

Sandy Pfeiffer's new book presents an excellent overview of the field of technical communication. The text is well-written and succinct, and includes an effectively designed format to guide the reader through such areas as the writing process; order and design; and style, grammar, and spelling. Pfeiffer also includes a useful appendix of formats and sample letters for a variety of writing project contingencies.

Pocket guide gives the reader an immediate sense that the author is an experienced writer and editor who knows the field; he cleverly graces the inside front and rear jackets with a guide to common editing symbols. Another considerate touch is the use of a condensed as well as a detailed table of contents labeled "Brief contents" and "Contents," respectively.

As a seasoned technical writer and editor, this reviewer naturally has a few minor points of contention with some of the generalizations made by the author, as well as some layout/design and stylistic suggestions for modifications to a second edition. The most substantive problems with the book are the author's generalizations and failure to acknowledge numerous style manuals. For instance, in Design Rule 1, the statement "Most readers prefer the visual break that paragraph indenting adds" might be open to debate. The author could have included sections of suggested reading or references to back up such claims. Also, some style manuals will refute Pfeiffer's adherence to the "Follow the 10-or-over Rule" (see Chapter 12, "Numerals," p. 79 of the Government Printing Office *Style manual*).

In Chapter 1, "Definition of technical writing," Pfeiffer states that "The term *technical writing* includes all written communication done on the job," when in fact much writing on the job may appropriately be categorized as clerical/administrative support or business/professional

POCKET GUIDE TO TECHNICAL WRITING

William S. Pfeiffer. 1998. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. [ISBN 0-13-242157-7. 170 pages, including index. \$13.33 (softcover).]

writing, such as correspondence (letters and memos). Even university curricula make the distinction between "technical" and "professional" writing. To this end, the first set of writing descriptions in the text box on p. 3 should be categorized under clerical/administrative support writing, not technical writing. Also, Pfeiffer could have taken the opportunity to make some distinction between technical writing and technical editing. This would help the reader understand that these are two separate career paths.

The second item at the bottom of p. 3 ("A writer more informed than the audience") may not be accurate. With process and procedure manual development—including rewriting engineering specifications for operators to follow—the technical writer may not know more than the reader and may even need to consult with both the engineer and the operator to write an effective manual for a procedure that the writer has never performed and may not fully understand. Although many technical writers hold dual degrees in such disciplines as computer science or engineering as well as technical writing, many majored in English or other subjects and depend on developers and readers for help in creating accurate documentation.

"Nine steps to better writing" is an important and informative section with a format that is easy to follow, as is generally the case with the entire book. In Step 1, however, the author could have added some text on executive summaries to compare and contrast with the purpose statement. Also, the big picture in Step 4 is confusing; this reviewer has always considered technical writing as the accumulation, organization, and presentation of information, not as persuasive writing.

The figures generally are designed well and offer useful information, except for Figure 1-3, "Tech

writing triangle," which doesn't seem to contribute much. Step 7 offers invaluable advice on the initial stage of organizing thoughts, and Figure 1-6 presents a helpful example of how to reorganize your notes.

In Chapter 2, "ABC rule 2, include listings," the author makes a good point in keeping bulleted or numbered lists to a minimum of five to nine items. But what if 15-20 items in a series are necessary? He should reference p. 28 for more detailed information.

The tables of contents—alphabetical and topical—in Chapter 3 are presented in an effective and novel format, combining a good reference with excellent examples of generally accepted rules such as the sections on accurate wording and on active and passive voice.

"Abbreviations: Rules. Avoid spacing and periods" would be a good place for the author to note that some style guides—such as the Council of Biology Editors' *Scientific style and format* and the *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*—recommend against using periods for professional titles and degrees. Also, the titles listed in "Abbreviations: Common examples" are not a very comprehensive list. The author could have left out a few of the more familiar abbreviations such as *B.S.*, *Dr.*, *M.S.*, and *M.D.* to leave space for others, such as *J.D.* for doctor of laws, and some even more obscure credentials such as *C.C.S.P.* for certified chiropractic sports physician, *L.Ac.* for licensed acupuncturist, and *N.D.* for naturopathic physician.

In "Commas. Commas in a series," this reviewer was happy to see the author promoting the rule of the comma preceding the *and* before the last item in a series. However, wording such as *always* may be strong.

The rule for periods and commas used with quotation marks, although generally accepted, is not

used by all style guides. See section 10.2, "Punctuation and typography" on p. 184 of *Scientific style and format*, as well as the *Chicago manual of style*, 14th ed. (sections 5.11 through 5.13, "Periods with quotation marks," p. 160). Also, regarding "utilize/use," p. 153 of the American Medical Association's *Manual of style* (8th ed.) states that "utilize" indicates using something for other than its intended purpose—a clear difference from "use."

Throughout the book Pfeiffer consistently offers commonsense advice useful to both the novice and the experienced technical writer, making this book more of a desk reference than a pocket guide. *Pocket guide* probably should be made mandatory reading for new technical writers coming to a company or those who are new to the field. A tech writing pre-employment test could even be developed using this guide.

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