
Reviewed by Frances S. Johnson, Old Dominion University

Sam Dragga and Gwendolyn Gong offer a genuinely new textbook in their Editing: The Design of Rhetoric by Baywood Publishing, a long-time supporter of high-quality scholarly publications in technical communication. Most technical editing textbooks, like most technical writing textbooks, cover the same material, claiming to present it in a “new and improved” format; but seldom is anything new added. Dragga and Gong’s textbook is different, however; it may well be the only rhetorically-based technical editing textbook on the market.

The book is organized around the classical rhetorical canons. Each chapter briefly introduces historical backgrounds, mentioning (among others) Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and key nineteenth- and twentieth-century rhetors/rhetoricians. These short introductions do more than merely connect rhetoric with its roots; they provide the reader with a clear footing in theory and then follow it with practical applications. Thus, each chapter makes rhetorical theory practical, useful, and current for today’s student—a powerful combination. The chapter on invention, for example, discusses the purposes of communication, the importance of audience assessment, and the methods of gathering information (brainstorming, internal and external dialogue, Burke’s pentad, the Aristotelian topoi, for example). Given that most composition textbooks employ theory only implicitly and commonly eliminate references to classical rhetoric, this approach is noteworthy. While more detailed explanations and longer introductions would have pleased me, the reference lists following each chapter point the way for those who want more.

Dragga’s own Verbal-Visual Orientation Survey is an excellent heuristic. It characterizes the discourse and the reader in seven categories: the aim, urgency, and access of the discourse are rated from one to five, as are the reader’s motivation, education, familiarity with the subject, and environment. When tabulated, a yielded score enables a technical writer or editor to determine verbal and visual levels for a document: a high score warrants a more visual text, a low score a more verbal. This heuristic provides a high degree of accuracy in pinpointing the needs and wants of a reader. Its inclusion supports the necessary combination often ignored by other textbooks: the equality, connection, and importance of text and graphics. This textbook recognizes the interactiveness of both in a way not seen before.

The book focuses on editing objectives: accuracy, clarity, propriety, and artistry. These principles demonstrate the often sensitive role editors assume. We do a disservice to students when we suggest blanket solutions to
touchy editorial decisions and, in so doing, underestimate the role of egos—both writers' and editors'. Editing: The Design of Rhetoric recognizes the need for sensitivity and treats it as a natural part of the editing territory.

The chapter on style is non-prescriptive, focusing again on verbal and visual style. This, like any treatment, discusses words, sentences, and mechanics, and then adds more. The authors' discussion of linguists Crystal and Davy's eight dimensions of style (individuality, dialect, time, singularity, discourse medium and participation, province status, and modality) is unexpected, and explained well. Multiple examples guide the unfamiliar, further cementing the verbal/visual connection which guides the book.

In most editing textbooks, graphics are called "visual aids" and given incomplete treatments. Dragga and Gong offer a radical and welcome departure from this norm. The Verbal-Visual Orientation Survey introduced earlier is shown to determine the types of visuals needed in a technical text. Not only is the aim of specific graphics explained, but so is their placement. A section called "Editing for Artistry" discusses the importance of printing, paper, binding, typography, illustration, and page design. I know of no other book that so thoroughly deals with each of these elements.

Each chapter closes with a "practice" section that connects principles and examples to questions and answers. Examples of a technical publication, a news publication, and a promotional publication are appended.

While the book is organized around four of the five classical canons, sadly it omits memory without acknowledgement or explanation, and it makes only passing final reference to the interconnectedness of the canons. Its one-page epilogue (with a two-page flow chart) discussing the "interactivity of the four canons" may be too little too late. I'm not sure which is worse: that memory's disappearance was neither noted nor explained, or that the recursiveness of the canons was given such brief treatment. Both are disappointments in an otherwise excellent book.

The language of The Design of Rhetoric may prove best suited to an upper-division or graduate-level technical communication course. Dragga and Gong make little effort to entertain, verbally or visually. They concentrate their efforts on producing a straightforward, practical, informative, and scholarly textbook, and they have done their work well. This book is a remarkable addition which many of us have already begun to use with great success in our classes, and we should all welcome its arrival.