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Technical Report Writing Today—9th Edition

Book Review

—Reviewed by
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Index Terms—Electronic documentation, electronic research, ethics, globalization, presentations, reports.

Now in its 9th edition, Riordan's *Technical Report Writing Today* continues to have success as it adapts to the new demands of technical communication. As the author notes, "Since the first edition of *Technical Report Writing Today* appeared on instructors' desks some three decades ago, technical writing has changed dramatically. Yet with each successive edition, this book has consistently reflected an emphasis on the last word in its title—*today*" [p. xxiii]. The author notes a number of changes in the front matter, "To The Instructor" [pp. xxiii–xxx]. The most noteworthy include added emphasis on globalization and ethics, as well as new exercises in most chapters. Having had the opportunity to review the 7th edition in the September 2000 issue of this journal and the 8th edition in the March 2003 issue, I welcome the opportunity to review the new edition and the possibility to compare and contrast all three.

The text is a soft cover book divided into three topical sections, two appendices, and the index. Section I, Technical Communications Basics, consists of ten chapters; Section II, Technical Writing Applications, has seven chapters; and Section III, Professional Communication, contains three chapters. As was the case with the 7th and 8th editions, I again had some difficulty in rationalizing the placement of some chapters in a particular section, and will address my thoughts and recommendations on this later in the review.

Like the 8th edition, the 9th edition again offers a companion website for the text. Since the website was referred to in the introductory remarks, I looked for, but could not find, information on the site's URL. (I later found it on the inside back cover.) At the time of this review, the 9th edition was being touted on the site, but some sections of the site were still under construction. To provide the best service to student

and instructor, the updates to the website should be synchronized more closely with the publication of the new edition. Nevertheless, a cursory review of the current website indicates that it would be of interest to both student users and instructors.

In reviewing previous editions, I had noted the lack of discussion on technical communication ethics. In this new edition, the author has included a number of excellent presentations on ethics throughout the text. In particular, the various discussions of ethics are noted on the inside front cover, along with items related to the impact of globalization on technical communication. Both topics are a welcome addition to earlier editions.

Section I establishes a foundation for the remainder of the text. It also presents the author's purpose in writing the text: "All the rest of the ideas in the book are based on three concepts: technical communication is audience centered, presentational, and responsible" [p. 3]. In the introductory remarks, the author also offers the first new discussion on ethics and its importance to the technical writer: "Because readers count on you to be their guide, you must do what you can to fulfill their trust that you will tell them what—and all—they need to know. In other words, technical writing is an ethical endeavor" [p. 15]. The discussion of ethics in technical communication continues for several pages, and I found it to be a welcome addition. The subject of the effect of globalization is also introduced in the first chapter. The number of items that can affect word selection, color choice, examples, and so forth are introduced in some depth [pp. 20–25], and are expanded upon in later chapters for specific topical issues. However, a continuing disappointment was the lack of commentary on recognition of sources of materials. The only noted entry for plagiarism is found in the discussion of ethics and website development [p. 338]. The brief comment, "…and credit the ideas or work of others" seems to evade a real ethical, and legal, issue for technical writers today [p. 18].

It is difficult, at times, to determine where chapters fit within the overall structure of the text. The author has made some major changes in this edition, including

reducing the number of sections while relocating some chapters. With the exception of Chapter 13, which, in my opinion, still belongs in the last section, the remainder of the chapters appear to be in a logical sequence. I was also happy to see that the special emphasis on the use of color ("Focus on Color" [p. 166]) had survived the new edition, as it provides valuable insight into the use of color for the technical writer.

With Section I provided fundamentals to this point, Section II begins to look at specific applications found in technical writing, i.e., instructions, memorandums, informal reports, websites, formal reports, feasibility reports, proposals, and user manuals. In each case, the author provides insight into the makeup of the particular document and, as in previous chapters, provides many examples, student assignments, and worksheets to assist in the learning process. From my previous comments, I continue to believe that Chapter 19, "Letters," should have been included in Section II rather than in Section III. Writing of letters, both formal and informal, is another technical writing application. Also, Chapter 13, "Developing Websites," would fit logically into Section III. In the position it holds in Section II, I believe the special demands of good website development are not provided the focus the subject deserves.

Chapter 13 does provide a good starting point for discussions of website development. The impact of the web has been recognized around the world to the point that individuals are placing personal information on the web for friends and family. While the author has provided basic information, the chapter does not address the differing needs in web pages—for example, sales, technical information, informational searches, technical support, and so forth. The special topic of "Ethics and Websites" is a welcome addition, although a more direct discussion of copyright, plagiarism, and acknowledging source material might be appropriate [p. 338]. A simple extract, with proper recognition from the US Copyright Office on what constitutes a copyright, would be helpful.

Section III, "Professional Communication," has added emphasis with the movement of Chapter 18, "Oral Presentations," into this section. As mentioned earlier, I believe that if Chapter 13, "Developing Websites," were also moved into this section, which also contains Chapter 20, "Job Application Materials," a logical set of material concerning other aspects of technical communication would result.

The 8th edition of *Technical Report Writing Today* was a good upgrade from the 7th edition, and the 9th has followed that with additional information and revisions that increase its value to the student and practitioner. Even for readers who have either of the earlier versions, the latest will still be an excellent investment, specifically for the new information on ethics and the impact of globalization on the technical communicator.