

Something for Everyone

Talking About People: A Guide to Fair and Accurate Language. Rosalie Maggio. Phoenix: Oryx Press; 1997. x + 436 pages. Softcover \$27.50. ISBN 1-57356-069-3.

Rosalie Maggio, author of *The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage* and other books, has outdone herself.

“Any kind of writing can be difficult and frustrating. Verifying that people language is fair and accurate should be as commonplace as checking for spelling, grammar, usage, and style.” “The myth . . . is that either you write beautifully or you write respectfully. You can do both. It’s work, but so is any other good writing.” So say the “Writing Guidelines” and the “User’s Guide” in *Talking About People*, the book to have if you ever wonder how to refer to someone accurately and fairly in these days when we are gradually—finally—learning not to be unintentionally insulting.

In 400 pages, Maggio suggests alternatives to some 8000 people terms that can be problematic. Terms related to the sexes probably make up the largest fraction, but many hundreds refer to humans categorized in other ways—by religion, disability, ethnic group, sexual orientation, skin color, nationality, and the like. Not all the terms included are inherently offensive. There are also such entries as “powder room” (“coy and exclusive”); “prattle” (“used of women and children, and rarely of men”—if you choose this word, are you “making a subtle statement about women?”);

and “learning disability” (“sometimes used unthinkingly and imprecisely”).

Most of the book is in dictionary form; that is, the entries are arranged alphabetically, and almost every entry begins with a term. However, a fair number of entries deal not with specific terms, but with ideas or topics, such as “sex differences”, “hyphenated surnames” (“not always ideal”), and “disability/disabilities” (an 11-point mini-essay replete with terms to avoid and terms to consider using).

Maggio includes all sorts of advice that is not necessarily related to specific terms—things to become sensitive to. In one of many asides, for instance, she notes under the heading of “pinko” that words that end in “-o” are usually derogatory—like “fatso”, “gringo”, “dago”, and “homo”. She points out that “sex-specific adjectives [such as ‘female’ in ‘female lawyer’] are often gratuitous and belittling.” She suggests that writers always try to be parallel (good editorial advice in any case): why write “man and wife” if you would not write “husband and woman”? She warns us to “be aware of how many expressions in . . . English . . . are male-based. Balance their use with female-based expressions, creative expressions of your own, or a sex-neutral alternative.”

Maggio’s book is not dry and preachy; far from it. It is written in a light style. It is consistently supportive and helpful. It is never angry, never militant. And Maggio has a sense

of humor. For example, she acknowledges, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, that the search for the perfect word will not always be successful, but she persistently encourages the search nevertheless. Under “boyfriend” (whose entry is virtually identical with that for “girlfriend”), before suggesting some 50 alternatives, she notes that “none of the following terms work in all situations; some of them hardly work in any situation.”

As a sort of bonus, Maggio has included “Writing Guidelines”, a 27-page treatise that deserves to be printed and widely distributed in its own right and would constitute an excellent part of the syllabus for a first-year journalism or composition course.

Perhaps this review should end by referring to the entry for “zoo”, which itself ends, “although this is the last and probably the ‘least’ entry in the book, it offers another opportunity to think about word choices.” Indeed, that is what this book is about—choices. Faced with a choice among possible people terms, you will almost certainly find help here.

Norman Grossblatt

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Systematic Reviews: Synthesis of Best Evidence for Health Care Decisions. Cynthia D Mulrow and Deborah Cook, editors. Philadelphia: American College of Physicians; 1998. x + 117 pages. Softcover. \$27.00. ISBN 0-943126-66-5

Keeping up is hard to do—keeping up with the medical literature, that is. With more than a million articles published in medical journals each year, physicians trying to keep abreast of new developments can be overwhelmed. One answer to this problem comes in the form of literature-review periodicals—such as the Massachusetts Medical Society Journal Watch series and the American College of Physicians ACP Journal Club—which provide structured abstracts of and expert commentary on the most important articles published. Another answer to the problem of information overload is the systematic review, the subject of *Systematic Reviews: Synthesis of Best Evidence for Health Care Decisions*.

As the editors of this excellent volume explain, systematic reviews “use explicit and rigorous methods to identify, critically appraise, and synthesize” the best available evidence relevant to a particular clinical question, so systematic reviews come closer to “the whole truth” than do traditional reviews, which rely on “implicit, idiosyncratic methods of data collection and interpretation”.

Systematic Reviews is both an interesting guide to understanding and using systematic reviews and a useful how-to manual for preparing such reviews. The book consists of 10 chapters that originally appeared in 1997

as a series of articles in *Annals of Internal Medicine*. The first chapter defines the concept of systematic reviews and describes their purpose and utility. Chapters 2 and 3 tell how to locate, interpret, and evaluate systematic reviews. Especially interesting is the discussion in chapter 3 of the “number needed to treat”. This measure, which the authors aptly describe as a “common currency”, provides a basis for meaningful comparisons of quantitative reviews that address the same clinical question but report their results in different ways. The authors of this chapter also provide an excellent overview of the strengths and weaknesses of the various numerical methods of reporting results of clinical trials, including relative risk, relative-risk reduction, and absolute-risk reduction.

Chapters 4 and 5 suggest strategies for incorporating systematic reviews into clinical education and into decision-making by consumers and policy-makers. In both these chapters the authors are careful to point out not only the potential benefits but also the limitations of using systematic reviews. Chapter 6, the end of the first section of the book, clarifies the relationship between systematic reviews and clinical-practice guidelines.

The last 4 chapters of the book could stand on their own as a how-to manual. These chapters should prove very helpful to anyone faced with the daunting task of preparing a systematic review, especially anyone approaching the task for the first time. Topics addressed in this section include selecting an important question, refining the question, selecting studies for inclusion in the review,

and performing a statistical analysis of the studies collected. The importance of good planning in achieving a high-quality review is stressed throughout.

The authors of the various chapters have provided helpful resources whenever possible. For example, readers will find specific search strategies for locating systematic reviews in MEDLINE and other databases; lists of the major sources of systematic reviews, with their telephone numbers and Internet addresses; a chart that can be used to convert odds ratios into the “number needed to treat”; and examples of forms that could be filled out to determine whether a study should be included in a systematic review.

The excellent format of the book deserves mention. Each chapter begins with a brief abstract and ends with a concise list of “key points to remember”, which makes note-taking largely unnecessary. Figures and tables are included in some chapters, and in every case they are clear and enhance the information in the text. Finally, the page layout is very attractive.

Systematic Reviews should prove to be a useful resource for anyone involved in using or preparing systematic reviews; for the reader not already familiar with such reviews, this book would serve as an excellent introduction to the topic.

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Green Ink: An Introduction to Environmental Journalism. Michael Frome. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press; 1998. x + 204 pages. Softcover \$19.95. ISBN 0-87480-584-8

Advocacy is an activity that journalists have been taught to avoid in their writing. Indeed, journalism schools teach that advocacy marks bias and leads to a loss of credibility. In *Green Ink*, Michael Frome goes against the grain and makes a case for advocacy journalism. In the course of his advocacy, he offers tips to help environmental writers write well and get published.

Green Ink is divided into 3 sections. The first is Frome's case for advocacy journalism. Frome writes that journalists should be advocates for the health of the planet. "Environmental writing", he says, "must be clear and understandable, based on sound data and thorough research, yet reflecting the author's imagination, deep inner feeling, and desire to advance the cause of a better world" (page 22). Frome writes that journalists should critically evaluate information rather than simply report it. "The strict separation of facts and editorial opinion leads to misunderstanding. . . . Readers and viewers need interpretive voices to guide them through a jungle of facts" (page 28).

The second section of the book chronicles Frome's career as a journalist. He began his career as a copyboy at the Washington Post and later became a reporter there. He left newspaper writing and did public-relations work for the American Automobile Association (AAA) for 10 years. While there, Frome became aware of conservation groups and developed expertise in travel and tourism. He also wrote occasional travel

articles for popular magazines. After writing magazine articles, he says, "I recognized that I could do more in my life than publicize and promote automobile clubs" (page 72). In the late 1950s, he left AAA to freelance full-time, initially writing travel articles. But as his interest in environmental issues grew, Frome began to write about the environment.

In 1966 Frome became a columnist for *American Forests*, the monthly magazine of the American Forestry Association. He also worked as the conservation editor of *Field and Stream*. He was fired from both jobs over conflicts about the editorial slant of his articles; he says that his firings lend credence to the idea that the media exist more to mollify the public than to educate. Frome then worked as a freelance writer and eventually began teaching environmental journalism at the universities of Idaho and Vermont and at Western Washington University.

The third section of the book, which stems from Frome's teaching experience, is a primer for aspiring environmental journalists. Frome recommends writing about what you know and care about. His tips for involving readers in an article include noting how science affects people rather than just reporting the technical details. "Technical writing doesn't connect, it doesn't communicate; it alienates", he notes (page 110). His tips for interviewing scientists include doing background research on the subject and finding a subject of common interest to encourage interviewees to talk freely.

Frome emphasizes reporting fairly and verifying facts. Being familiar with and using the Freedom of Information Act can be a help in this regard. "When officials insist on hiding something", he says, "they invariably

have something damaging to hide" (page 114).

Frome names some Web sites that can help generate story ideas, such as *Enviro-Link*, *American Rivers*, *National Press Club*, *Poynter Online*, and *Investigative Reporters and Editors*. He cites such environmental magazines as *Amicus Journal*, *Audubon*, *National Parks*, and *Sierra*. Pragmatically, he says, "the trouble with each of them is each has an organization party line, with its own sacred cows and shibboleths" (page 140). Frome also lists alternative media publications, such as *Simple Living*, *American Rivers*, and *High Country News*. He suggests that writers consider publishing in nontraditional media as a growing field, a place for beginners and perhaps for professionals still looking for fulfillment.

Although Frome's liberal use of anecdotes makes *Green Ink* enjoyable to read, his tendency to pursue tangents detracts from the flow of the book. A chapter devoted to contemporary environmental writers, included to inspire young writers, seems too long and detailed to be of interest. Similarly, the chapter highlighting Frome's heroes and role models can be slow reading. Ideally, the book would contain more tips and resources for environmental writers and fewer tangential anecdotes. Overall, the book offers a basic set of tips and resources for journalists and an interesting perspective on advocacy journalism.

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