

# The Elements of Technical Writing

Reviewed by JENNIFER PARKS

**THE ELEMENTS OF  
TECHNICAL WRITING**  
**Gary Blake and**  
**Robert W. Bly**  
**New York, NY: MacMillan**  
**General Reference: 1993.**  
**165 pp. • \$9.95**  
**0-02-013085-6**

**G**ary Blake and Robert Bly, both authorities in the field of business and technical writing, have provided a valuable tool in *The Elements of Technical Writing*. As the cover states, this book is the essential guide to writing clear, concise proposals, reports, manuals, letters, memos, and other documents in every technical field. Not only have Blake and Bly included all the necessary information concerning punctuation, grammar, and tone, they have organized the book in an easy-to-use, precise format.

The first chapter begins with the following quote and serves as a good introduction to the material in the first chapter.

*"Newspaper reporters and technical writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writing. This makes them freaks in the world of writers, since almost all of the other ink-stained wretches in that world reveal a lot about themselves to the reader."*

—Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

The first chapter, "Fundamentals of Effective Technical Writing," identifies the ten principles that make technical writing good technical writing. These principles include:

1. Technical Accuracy
2. Usability
3. Conciseness
4. Completeness
5. Clearness
6. Consistency

8. Correct Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar
9. A Targeted Audience
10. Clear Organization
11. Interest.

These principles are easily overlooked in business writing. Blake and Bly urge us to remember that our audience is made up of humans, not just technical personnel.

Each chapter in this guide is broken out into sections that clearly outline the information that follows. The format is legible, succinct, and lends itself to easy reference. There are chapters regarding the use of equations and numerals, grammar and punctuation, and principles of communication, as well as a chapter regarding commonly misused words and phrases.

Chapters six through nine break away from the rules of the English language and get down to the specifics of writing proposals, technical articles and reports, letters and memos, and manuals.

Chapter six, "Proposals and Specifications," details the components necessary in a formal proposal. The authors set forth their ten principles of proposal writing, which revolve around the focal point of the client. They are:

1. Learn everything you can about your prospective client and the people who will evaluate your proposal.
2. Sell your ideas by fitting them into your client's needs.
3. Don't just solve the technical problems; empathize with the customer's critical needs.
4. Recognize all critical factors that evaluators will use in assessing the proposal.
5. Make sure your proposal addresses every element mentioned in the RFP.
6. Use appropriate graphics to highlight your ideas and make them easy to visualize.
7. Tailor each proposal to the needs of the specific client.
8. Anticipate and defuse objections.
9. Avoid hedging and subtlety in proposals.



This issue features books on technical writing and statements of work. The opinions expressed by reviewers are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals. Book review recommendations are welcomed by book review editors Nancy Brome and Paul Giguere.

11. Make a list of where key resources are located if you do not have a proposal library.

Blake and Bly urge us to learn everything we can about our clients and then tailor our proposals to their needs. For example, the following sentence does not tell the client what we can do for them:

*"We have extensive experience in airlines operations and forecasting and evaluating traffic flows."*

A better way to make the point is:

*"Our extensive experience in airlines operations and forecasting and evaluating traffic flows gives us insight in to the logistics of your business and will help you respond faster."*

The second sentence focuses on what your company can do for the potential client and tells the reader how you will benefit them rather than simply stating your qualifications. The more tailored your proposal is to the reader, the more impact it will have.

Blake and Bly have written a useable, handy, and inexpensive style guide that is tailored to their audience: people who write for business. While the majority of style guides and writer's reference books tend to be very dry, I found Blake and Bly's book to be highly readable. They have practiced what they preach—their writing is clear, and more importantly, interesting. *The Elements of Technical Writing* is written specifically for technical writers, but it is also a very valuable reference guide for other writers. This concise style guide is now an indispensable part of my library.

# Technical Writing

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