In this column, I look at books that talk about how to do something. All of the somethings are related to words and writing.


The earlier edition of this book, without “2010” in the title, came out in 2009 and covered Word 2003. I reviewed it in the July/Aug. 2009 Micro Review. It was highly acclaimed among its target audience, which has been clamoring since then for an updated version.

Now in her fourth career (see www.salamanderfeltworks.com), Hilary Powers has been a freelance editor since 1994. She says she chose editing to enable her to emulate Nero Wolfe—that is, never to have to leave home on business. Before her first year as an editor was done, she had abandoned paper. She works online only, a fact that necessitated her mastery of Microsoft Word. The original edition was 80 pages, but the target audience of this larger volume is still anyone who edits for a living. If you use Word in any capacity, however, you will find useful information here. For example, editors must master Word’s change-tracking facilities, but many non-editors use that feature, too, and practically everybody finds it maddening. The display can be a garbled mess, hiding important information while revealing what you’d rather keep private. Sometimes the same change can appear clear or confusing, depending on how you make it. Powers knows all the tricks. In 11 pages, she tames the feature’s wildest aspects and brings out its good points. She can’t remove all of Word 2010’s quirks, but she shows ways to work around the worst of them.

Macro programming is another powerful feature of Word that will quickly repay your learning how to use it well. Powers shows you where and how to use macros and provides free downloads of her own macros (www.powersedit.com/ftp/Word2010exercises.zip) to help you learn the details.

Powers says, “Macros and templates are at the absolute heart of making Word 2010 your own.” This has been true for many versions of Word. More than 20 years ago, I had to maintain a 1,000-page manual in Word for Windows 2.0 and publish both the printed Word version (before PDF came on the scene) and a text version to be read online (before HTML and browsers). Without writing eight pages of macros, I could never have done it. Nowadays, things are easier, but well-designed macros can still save lots of time. Templates provide the modularity necessary to have different configurations and sets of macros for different kinds of jobs. Powers devotes 27 pages, nearly 20 percent of the book, to the chapter on macros and templates.

The Microsoft documentation of these subjects is arcane, but Powers explains the features clearly.

One huge frustration for most experienced Word users is the Word 2010 ribbon. At first glance, it looks like a huge change in the user interface. It takes all those menu commands, whose locations you finally memorized, and rearranges them in ways that make sense to at least one person at Microsoft. Unfortunately, the rearrangement makes no sense, especially at first view, to most of the rest of us. Some people refuse to use the ribbon and seek out aftermarket programs to emulate the old menus, forgetting how much they hated that interface before they saw the new one. Let Powers lead you through the desert to the promised land. When she gets through showing you how to customize the interface, you’ll never want to go back. And, to keep you sane while you’re learning, she gives you a few tricks for finding what you know must be there—because over the last 30 years, no feature of Word has ever gone away.

This book removes your excuse for avoiding a range of troublesome tasks, from mastering macros to simply selecting configuration options. If you’re like most Word users, you could do a lot of what this book recommends without reading it, though you’d have to figure out a lot of things that Powers has already figured out for you. And once you...
read about the huge increases in efficiency that she achieves through those techniques, you won’t be able to resist the urge to tinker. I have known Hilary Powers for many years, so I can testify that she writes the way she speaks. Her style is clear and colorful, never boring. The topics she covers are practical and directly useful. If you use Word, you should read this book.

**DITA Best Practices: A Roadmap for Writing, Editing, and Architecting in DITA**


In the Mar./Apr. 2012 Micro Review, I reviewed the **IBM Style Guide**. This book, **DITA Best Practices**, is a companion to that style guide. It focuses on the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA), an XML-based system for authoring and publishing technical information. Originally an IBM project, DITA is now an open-source toolkit, managed by the independent global consortium Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Standards (Oasis).

DITA provides a technical infrastructure for topic-based writing and publishing. Following a model that evolved from the online-help systems of the 1990s, DITA starts with the idea that most technical documentation can be broken into chunks, and that each chunk falls into one of the following basic categories: procedures, concepts, and reference. The Darwin part of the name comes from DITA’s use of inheritance to allow different projects to extend and specialize the basic categories. Unlike DocBook, another popular XML schema for technical publishing, DITA has an associated set of tools for building an automated process that supports publishing multiple documents to multiple output media from a single database of content.

This book provides a clear treatment of metadata and DITA maps. Metadata—data about the content—provides one key to achieving DITA’s benefits. Properly designing and using metadata makes your content easy for you to manage and for your users to find, and it helps you provide different output to different audiences. While much of the DITA metadata stays with the content, a significant portion of it can reside in DITA maps—structures that define documents in terms of the topics that comprise them and the relationships among those topics. Becoming thoroughly familiar with DITA maps is an important step on the road to feeling comfortable with DITA.

Understanding DITA, especially its architectural aspects, entails digging into the details. DITA is conceptually simple, but the details are hard for most people to wrap their minds around. This book helps you understand the details and, by laying out best practices, makes many choices for you, simplifying your task of getting up to speed. The authors are aware of the learning difficulties DITA presents for many users. For example, they begin the chapter on metadata by saying, “If your writing team is just learning about DITA elements, don’t scare them by using fancy words such as metadata at team meetings. Otherwise the guy who brings the donuts might not come anymore.”

Like the **IBM Style Guide**, this book is sure to become a standard. If you want to work in DITA, you need this book. If you’re not sure you want to work in DITA—it’s overkill for many applications, though new tools and techniques keep lowering the bar—the detailed information in this book will give you a basis for deciding.


Marcia Riefer Johnston is a popular blogger about writing. This book is essentially a collection of blog posts, arranged to support the theme that the book’s subtitle suggests. Yet as pedestrian as that sounds, the book builds momentum and ends powerfully. Johnston succeeds where most blog rehashes fall flat, because she digs new and interesting material out of veins that have been mined again and again. Besides, she may be the only person I know of who quotes from S.I. Hayakawa’s *Choose the Right Word*.

Johnston starts by taking a position in the pointless but heated debate over whether language mavens should prescribe rules for others to follow or just describe the way others speak. Her position, sensibly, is squarely on the fence. On the prescriptivist side, she says, alluding to a formulation by Bryan A. Garner, “After a quarter-century of professional writing, I still yearn for linguistic guidance, and I still struggle with editorial pred earment.” After my half century of professional writing, I can tell her that the next quarter century probably won’t be any easier. There will always be plenty of work for the prescriptivists. On the other hand, she also bows to the descriptivists. In her essay “To Each Their Own,” she pragmatically acknowledges a place for a singular “they,” though she tries to avoid it. On the other hand, her prescriptivist side inveighs against computer-generated abominations like “Mary updated their profile.”

Johnston is more engaging when, rather than taking a position on some tired old question, she shines fresh light on an unexpected topic. By examining the question rather than answering it, she takes us somewhere new and interesting. Should you end a sentence with a preposition? Who cares?! The interesting question is, “What is a preposition anyway?” Is “from” a preposition? Are prepositions really parts of speech, or should they be demoted, like Pluto, to something less grand?

Book publishers nowadays use Google as an excuse to skimp on indexes, but Johnston knows the value of a good handcrafted index. She created her own and proudly introduces it by calling attention to entries she’s especially proud of. Indexing mavens have long maintained that indexing helps to identify structural problems in a book. However, professional indexers usually receive books when the content is frozen, so nobody corrects
the structural problems. Johnston points out ways that she was able to strengthen her book while indexing it.

In the final chapter, Johnston tries an exercise that many writers would find terrifying. Emulating William Zinsser, she presents a piece of her own writing about a meaningful personal experience, then goes through it step by step, explaining the options she considered and the decisions she made to arrive at the final version. I found it enlightening.

When it comes to details, I disagree with some of the things Johnston says, but I like her basic message of loving the language and using it precisely. Not everybody wants to work at learning to write well, but if you do, you’ll enjoy reading this book, and you may decide to follow Johnston’s blog as well.


Jack Molisani is the founder and principal of ProSpring Technical Staffing and executive director of the LavaCon conference (http://lavacon.org). He is a fellow of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and a frequent speaker on career-related issues. I have heard him speak many times, and this thin book perfectly captures his basic message: face the truth and deal with it, but no matter how bad things get, stay optimistic and keep working toward your goals. Jack suffered a big setback in the 2008 downturn, and he used his own methods to come back strong. This is an inspiring book, but it is filled with simple, practical advice. I recommend it.

Richard Mateosian is a technical writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Contact him at xmxmxm@gmail.com.