Literature Review of Studies on the History of Technical Writing

In the nineteenth century, America had many forms of technical writing, including guides, articles, manuals, pamphlets, and treatises. However, there are currently no inclusive studies of nineteenth-century technical writing, so it is difficult to generalize about other types of technical writing without doing an exhaustive original survey that would be beyond the scope of this study. However, there is a small body of historical research in technical writing from this time period. To illustrate, in R. John Brockmann’s 1983 "Bibliography of Articles on the History of Technical Writing," only seven of the thirty-six listed concentrate on the nineteenth century, and the majority of those focus on an individual text or writer, presumably because most of the works are articles. The number of works devoted to nineteenth-century writing is essentially the same in William E. Rivers' "Studies in the History of Business and Technical Writing: A Bibliographic Essay" from 1994 which is ultimately a larger study (200 works) because of the additional historical research devoted to other time periods, but also because he includes citations on historical research in business writing.

Not surprisingly, many researchers call for additional research. In their 1992 article, "Expanding and Redirecting Historical Research in Technical Writing: In Search of Our Past," Elizabeth Tebeaux and M. Jimmie Killingsworth suggest a need for larger studies to examine as many kinds of technical writing as possible for a specific time period (27). Rivers, likewise, recommends the need to focus on neglected time periods, noting that most work has concentrated on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century British writing. Like Tebeaux and Killingsworth, he suggests larger studies that incorporate multidisciplinary approaches. Similarly, he calls for placing historical studies in context, illustrating the connections between technical writing and all writing from a particular time period and ultimately analyzing how writing has evolved over time (45).

Annotation: This revision of the ineffective literature review was part of a larger study, a thesis involving historical research in technical communication. This review takes a chronological approach and uses the MLA system of documentation to refer readers to a list of Works Cited to find cited sources. It first attempts to establish that research in this area is limited, confirming the subsequent calls for additional research, discussed in the second paragraph, that establishes the basis for work in the present study (the thesis this review appears in).