

# Comments arising from W.D. Maxwell-Mahon's article on report writing

by A.K. Scholes

In an industrial context the above article makes a number of valid points which our experience in AE&CI amply confirms.

While we agree that 'only the essential facts' should be presented it is often desirable, especially in reports setting out the results of research work, to include details of experimental work, or calculations, and so on. These we suggest may well have a limited readership and should, therefore, be set out in Appendices rather than in the main body of the text.

The objective of an industrial report is frequently to assist people in positions senior to the report writer in making decisions. We agree on 'the need for clear, precise expression' and would add that there is an equally great need to ensure that any conclusions which may be drawn from the text are based firmly on the work reported. And similarly that any recommendations made for specific action are based on the conclusions drawn. This sort of logic may appear to students of any language to be obvious, but then so is the need for clear, concise and precise expression, and we know how frequently this need is not met satisfactorily.

The nineteenth century French chemist Pascall made a pertinent observation in a letter to a friend when he said: 'I regret that this letter is so long but I lack the time to make it shorter' – he could equally well have been referring to many modern reports. We believe that good report writing is writing that does what both the writer and the reader want it to do – i.e. it tells what is meant. However, there is no justification for the sharing of effort; the responsibility for being understood rests exclusively with the writer.

A final point which we believe requires considerable emphasis concerns the summaries of reports, or at least of technical reports. In the case of commercial reports the matter is probably of far less importance.

The total of published information on almost any technical subject has grown formidably during this century, to the extent that most of us are hard put to it to keep up-to-date, let alone to search retrospectively in the literature. This situation has resulted in the setting-up of numerous commercial abstracting services (e.g. Chemical Abstracts, Engineering Index, Biological Abstracts, etc). Further, the writing of large numbers of reports within industrial concerns, for their own use, has led to the development of so-called information retrieval systems. All of these systems are based on subject indexing, while many also include abstracts of reports in the same way as commercial services cover the published literature. In fact, in the context of technical articles and reports the word 'Summary' has become, for practical purposes, synonymous with 'Abstract'. It is also factual that many managers in industry usually read only the summaries of reports, thus making this section an extremely important one for each such document. These summaries are usually printed at the front of reports and not at the end.

Summaries at the beginning of technical journal articles are now so widely accepted by publishers and learned societies that it is true to say that their absence is noticeable. The only remaining major bone of contention is the question of who should write them – the author or a professional editor or abstractor. Whichever side one may take in this argument, once abstracts are provided which are more than simply amplified titles, then there appear to be two main ways for constructing an abstract or summary. In the jargon of Information Science the first is called 'Indicative': in this instance the abstract merely indicates the major topics covered in the article or report in appropriate sentences. The concepts listed in these sentences would in effect comprise the list of indexing terms used for retrieval of the document in an information retrieval system. The second way is called 'informative': here the abstract provides a brief description of the work done, incident reported, etc. and, where appropriate, includes any conclusions and recommendations. The informative abstract requires a greater intellectual effort to prepare but, if well

done, frequently saves much time for busy readers by giving them sufficient information for them to decide whether they need to read the original text or not.