

ChE news

NOBLE RECEIVES AWARD

Recipients of special awards given at the ASEE meeting in Amherst, MA, on June 25, 1980, were listed in the Summer 1980 issue of *CEE*. That list of outstanding ChEs should have included Richard D. Noble of the University of Wyoming, who received the Outstanding Zone Campus Activity Coordinator Award, Zone IV.

ChE book reviews

SCIENTISTS MUST WRITE

By Robert Barrass

Chapman and Hall, London, 1978

Reviewed by Michael E. Leesley

University of Texas at Austin

When asked to review this book I kept putting it off thinking it would be just one more sermon on the need for engineers and scientists to write good English. By now there can hardly be an engineer or scientist in industry or academia who is not fully aware of the deplorable level of the communication skills of graduating students. Finally and reluctantly I picked it up. I was amazed. Mr. Barrass has packed a huge amount of common sense into this tiny text. Unequivocally it is the best condensation of written communication know-how that I have ever seen.

Mr. Barrass must be a most astute observer of both written and verbal communication. He picks out examples of misuse of English and then shows how they could have been improved. Furthermore, in some cases, he suggests reasons why the writer had used the poor English of the examples. He gives useful hints for writing summaries, precis, letters, memoranda, reports, essays, theses and even book reviews. He lists tricks, some old some new, which will help a writer gain and keep a reader's interest. Of course, being British, Mr. Barrass has stated the normal rules of English for his country and these do not always apply in the United States. Perhaps an American version could be published: it certainly would be a most useful text in this country.

Teachers will find that it provides many illustrative examples of misuse of English. The sources of his examples and the delightful anecdotes could not be more wide-ranging: from Patrick Dennis's Aunt Mame to Rudyard Kipling's letters to technical journals, the chosen passages are

witty and entertaining.

However, it is difficult to see just how this book could be used in a formal science or engineering education unless in the curriculum there is a course designed to improve writing skills of attendees. Even then, a professor would be more likely to choose as required text the Harbrace College Handbook or one of the similar handbooks currently available. It's not that the book fails as a teaching aid: rather, it is insufficiently structured and does not contain a coded feedback mechanism to use when grading students' written work.

He does discuss some controversial issues. One minor one is his reminder that the word "comprise" does not need the word "of" between it and a list: a common error in American use of English. More important, he tackles the question of the use of active mood, first person reporting of technical work. After a brief history of views on this topic he comes down on the side of first person active. I wish most sincerely that his advice and exhortation would change the stuffy attitude which is currently prevalent in the U.S. "I found" is far more concise than the clumsy "it was found that" which always seems evocative of a lack of confidence in one's work. Further there is nothing whatsoever untrue or deceitful in saying "I conclude that" instead of the awkward "it can be concluded that" which is far more common.

As efficient as the rest of the book, the sections on recommended reading are well presented and include the United States' and United Kingdom's Standards (ANSI and BBS) for written media and numerous handbooks, directories, indexes and abstracting journals. I like, too, the extra chapter at the end where he complements the main body of the book with some useful hints on technique for people talking about science and engineering.

After all this praise of what is really quite a small book, I have one negative point to raise. The book would have been just that little bit better if the asinine cartoons had been left out.

All in all, this is an excellent book which could be revised very simply for the American market, but which is unlikely to be used in colleges and universities except, perhaps, as an entry in lists of recommended reading. □

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