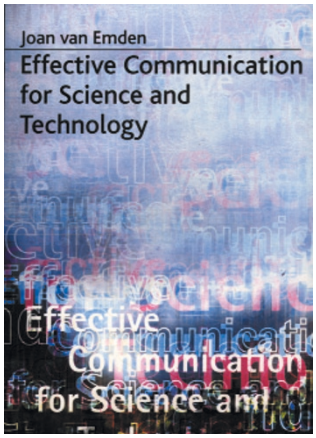
The art of the comprehensible



Effective Communication for Science and Technology
by Joan van Emden
Palgrave · March 2001
Paperback £10.99

Simon L. Bullock

We have all, at times, come across seminars or manuscripts in which seemingly interesting work is not done justice because of poor presentation. Of course, the ability of scientists to communicate their work successfully is hugely important, yet it is a skill for which many of us receive little formal training. In this book, Joan van Emden attempts to address this shortcoming by providing undergraduates with an introductory guide to various aspects of presenting scientific and technical material.

Naturally, this is not the first time that a book on this subject has been produced. However, what is refreshing about *Effective Communication for Science and Technology* is the friendly style in which it is written. Van Emden succeeds in convincing the reader that, given a few simple techniques and enough practice, anyone can achieve good presentation skills. The writing is concise, accessible and informal and most of the points are illuminated using well-chosen examples. Another benefit is that the subject matter is up-to-date, including practical advice on such topics as how to garner appropriate information from the Internet and how to avoid visual impotence at the hands of a temperamental laptop computer or data projector.

The book is well structured—it begins with tips about completing the first undergraduate assignment and concludes with how to write CVs and how to apply and interview for jobs. In between there is guidance on effective listening and note-taking, critical reading and sitting exams, and, as one would expect, extensive sections on writing and speaking skills. On the whole these subjects are dealt with well. The chapters on writing skills include sensible, but never starchy, guidelines on punctuation and sentence composition, as well as tips on how to structure reports and dissertations. The author introduces elementary principles of good writing, but does so in a manner that never risks stifling the development of the reader's own style.

Of all the topics covered, it is seminar presentation that is tackled most comprehensively, perhaps because it is the form of communication that fills many young scientists with dread. It is in this section that the author's benevolent style comes into its own. For example, she assures the reader that nerves should be viewed positively because they will benefit the presentation. The reader is also encouraged not to be too disheartened if the audience appears tired or sleepy—this may well be due to a poorly ventilated room rather than any fault of the speaker. Another piece of valuable advice for such occasions that is missing from this book is provided by Sir Peter Medawar in *Advice to a Young Scientist*: 'If people *do* sleep in their lectures, speakers should try to take comfort from the thought that no sleep is so deeply refreshing as that which, during lectures, Morpheus invites us so insistently to enjoy'.

The speaking skills section of *Effective Communication for Science and Technology* also describes potential pitfalls for speakers and how they are best avoided. Although many of the techniques seem like common sense (for example, not obscuring the audience's view of the data), they are all too often ignored by inexperienced and experienced speakers alike. Some of the touches are more novel, such as vocal exercises to improve one's volume, and tips on how to interact effectively with the audience by both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Although this book is designed to be only a basic introductory guide, it is disappointing that there is a disproportionately small section on how to produce good scientific illustrations and posters. Nor is there any reference to where such information can be found, despite the availability of several good books devoted to the subject.

With its references to the United Kingdom's examination systems, this book is clearly written with a British audience in mind, although it should lose little when read by students in other countries. The only major disappointment is that it is not until the reader finishes the book that it becomes clear that it is aimed squarely at undergraduates. Those who have already progressed beyond this stage will need to look to other publications for more specific guidance on how to write a scientific paper or thesis or how to talk at scientific meetings. Once it has found its target audience, however, *Effective Communication for Science and Technology* will prove a valuable asset—it should make even the most timid undergraduate student more comfortable and confident in their ability to articulate effectively. That said, many of the basic principles that are dealt with are of general relevance and even the most experienced expositor that happens across this book should find something that will improve their performance—the section on how to keep to one's allotted time when giving talks might well be of particular interest. □

Simon L. Bullock is at the Imperial Cancer Research Fund, 44 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3PX, UK
e-mail: s.bullock@icrf.icnet.uk

Other Communication Books

A Short Guide to Writing about Science
By David Porush
Addison Wesley, £12.90/$18.75

Scientists Guide to Poster Presentations
By Peter J. Gosling
Plenum, £20.65/$30

Dazzle 'em with Style: The Art of Oral Scientific Presentation
By Robert R.H. Anholt
W.H.Freeman & Co, £10.99/$11.95

Essentials for the Scientific and Technical Writer
By Hardy Hoover
Dover Publications, £8.35/$7.95