



Surma, A. (2005). *Public and professional writing: Ethics, imagination and rhetoric*. Hampshire, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

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From the outset I was attracted to this book. In part it was the title. As a former journalist, speech writer and government press secretary, I was intrigued to hear about this thing called 'Public and Professional Writing'. I was further attracted by the sub title: 'Ethics, Imagination and Rhetoric'. What a challenge, dealing with the potential contradictions these words promised when linked together. Finally, I was intrigued to know what it was that a former colleague 'Anne Surma' had been beavering away at. We worked in the same building at Murdoch University for three years and yet sadly, I had known nothing about her work. Our discussions had been limited to hurried hellos as we dashed off to class, or the library, or the myriad of tasks that occupy academic lives these days.

Clearly she was working hard 'Public and Professional Writing' is testimony to that. It is an excellent book and one that provides an insight into the challenges that professional people confront on a regular 'in many cases daily' basis. The challenge is this: translating their professional knowledge into professional writing. As anyone who has worked as a speech writer would appreciate, it can be a difficult task. It is a skill that develops slowly over time. It is not something people are born with; nor is it something that can necessarily be taught to all and sundry. And yet increasingly people are expected to write professionally. They have to engage with a whole range of people; some who share their professional knowledge, others who don't. As she rightly points out, they need the ability to engage with their audiences, and increasingly they need to do so through a range of different vehicles, including reports, letters, emails, and on-line websites. All require different skills: the letter from a politician to a constituent who has a personal problem they are seeking advice on, is approached in a different way to a letter from that same politician to all constituents which seeks to expound the virtues or weaknesses of a particular policy.

While the book is not a 'how to', it does provide some interesting insights into the dos and don'ts of professional writing. This comes through the use of case studies. Surma uses some interesting case studies to highlight the challenges confronting professionals who need to write professionally. For example, in Chapter 2 she uses a range of documents produced by engineers to highlight the difficulties they faced in engaging with their clients. In Chapter 3 she takes the discussion in a different direction, using web sites 'in this case the official sites of the US President, George W. Bush, and the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard' to show how messages can be moulded and nuanced to present a particular message.

For me, however, the strength of the book rests with its discussion about ethical writing. Can professional writing be ethical? Surma says 'yes'. I'm not sure that it always is, as laudable a goal as it might appear. In the book Surma spends considerable time discussing how messages are massaged to serve the purpose of the writer or the organisation s/he works for. It is a fact of life and people have been conditioned to view sceptically information they receive from political parties and large corporations. She acknowledges it and weaves it into an interesting discussion about the use of imagination and rhetoric.

If the book has a weakness, it is this: It seems to contain the assumption that professional writers reach their target audiences directly. I would be uncomfortable with such a view. While email and internet provide a direct link between writer and audience, the fact remains that much of the material circulating in the public sphere has been filtered, edited and perhaps even reinterpreted before it hits the audience. Today communication theorists have moved well past the bullet and hypodermic syringe explanations for how people absorb messages. With that in mind, I would have liked to see a chapter on the media and its ability to subtly 'perhaps not so subtly?' change the meaning of information. In the hands of a mischievous, perhaps misguided or uninformed journalist, the work of the most ethical professional writer can be turned upside down. But perhaps that's the subject of another book.

Finally, I think that Surma has missed the mark with one of her target groups 'upper level undergraduates'. While it would undoubtedly appeal to people who write professionally, and may be beneficial to postgraduate students, I don't believe it will appeal to upper level undergraduates. The reason: ironically, the writing is too academic.

**About the reviewer:** Associate Professor Stephen Tanner is Head of the School of Journalism and Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Professor Tanner was previously a Senior Lecturer in Journalism at Murdoch University (WA), where he specialised in investigative journalism and research, political journalism, journalism ethics, media coverage of disability and media and corruption. He also co-directed and co-founded Murdoch University's 'Journalism and Justice Initiative' 'a research-based institute that coordinates research projects by visiting staff and students and promotes discussion about topics embracing the 'journalism and

*justice' theme. His major publications include the edited text Journalism: Investigation and Research (Longman, 2002), the co-authored Journalism Ethics at Work, (Pearson, 2005), and the co-authored The Press, Politics and Power in Australia (forthcoming, Pearson, 2006).*

**Purchase information:** This book is available from all good booksellers, or can be purchased direct from Palgrave Macmillan at: <https://www.palgrave.com/products/Catalogue.aspx?is=1403915822>