.

Designing Technical Reports is not a book I'd recommend for the communications professional's reference shelf. It's too specialized and adds too little to what one with communications training and experience already knows. It seems better suited to the technician who needs more direction relative to a communications responsibility, and even here it's not the best source around.

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IBM Dictionary of Computing (Ninth Edition). October 1991. International Business Machines Corporation, P.O. Box 12195, Research Triangle Park, NC 27709. 644 pages. \$35.

The *IBM Dictionary of Computing* is a dictionary of information processing, personal computing, telecommunications, office systems, and IBM specific terms, including desktop publishing terms. The publishers say that the dictionary provides a comprehensive reference for anyone who uses, maintains, or has an interest in information processing systems, communication products and facilities, personal computers, and office systems.

Entries are arranged in the same manner as those in *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*—alphabetically on a letter-by-letter basis.

Each entry consists of a single-word or multiple-word term or the abbreviation or acronym for the term followed by a commentary that includes one or more definitions or references. Each entry includes the following:

- an item number if two or more meanings are possible.
- a usage label indicating the area of application; for example, "in printing" is included in the definition for cm.
- a descriptive phrase giving the basic meaning of the term.
- annotative sentences giving explanatory information.
- references directing readers to other entries.
- source labels: definitions without sources are IBM definitions.

Scattered throughout the 644 pages are 184 illustrations.

The *IBM Dictionary of Computing*, by far, surpasses other dictionaries in terms of number of entries, comprehensiveness, organization, and illustrations. It is an excellent reference book for communications offices generally, and especially, for specialists who must deal with computers and computer folks who use a lot of jargon.

I would think it invaluable for communicators whose offices have or will soon merge with computer sections. The dictionary also comes in handy when reading computer literature and magazines above the novice level.

The *IBM Dictionary of Computing* is available from IBM representatives or your IBM Branch office.

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