

A GUIDE TO TECHNICAL WRITING

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A Guide to Technical Writing by T. A. Rickard

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T. A. RICKARD

**A GUIDE TO
TECHNICAL
WRITING**

A GUIDE
TO
TECHNICAL WRITING

-BY-

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SECOND EDITION
(First Printing)



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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

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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.

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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