REVIEW:

STYLE AND READABILITY IN TECHNICAL WRITING:
A SENTENCE-COMBINING APPROACH

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I might as well admit from the beginning that I have mixed feelings about James DeGeorge, Gary A. Olson, and Richard Ray's *Style and Readability in Technical Writing: A Sentence-Combining Approach*. In some ways, this text is a valuable addition to the technical communication classroom, for it is intended by its authors to be a supplement to traditional technical writing texts, which "emphasize form and must assume a certain amount of stylistic sophistication on the part of students." Many technical communication teachers have felt the need to offer students further work on revision, editing, and style, but relatively few supplementary texts exist in the field (Richard Lanham's *Revising Business Prose* and Joseph Williams' *Style* are two noteworthy ones). Moreover, many teachers feel that sentence combining has merit as a way of teaching students syntactic maturity and sophistication, and the book contains much good, commonsensical advice on writing.

But despite the obvious advantages of such a text, the book unfortunately has several liabilities as well. The first of these liabilities, to my way of thinking, has to do with the level of students addressed by the book. Perhaps an example taken from the book's sentence-combining exercises will explain what I mean:

A fluorescent lamp glows.
The glowing is with light.
The glowing comes from phosphors.
College students *can* learn some things about writing from combining these sentences, but I have trouble picturing my juniors and seniors needing more than a few such exercises to get the point. After that, they are likely to be bored by the simplicity and repetitiousness of sentence combining. Joseph Williams voices much the same opinion in *Style*:

I know many undergraduates have . . . a style characterized by one fifteen-word sentence after another. But that's not a problem that seems to endure very long. I have worked with a good many adult writers in government, in the professions, and in business; I have met not one whose major writing problem was a style that was immature. I am encouraged in this observation by every other adult writing program I have ever seen: Not one of them takes up the matter of writing longer rather than shorter sentences.5

And herein lies my difficulty with *Style and Readability in Technical Writing*. I won't say that all of the technical students at my state-operated, land-grant university are good, mature writers, for of course they aren't. And I won't say that they couldn't profit from a brief exposure to sentence combining. But most of them simply don't *have* the problems DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray suggest sentence combining will help. Instead, most of my juniors and seniors have the writing problem professionals face: overstuffed, under-verbed prose (Lanham calls it the "The Official Style" in *Revising Business Prose*).6

In fact, the sentence-combining part of this book (chapters 1-7) is not substantially different from a freshman sentence-combining text except that the sentences deal with technical subjects:

- Take the methanol/ethanol mixture from a cylinder.
- This mixture is used as a standard.
- The cylinder is no more than 50 percent depleted.

This difference in subject matter may be crucial to some students, but I'm inclined to think most upper-division technical communication students will find the book condescending. Some considerable effort has been made to give the exercises a
technical context, which is good, but even the exercises based on real-world examples present shattered versions of the original sentences and ask students to put them back together again:

This study has resulted in a number of findings.
The findings are in regard to projects.
The projects involve reuse of railroad stations.
It is adoptive use.
The use will be in the future.

Far more useful would have been some intact real-world examples that have sentence-combining possibilities.

To be fair, I think this approach to style and readability in technical communication might have some considerable value for freshmen, and some programs around the country (notably in junior colleges and technical institutes) could use a book like this one very well.

Unfortunately, however, the book doesn't even do as well as it might as a text for freshman because of its faulty organization. In essence, the book is divided into three parts. The first part (chapters 1-7) contains a series of increasingly complex sentence-combining exercises (addition, deletion, embedding, transposition) that lead students through the various strategies of this method of revision. The second part of the book (chapters 8-10) discusses readability, audience, and coherence. This section of the book has little direct connection with sentence combining, but rather discusses clarity and precision in writing (avoidance of passives, noun clusters, nominalizations, etc.). The third part of the book (chapter 11) offers a series of sentence-combining exercises complete with suggestions about context, audience, and tone.

On the surface, this arrangement seems innocuous enough, but when one looks more closely at the book, it seems fragmented and confusing. Symptomatic of the fragmentation of the book is chapter nine, on nominalizations. The authors never adequately explain why they have separated their discussion of this subject from the rest of their readability guidelines in chapter eight, or from the other discussion of nominalizations in chapter six, where they discuss embedding clauses and phrases. This scattering of related subject matter throughout the book in a seemingly random way makes the book harder to use than it ought to be.

But the primary difficulty with the organization of materi-
ial is that the readability guidelines offered in the second part of
the book should come before the sentence-combining exercises.
Not only do these guidelines, based as they are on readability
studies, address the stylistic problems most often encountered by
upper-division students, but they also provide a context for sen-
tence revision that is missing from the beginning of the book.
Chapters eight, nine, and ten explain why students should learn
to combine sentences, something they should know before they
begin to learn how to do so. In fact, though the information in
these chapters is not revolutionary (Lanham, Williams, and
everyone else discuss these same issues), it is sound preparation
for sentence combining.

Perhaps because of this problem with organization, the
book doesn't deal adequately with the role sentence combining
plays in the writing process. Students need to know when
sentence combining is likely to be most effective—and how to
get to this stage of the writing process. These are things the book
never really discusses (rough drafts aren't mentioned until page
147 of this 185 page book, for example); unfortunately, without
this kind of contextual discussion, students are likely to wonder
how these exercises apply to their own work. Even in chapter
eight, when the authors offer their readability guidelines, they
don't discuss the act of revision nearly enough. Instead, they
offer some do's and don'ts, but not an explanation of how
writers arrive at the point where such revision is necessary.

The book also suffers from a number of minor proofread-
ing flaws, such as the sentence-combining exercise which reveals
that "The borrowing was recently," or the discussion of sentence
pattern frequency on pages 112-113 which offers percentages total-
ning more than 100%. Other, more serious problems arise when
the authors contradict their own stylistic and grammatical
advice; the result is confusing at best. For example, in chapter
eight the authors suggest that dummy subjects ("it and there
used with is verbs") should be avoided most of the time, and yet
earlier in the book they promote this kind of construction when
they discuss embedding:

At times you will see a slight variation of the that connector in em-
bedding operations. The word it is often used in combination with
the word that, as in the following example:

It is clear that improve health insurance coverage is needed for
workers in this industry.
Another such example involves the authors' contradictory statements about prepositional phrases. In chapter nine, they suggest that prepositional phrases too often accumulate after abstract nominalizations and thus make sentences "difficult to read." In chapter five, however, they advocate reducing subordinate clauses to prepositional phrases for the sake of "economy." As a result, the statement, "The residents of the area were outraged because the report did not accurately represent the dioxin levels in the soil," becomes "The residents of the area were outraged because of the inaccuracy in the report on dioxin levels in the soil." Furthermore, in chapter seven the authors offer some sensible advice about avoiding dangling modifiers, but sometimes avoid taking the advice themselves ("But before moving to transforming and embedding, it may help to see in detail how transforming works"). Admittedly, these are minor problems, but in this kind of book especially, stylistic and grammatical difficulties are likely to have considerable influence on usefulness.

Although Style and Readability in Technical Writing has shortcomings, it does show promise, especially in chapter eleven, which contains a nice collection of exercises. In fact, chapter eleven is in many ways the most useful part of the book. These sentence-combining exercises are not only based on real-life writing samples, but provide a look at many of the formats of technical writing (abstracts, letters of transmittal and application, summaries, conclusions, and descriptions). In addition, the introductions to each section indicate something of the rhetorical situation common to each format, so that students can chose sentencecombining strategies based on audience and purpose. Teachers who can select exercises carefully from this chapter may find the book offers real benefits to their students.

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Notes

2 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. vi.
4 Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1981.
5 Williams, p. xii.
6 Lanham, p. vii.
7 William Strong's *Sentence Combining* (Random House, 1973) and Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg's *The Writer's Options: Combining to Composing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982) in particular seem to have had some influence on De George, Olson, and Ray's text.
8 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. 31.
9 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. 102.
10 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. 62.
12 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. 50.
13 DeGeorge, Olson, and Ray, p. 66.