Gary Blake and Robert Bly, authors of The Elements of Technical Writing, have provided a valuable tool in The Elements of Technical Writing. As the first chapter begins with the following quote and serves as a good introduction to the material in the first chapter: "Newspaper reporters and technical writers are trained to reveal almost nothing about themselves in their writing. This makes them freaks in the world of writers, since almost all of the other ink-stained wretches in that world reveal a lot about themselves to the reader." — Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

The first chapter, "Fundamentals of Effective Technical Writing," identifies the ten principles that make technical writing good technical writing. These principles include:

1. Technical Accuracy
2. Usefulness
3. Conciseness
4. Completeness
5. Clearness
6. Consistency
7. Correct Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar
8. A Targeted Audience
9. Anticipate and Defuse Objections
10. Clear Organization
11. Interest

These principles are easily overlooked in business writing. Blake and Bly urge us to remember that our audience is made up of humans, not just technical personnel. Each chapter in this guide is broken out into sections that clearly outline the information that follows. The format is legible, succinct, and lends itself to easy reference. There are chapters regarding the use of equations and numerals, grammar and punctuation, and principles of communication, as well as a chapter regarding the use of equations and numerals.

Chapter six, "Proposals and Specifications," details the components necessary in a formal proposal. The authors set forth their ten principles of proposal writing, which revolve around the focal point of the client. They are:

1. Learn everything you can about your prospective client and the people who will evaluate your proposal.
2. Sell your ideas by fitting them into your client's needs.
3. Don't just solve the technical problems; empathize with the customer's critical needs.
4. Recognize all critical factors that evaluators will use in assessing the proposal.
5. Make sure your proposal addresses every element mentioned in the RFP.
6. Use appropriate graphics to highlight your ideas and make them easy to visualize.
7. Tailor each proposal to the needs of the specific client.
8. Anticipate and defuse objections.
9. Avoid hedging and subtlety in proposals.
10. Clear Organization
11. Interest

Correct Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar
9. Anticipate and Defuse Objections
10. Clear Organization
11. Interest

8. Correct Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar
9. Anticipate and Defuse Objections
10. Clear Organization
11. Interest

11. Make a list of where key resources are located if you do not have a proposal library.

Blake and Bly urge us to learn everything we can about our clients and then tailor our proposals to their needs. For example, the following sentence does not tell the client what we can do for them:

"We have extensive experience in airlines operations and forecasting and evaluating traffic flows."

A better way to make the point is:

"Our extensive experience in airlines operations and forecasting and evaluating traffic flows gives us insight into the logistics of your business and will help you respond faster."

The second sentence focuses on what your company can do for the potential client and tells the reader how you will benefit them rather than simply stating your qualifications. The more tailored your proposal is to the reader, the more impact it will have.

Blake and Bly have written a useful, handy, and inexpensive style guide that is tailored to their audience: people who write for business. While the majority of style guides and writer's reference books tend to be dry, I found Blake and Bly's book to be highly readable. They have practiced what they preach—their writing is clear, and more importantly, interesting. The Elements of Technical Writing is written specifically for technical writers, but it is also a very valuable reference guide for other writers. This concise style guide is now an indispensable part of my library.
How to Write a Statement of Work

Reviewed by LISA M. MADDRY
PROPOSAL COORDINATOR, STRATEGIC OPERATIONS—BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT
MANTECH SYSTEMS ENGINEERING CORPORATION

How to Write a Statement of Work is a very detailed and informative manual. It is divided into six chapters and one appendix, and includes a Table of Contents detailed enough to warrant the absence of an index. The book’s target audience is government personnel who write Statements of Work (SOW) for contracts or solicitations. How to Write a Statement of Work also applies to government contractors who must read, interpret, and respond to SOWs, and to contractors who write SOWs for commercial contracts. The target audience must be kept in mind, because How to Write a Statement of Work is definitely NOT appropriate for individuals outside of the government contracting and procurement fields. If not already experienced in writing or reading SOWs, the reader will be lost almost immediately.

Cole has written a very informative and concise manual, and kept his target audience in mind every step of the way. He indicates in the Preface that the emphasis of the book is to provide “practical, detailed guidance on writing and preparing SOWs.” He accomplishes this and more. Cole also includes a short bibliography of other sources in the Preface, and these sources provide further guidance in developing SOWs and Performance-Based Service Contracts (PBSCs).

The first two chapters of How to Write a Statement of Work are the most important. Chapter One, an overview of the SOW, stresses the importance of a clear and concise document, and how this affects future communications between the government agency and interested contractors. This is the basis for the entire book and is its strongest point. The importance of the SOW to the other parts of the solicitation or contract is also highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter Two discusses the SOW development planning and preparation phase. It emphasizes the need to visualize the entire project from beginning to end, ensuring that all aspects of work are covered within the SOW. This includes choosing the type of contract or SOW to be used, and distinguishing between level-of-effort and completion SOWs, personal versus non-personal services, sole source SOWs, and follow-on efforts and options. Cole details the problems that will arise when the wrong choices are indicated in a SOW. These are the primary building blocks for fully understanding and writing a successful SOW, and Cole provides exceptional information and detail to ensure that the reader understands them.

There is very little about this book that can be criticized. One of the few exceptions is Chapter Two, Planning and Preparation, which covers a great deal of information on the development of the SOW. More examples on interrelating planning and preparation, and the many aspects that fall under each of these categories would be helpful.

Overall, Cole gives very effective, solid, insightful, and abundant examples. In Chapter Three, for instance, he illustrates the process of writing a Performance Work Statement (PWS) using a fictitious Agency’s decision to contract out one of the functions of its Transportation Department. He provides a figure to show where this function fits into the overall department structure, and explains each part of the PWS using this same example to strengthen the reader’s understanding. This consistent use of examples is evident throughout the book. Cole completes the learning process by walking the reader through a sample SOW and showing how to correct it (Appendix A). He proves throughout that he is a consummate instructor, leaving no issue untouched or unexplained.

Peter S. Cole has more than 34 years of experience in acquisition and contract management. After retiring from the Navy in 1979, he started developing textbooks and offering training programs to government and commercial clients. Based on his extensive experience, Cole has become a leader in consulting services. Cole has written 15 manuals and handbooks for government agencies, including the Department of the Treasury, the Department of Interior, and the Central Intelligence Agency.

I recommend How to Write a Statement of Work very highly. Although SOWs are not an easy topic to understand, this book discusses them in a manner both informative and, in its own way, very enjoyable. It should be required reading for anyone in the government contracting and procurement fields. Despite the steep price tag, its value far outweighs the publisher’s list price, and the book is much better than similar, more inexpensive examples. I have found How to Write a Statement of Work to be an invaluable resource. Its wealth of information provides contractors with a better understanding of the government’s SOW goals, and with the legal ramifications that affect both sides in government contracting.

This book will be an asset to anyone preparing SOWs for either government agencies or for commercial purposes. How to Write a Statement of Work presents SOWs clearly and concisely. I believe it will become a valued, timeless resource for your Library.

How to Write a Statement of Work — Fourth Edition
Peter S. Cole, CPCM
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