

## Teaching Technical Report Writing as Aesthetic Pursuit: An Innovative Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*In a typical technical report writing course, students are exposed to the techniques of what good technical writing is about and then are evaluated on their ability to produce a sample of what they have learned. Those who teach a technical writing course would agree that teaching the course can be a drab affair. We need a new way of approaching the subject to enliven it a bit and add spice to it. This paper sets out to show that to a certain extent, report writing is a kind of art form and reports which are submitted by students are artefacts whose quality varies from person to person. A new, innovative approach to teaching technical report writing from an aesthetic perspective is worth considering.*

**Keywords:** Technical Report, Writing Innovative, Teaching Method, Aesthetic Evaluation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As part of their technical education requirement, most students in a technical college will have to enrol in a technical report writing course. Technical reports often show people how to do things or how things are structured. Technical reports must convey volumes of data and, often, the best way to do that is through tables, charts, graphs, and the like (McMurrey, 2001). In a technical report writing course, students are exposed to these elements plus the techniques of good writing such as rules of usage, principles of composition, and matters of form and style (Strunk & White, 2000). According to Blake and Bly (1993) good technical reports should have the following characteristics:

- i. technically accurate
- ii. useful
- iii. concise
- iv. complete
- v. clear
- vi. consistent
- vii. correct in spelling, punctuation and grammar
- viii. targeted
- ix. well organised
- x. interesting

The last item, *interesting*, is definitely an eye opener. To these, we might add that students should also be made aware of the fact that the report that they write is, to a certain extent, a work of art, and therefore can be looked at from an aesthetic perspective. Teaching a technical report writing class can be done through an aesthetic approach.

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The paper will discuss the historical genesis of aesthetic, some problems and issues in aesthetic judgment and how these issues are relevant in approaching technical report writing from an aesthetic perspective. Without some knowledge of the meaning of aesthetic and issues germane to it, we will not have a proper understanding of the need to approach technical report writing from an aesthetic approach. A rubric to evaluate the aesthetic quality of the report is also proposed.

## **2. THE HISTORICAL GENESIS OF AESTHETIC**

The term aesthetic conjures images of beautifully crafted works of arts that are inspired by muses and cherished by connoisseurs. Art and beauty are the two notions most closely associated with aesthetic. In fact, through a convoluted twist of historical accident, the three become so entwined that one is an indispensable part of the others. In order to place aesthetic, beauty and art in their proper perspective, let us begin with the notion of art as the product of bourgeoisie's flight of fancy.

According to Tilghman (1991), theories of art as we understand it today had its origin in eighteenth-century European cultural and philosophical thinking:

Both Plato in his Republic and Aristotle in the Poetics were concerned primarily with certain varieties of poetry, and although both made passing references to painting and sculpture, it is usually done in order to highlight some features of poetry. Neither offered a general theory of "the arts", a notion they could not have understood, despite our temptation to supply them with one. (p.22)

Prior to the eighteenth century, the commission for the creation of objects of a craft or skill was under the auspices of the Church and the Court. However, with the decline of both Church and Court as the centre of power, the bourgeoisie rose to prominent height and cultivated its own taste for objects of the various crafts or skills. And the common theory of art somehow accrued along the way to include the various species of arts – painting, sculpture, music, dance and architecture (Sarup, 1988, p. 126)

Just as the theory of art underwent important transformations to become what it stands for today, so did the term aesthetic. It all began, according to Caygill (1989), with the difficult task of locating art within the philosophical system. The term aesthetic was coined by an eighteenth-century German philosopher, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in his quest to link art and philosophy together. In his famous treatise on poetry, Baumgarten claimed that philosophy and the knowledge of how to construct a poem, which were often held to be antithetical, were actually linked together in the most amiable union:

Baumgarten's attempt to unite philosophy and poetics culminated in his announcement in the last pages of the book of a new philosophy in which logic as an art of judgment would be complemented by aesthetic as an art of invention, the former arranging and disposing the materials produced by the latter (Caygill, 1989, p.152).

In subsequent development, aesthetic as an art of invention was elevated to the rank of science of perception:

The Greek philosophers and the Church fathers have already carefully distinguished between things perceived and things known. It is entirely evident that they did not equate things known with things of sense, since they honoured with this name things also removed from sense (therefore images). Therefore, things known are to be known by their inferior faculty as the

object of logic; things perceived are to be known by the inferior faculty, as the object of the science of perception (Caygill, 1989, p.160).

At a much later stage of his aesthetic development, Baumgarten stressed that “the potential to perfect or realise innate perfection characterised human perfection and is the source of beauty” (Caygill, 1989, p. 170). This assertion was later misconstrued by philosophers such as Georg Friedrich Meyer, Friedrich Justus Riedel and Johann Georg Sulzer who demoted aesthetic to the rank of the philosophy of taste. This misapprehension came about due to the untimely death of Baumgarten (Caygill, 1989).

The historical distortion of the true meaning of aesthetic has had far-reaching implications upon subsequent development of the theory and philosophy of aesthetic, especially aesthetic judgment.

### **3. AESTHETIC JUDGMENT: PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES**

What qualities make an object aesthetically good or bad? What aesthetic values do we look for in an object? Various answers have been forwarded by aesthetes (Bourgeois, 2013; Kivy, 2015; Peters, 2015; Duve, 2018). Richard Shusterman (1989), for example, points to us that G.E. Moore in his aesthetic theories mentions that “beauty in nature should be held superior to an equally beautiful landscape [painting] or imagination, simply because the former is real and thus beauty is further beautified by truth” (p.13). Beauty and truth are two qualities which constitute aesthetic value according to this.

However, according to Adorno (1984), if beauty is what aesthetic is all about, then the concept is sterile because the formal character of the concept of beauty tends to miss the bountiful content of the aesthetical. If aesthetics were nothing but an exhaustive and systematic list of all that can be called beautiful, we could gain no understanding of the dynamic life inherent in the concept of beauty (p.75).

In such wise, Saville (1989) also cautions us that “fundamentally art is aimed at truth, and where the truth that has to be conveyed is that society is rotten to the core, for the artist to offer his public beautiful images could only be to connive in this corruption” (p.125).

Beauty and truth, therefore, could not be the only criteria for evaluative judgment since there are certain drawbacks in their constitutions. The notions of beauty and truth, one could add, might differ from one culture to another, or even among members of a certain culture. Another criterion for evaluation proposed is the function-class concept (Beardsley, 1958). A thing is considered aesthetically valuable depending on what function it best fulfils. A chair, for example, is for sitting and a wrench for tightening nuts. Even this, too, might pose a problem in some instances; what good is an ant or a fly, one might ask. In short, aesthetic judgment is a many-headed hydra, a creature who wears a thousand masks which prompted J.O. Urmson to remark that he is not for free-thinking in aesthetic (Shusterman, 1989, p.30).

Adorno (1984), however, distinguishes two modes of aesthetic evaluation: subjectivistic and objectivistic. The former maintains that an object is aesthetically valuable if the aesthetic consumers can connect emotionally with the object in question such as liking or enjoying it. The latter, on the other hand, stresses that what makes an object aesthetically valuable are the properties of the object itself, regardless of the emotional connection between object and consumers.

Within the objectivistic framework, Beardsley (1958) propounds that there are specific canons of evaluation which apply to certain medium of art and general canons which are applicable to all objects regardless of the medium or genre. The general canons are unity, complexity and intensity.

Unity refers to the ability of an aesthetic object to hold together the diverse elements in it, so that there is no confusion despite the many elements within the object. In an act of unity, everything hangs together in complete harmony. Everything that is in the object belongs and nothing is superfluous. Every element functions together even though some are more important than others.

Complexity refers to the diversity of elements or variation within an aesthetic object. However, these must be related to achieve or maintain a certain theme or promote a certain concept. The complexity within an aesthetic object seeks to avoid the monotony of mere repetition.

Intensity, according to Beardsley (1958), accrues when an object achieves a certain pervasive quality. In essence, an object is aesthetically good when it has “some marked quality, and not be a sheer non-entity or zero. The quality does not matter—it can be sad or cheerful, graceful or rugged, soft or stern, provided it be something” (p.463).

#### **4. AESTHETIC APPROACH TO TEACHING TECHNICAL REPORT WRITING**

According to the great poet John Keats, “A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness.” This phrase is a perfect avowal that beautiful things exude interminable pleasure. We can appreciate it by interpreting it as all beautiful things give happiness throughout our lifetime. Thus, our approach to technical report writing from an aesthetic perspective will help students see that the process of writing the report and the finished product as “a joy forever...” The following paragraphs will discuss how to teach technical report writing from an aesthetic approach and the finished product as a product of art. First, what we need to do is to put students in a proper frame of mind. Show them a sample report taken from a textbook or webpage which shows what an excellent report must look like. Ask them to comment on the report. It must be worthy enough to be described as a fine technical specimen; in its class it is simply a work of fine art. First impression is extremely important. Draw comparison of the report to a fine drawing or a beautifully sculptured vase or magnificent edifice like the Taj Mahal.

Ask them the amount of time it could have taken to design and craft such a beautiful creation. Could it have been done overnight or within a short period of time? A thing of beauty definitely requires a lot of time to build or create. We need to instil in them that to write a good report takes time and the task should not be rushed through. The end result might just fall short of a work of art. This first step is very important in preparing our students to start to see things in a very different light. Report writing must be interesting to learn even though the process can be somewhat daunting in the time it takes and the format that needs to be followed. It is a complex process. Tell them they are report writing artisans in the making.

Once the first step is firmly anchored, we can go on to the next step, discussing the building blocks of report writing which we can categorise as report format, organisation, and visual design.

The report format and organisation deal with the beginning and end of the report, the appendices, sections and sub-sections, the headings and sub-headings, the decimal notation and the references. These elements must be well-positioned within the report and there are certain

conventions that we must follow. In a poorly done report, the reader can be deterred initially by the appearance of the report. Congested pages, narrow margins, information vanishing into the binding, a typeface that is somewhat diminutive, and headings which fused with the text can definitely have an adverse effect on the readers and may even thwart them from reading the report. The report must have good print and layout; it must be attractive so that the reader is stimulated into delving in to tackle even the gloomiest subject. The report's appearance must be pleasing; it is easy to handle in term of its readability; it must be 'interesting' and 'well-organised', to quote the characteristics mentioned earlier. Show them samples of good reports and tell them it is all about convention, convention and convention. An artisan in the making must be inured to fine details and minute scrutiny. For example, let us take a look at how the Table of Contents is written.

<p><b>Table of Contents</b></p> <p><b>I. Introduction to the Interactive Graphic System</b></p> <p><b>II. Cost Reduction Benefits in Manufacturing</b></p> <p>    <b>A. Reducing Scrap</b></p> <p>    <b>B. Controlling Inventory</b></p> <p><b>III. System Operation and Special Features</b></p> <p>    <b>A. Using the Software</b></p> <p>        1. Language</p> <p>        2. Functions</p> <p>    <b>B. Handling the Hardware</b></p> <p>        1. Equipment</p> <p>        2. Procedures</p> <p><b>IV. Feasibility</b></p>
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Source: Parallel structure – St. Norbert College.

The numbering system used is the alpha-numeric and the phrases to denote the various sections and sub-sections are done in such a way that they are parallel in construction to one another. The Roman numerals, the Arabic numerals and the alphabets are all in alignment with one another. This is definitely not poetry in action but the beauty as per its synchronistic orderliness is without doubt there for all to see. Imagine if they were not aligned to one another in terms of linguistic similarities or numerical configuration.

Another example is to highlight the way the references list is written. When we put together the list of the sources of materials that we use at the tail end of the report, we must adhere to certain conventions which go by the name of APA, MLA, Harvard, Turabian or some other generally accepted systems. The references list can be quite a chore to construct but nonetheless its symmetrical configuration has its own aesthetic value. We need to highlight to students that they are building something worth beholding at the end of the day.

Another distinguishing element of report writing is the use of visuals to summarise data or to show a complex design or structure. Visuals include tables, graphs, charts, photographs scanned in, and line drawings, or any other non-verbal descriptive elements. Visuals are a crucial part of many technical reports. As such, visual design is important in report writing and students need to be coached on how to do this. Visuals must be presented when and where the user needs them. Hence, it is imperative that visuals are sited in the correct place, that is, where they are required. The technical report writing instructor must have knowledge and expertise on how to do this. In fact, a working knowledge on how to design visuals must be a part of the instructor's teaching armoury. If he is not savvy enough, then he should go for a course on how to do this. The instructor himself must be made to feel that he is an artisan teaching his disciples on how to become artisans themselves. Students need to be shown examples of excellent visuals used in

report so that they can imitate these elements which are akin to works of art. Take time to appreciate them. Ask them to answer the following questions: Does it give the required information? Does it reproduce realistically the intended information? Is it easy to use? And the million-dollar question, does it look attractive?

Finally, what we need to complete the guide on writing technical report from an aesthetic perspective is to have a proper scale that can measure the aesthetic quality of the report. The foregoing paragraphs in Sections 2 and 3 should provide valuable insights into the meaning of aesthetic, its problems and other related issues which we can extrapolate to help us view our task in a new light. Several significant corollaries accrue.

First, we need to have a proper frame of mind when evaluating aesthetic objects, in this case the overall presentation of the report. We need to be objective in our contemplation. We do not simply want to say, "This object pleases me," but also need to view the object from a functional perspective, of how best it helps the writing relate to the central concept. Visual aids used in report, for example, need to be placed properly within the report so that they help make the report functional.

Second, beauty is important, too, but it is not so much beauty of appearance that we look for; it is beauty of functional and conceptual modality that we want, of how best beauty helps the object fit into the grand scheme of things. Everything is there not for just the sake of being there. Third, the dynamics of objectivity, functionality and beauty of conceptual modality require an organising framework to become potent criteria for evaluation purposes. In this, Beardley's general canons of aesthetic criticism provide the overall organising principles for effective conception.

The foregoing are significant corollaries which provide a plausible scheme of evaluation that serves our purpose. The following is a tentative rating scale to evaluate the overall impact the report has on us visually and also emotionally as an aesthetic object. It is by no means conclusive and seeks only to present a prolegomenon on the subject – further discussion is certainly required.

### **A Tentative Rating Scale for Aesthetic Evaluation**

<b>Unity</b>	
4	The report as a whole visually well configured Page arrangement shows consistent *visual logic Page layout and text features well established Everything hangs together in complete harmony Nothing is superfluous
3	The report has slight problems with visual presentation Slight problems with page layout and text features Some elements do not come together in complete harmony
2	Some materials are not well organised Visual logic is compromised somewhat Some problems with page layout and text features
1	Visual logic highly compromised Major problems with page layout and text features

\* visual logic according to Riordan and Pauley (2002) is the consistency in the placement of information, e.g. page numbers are italicised in the upper right corner, etc.

<b>Complexity</b>	
4	The report is richly textured with elements of language, numbers, figures and tables, etc. put together cohesively Visually attractive despite the many elements put together Nothing seems repetitive
3	The report has slight problems with visual complexity Moderately rich in visual texture You have the feeling that an element or two are missing
2	Minor problems in visual design and page layout Visually lacking in texture You have the feeling that some elements are missing
1	Major problems in visual design and page layout

  

<b>Intensity</b>	
2	The report in its totality is superb Vivacious Generate interest for readers to read
1	Moderately attractive in its totality Presentable
0	Failed completely to generate interest for others to read

The rating scale is based on a perfect score of 10 with a range of 1-4 for unity and complexity, and 0-2 for intensity. The total score of the components should give a fair estimate of student's aesthetic performance. Through using the scale, the class instructor should be able to attain a certain degree of objectivity in assessing students' writing apropos the aesthetic quality of the paper.

Aesthetic evaluation in the technical writing class should be given particular emphasis because the papers that students produce are somewhat akin to a work of arts and, therefore, we need to be able to objectively assess them using a scale which captures the essence of such an effort. Apart from assessing the quality of writing in a paper, marks should also be given to the aesthetic quality of the work as a whole. If students are informed that the report they turn in will also be assessed on its aesthetic quality, we believe they will put in the extra effort needed to ensure that the report is indeed a work of arts, and this will definitely inspire them to be more creative. When they design the visuals to put into the report, for example, we are certain that they will think of themselves as artisans putting something worthy to be praised as a work of arts.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper sets out to propose a new way of looking at how we can approach the teaching of technical report writing from an aesthetic perspective and how we can assess the end product as a work of aesthetic objet d'art. Teaching technical report writing in the normal usual way can be a drab affair, both for the teacher and the students. We need a new innovative way of approaching the subject as has been shown in the forgoing sections. Definitely, some other elements can be added to the guidelines proposed. For example, we can take students to an art gallery to appreciate things of beauty which are put on display. If this is not possible, then we can show them objects of beauty available online. The thing is we want them to have a proper frame of mind in approaching the subject. Instructors too must adopt the same attitude; in fact, they need to have proper skills in handling visual design and be technically savvy when it comes to matters of formatting and language use.

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