APPLIED ORGANOMETALLIC CHEMISTRY
Appl. Organometal. Chem. 2004; **18**: 503
Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com)

Book Review

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The art of scientific writing

Wiley–VCH, 2004, 2nd edition, 595 pp.
price £24.95.
ISBN 3-527-29829-0

This book has excellent pedigree in the form of the first edition published in 1987, which gained world-wide praise and soon became regarded as a classic guide to scientific writing. Since that time, changes to the techniques of writing have continued at pace, and the current landscape of publishing bears little resemblance to that of some 20 years ago. The scientific community needs an update, but is the second edition a worthy successor?

The content is organized into two parts: goals and forms in scientific writing; and materials, tools, and methods in scientific writing. The former has chapters on reports, dissertations, journal articles, and books, and the latter has chapters on writing techniques, formulas, figures, tables, and collecting and citing the literature. A case is made for the importance of 'written communication' in science, as a medium for conveying the most complex message unambiguously and one that supports intense critical evaluation. The pervasive influence of information technology on the modern 'art of scientific writing' is a theme throughout the book, which is the feature that most clearly distinguishes it from the first edition. The interface between writing and publishing is another theme explored throughout the book. There are some disappointments, but none that significantly diminishes the exceptionally high quality of this text. Under the *Journal Articles* chapter, for example, the section entitled *From Manuscript to Publication* does not adequately describe the new electronic modes of manuscripts submission, the 'manuscript central' approach that is rapidly becoming the modern journal norm. I also would have liked to see a table of *Proofreader Symbols*, which would have been in keeping with the reference-work character of the book.

There are competitors on the market written in the English word, each with a particular flavour (e.g. Matthews *et al.*, *Successful Scientific Writing: A Step-by-step for the Biological and Medical Sciences*, 2nd ed, 2000). All are worthy guides for the novice scientific writer. The present book, however, offers more—not only an excellent guide to the nuts-and-bolts of writing and publishing, but also an almost philosophical insight into the 'art'. I defy even the most experienced of scientific writers not to benefit from reading this book; its (almost) all here, in one place. Although principally targeted to chemistry and related fields (difficult to define!), virtually all of the content transcends scientific field boundaries. Furthermore, since the book has the character of a reference work, with a comprehensive index, both novice and experienced writers alike should be readily able to extract the pearls of wisdom relevant to their need.

The market for this book is enormous. Not only does it transcend the major fields of science, but also the stages of scientific professional development. As an experienced scientific writer I have already dusted down a readily accessible slot on my office bookshelves. As an experienced university lecturer, I have already ordered the library copies and polished my advice to undergraduate students on presentation of their final-year research projects.

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DOI:10.1002/aoc.665