

A GUIDE TO TECHNICAL WRITING

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649535316

A Guide to Technical Writing by T. A. Rickard

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

www.triestepublishing.com

T. A. RICKARD

**A GUIDE TO
TECHNICAL
WRITING**

**A GUIDE
TO
TECHNICAL WRITING**

-BY-

T. A. RICKARD

Associate of the Royal School of Mines
Formerly Editor of the Mining and Scientific Press
Editor of The Mining Magazine

SECOND EDITION
(Second Printing)

Published by the
MINING AND SCIENTIFIC PRESS, SAN FRANCISCO,
and
THE MINING MAGAZINE, LONDON.
1910.

165281

JUN 7 1912

SBGL

R42

12

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This little book is intended to help those who wish to write clearly on technical subjects. My experience in professional writing is not long enough to have entailed loss of sympathy with beginners, yet it is sufficient to have taught me the value of a guide in these matters. Rules are useful, but the understanding of the reason on which a rule is based is better. No man can apply a rule intelligently until he understands when to disregard it. Such hints as I have put together are those suggested by daily practice as an editor; they claim no finality; all of them may not prove acceptable; but if they provoke greater attention to the fundamentals of good technical writing, this essay will have accomplished a useful purpose.

T. A. RICKARD.

San Francisco, May 1, 1908.

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The exhaustion of the first edition of this little book and the kindly reception accorded to it, have prompted the publication of a second edition. In the appendix will be found some additional matter, namely, a paper read before the Institution of Mining and Metallurgy. This refers mainly to British usage and contains a few minor repetitions of remarks appearing in the earlier pages of the book. But repetition is not objectionable in an effort

to lay stress on errors of practice; therefore I have let it stand.

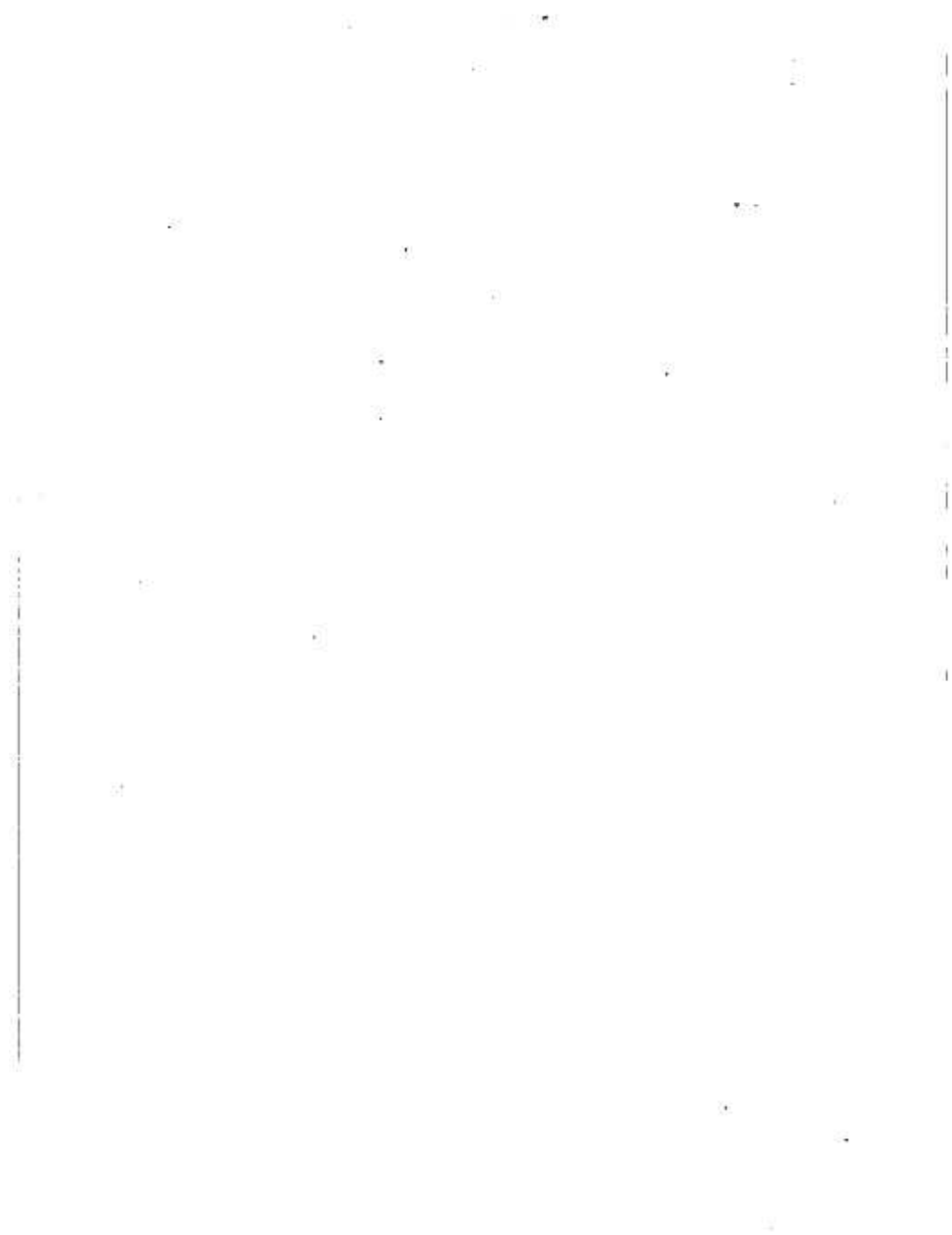
As might be expected, the advice that I have volunteered has laid me open to the charge of assuming a position of authority for which I have no official sanction. Most of my readers will waive an apology. Reformers do not wait until they receive official appointment. My purpose is evident. As an editor who was once a mining engineer I am in sympathy with the profession to which I formerly belonged and I am keenly aware of the necessity for care in technical writing, the importance of it, and the possibility of betterment. Fortunately, the cause does not fail with the fallibility of the advocate; in this little book, and in the sundry other books for which I am responsible, the observant critic will find many errors, such errors as hinder most of us when we try to write intelligently and intelligibly on technical subjects. But I have been learning and am learning still, by the application of the ideas and methods that I now offer to others equally willing to learn. The worst of all waste is the waste of experience. Such as I have, I give. I write as a scribe, without authority, except in so far as the members of my old profession will concede it to me from the nature of my present occupation; I speak as a student, not a master; as an amateur who has become a professional, but not a professor.

T. A. RICKARD.

London, August 1, 1910.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface.	Page.
Introductory	7
Spurious Coin	16
Abbreviations	20
Numbers	25
The Matter of Education	29
Hyphens	33
Some Words and Their Ways	40
Unconsidered Trifles	52
Concerning Titles	61
Matters of Usage	65
Relative Pronouns	73
Examples of Journalesque	85
Hints in Grammar	92
Minor Matters	96
Specifications	101
Things to Avoid	106
Good and Bad Writing	107
Parting Advice	110
A Plea for Greater Simplicity in the Language of Science	111
Standardization of English in Technical Literature	127
Index	169



INTRODUCTORY

It has been said that in this age the man of science appears to be the only one who has anything to say, and he is the one that least knows how to say it. This applies with particular force to the technical expert, whose science is utilitarian and who, therefore, even more than the philosopher, is inclined to disregard the help of correct literary expression. In fact, the suggestion of attention to such minor matters is apt to be considered merely the irritating emphasis on a non-essential. The editor of a Denver mining paper felt assured of support when he expressed the opinion that attention to the niceties of literary form was a mere "frill"; all that was needed was "to get there," that is, to say what you mean in your own way. This view of the matter receives endorsement, in deed rather than in theory, from many writers on technical subjects. Moreover, the men of the mining and metallurgical professions are usually too busy to write leisurely, and in their hurry they are apt to be heedless of the qualities that enable language to fulfill its purpose.

Herein lies the root of the matter. Language is a vehicle of expression designed to convey ideas from one man to another. It was not intended for the soliloquy; civilized man does not live by himself, nor does he talk to himself. The spoken word is heard by those present; the written word reaches those at a distance; the printed word is intended to be read by thousands. Careful composition facilitates the conveyance of ideas, the primary purpose of writing being to transfer ideas from one man to

another in such a manner as to give the least trouble to the recipient. At best human speech is a clumsy vehicle of thought; much of the idea is lost in transit; too much energy is consumed in the effort to arrive at the mental destination. Obviously we should endeavor to make the transfer as complete and as direct as possible. Conscientious writers try to improve their mode of expression by precision of terms, by careful choice of words, and by the arrangement of them so that they become efficient carriers of thought from one mind to another. Careless scribblers do not trouble themselves either to be precise in their terms or nice in the selection of words; they deem themselves hindered in the freedom of their speech by the rules of grammar; they regard form as a fad. As the Denver critic said, they "want to get there." But that is exactly what they fail to do, for "getting there" means the successful conveyance of ideas from their minds to those of their readers, and this they are unable to do because their terms do not describe the things they refer to, their arrangement of words is turbid, their sentences are involved, in fine, their vehicle of thought does not perform its proper function. It is as if a man wanting to transport a load of potatoes from his farm to the nearest town, were to put them, not in sacks, but loosely, into a wagon that needs repair, and then took any road that offered, driving without regard to ruts or stones, but rapidly and carelessly—just to get there—without wasting thought as to the manner of the performance or attempting to put on any style—just get there—at any time, in any way—while the potatoes get shaken and bruised, some fall out of the wagon, and the few that survive are hardly worth cooking. Another farmer with