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Engineers and Writing

James B. Rather, Jr.

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The tendency of the average young undergraduate engineer to mock the Arts or Business man, who when answering a quiz question, slings what is called in well-known college jargon, the bull, has become a well established custom at Lehigh.

You cannot get along in engineering, he will invariably remind his non-technical colleague, by throwing the bull. Then he will grin. The grin, of course, means that he thinks most Arts and Business men to be past masters of the art of bull throwing. We are trained to use the fewest possible words, he will continue. We have no use for unnecessary padding. With that parting comment, he will generally drop the subject.

On the whole the harmless razzing by the engineer is justified, but sometimes it is carried too far. Then there is danger ahead. Far too many engineers are forgetful of the importance of knowing how to write well. A few realize that to be successful in today's engineering world, one must possess an aptitude for the writing of letters and reports. But even those aware of that fact actually have the secret belief that because they have mastered the demon calculus, they will be able to pick up that ability to write good business letters without difficulty. A professor at the New York University School of Commerce addressing his class in Business English this summer, declared that it is a well known fact that most engineers are notoriously poor letter writers. Despite the efforts of many engineering universities to tighten up on their courses in English, a technical man in one of our large oil companies made a similar statement recently. In my experience, he commented, of employing young engineers from the various college classes for the past thirteen years, I can find no improvement. All but a few still remain incoherent writers.

Why does the world at large continue to think that it is only natural for engineers to be poor writers? It is not natural for any educated person to be a poor writer. Writing is largely a matter of experience, but engineers do not bother to obtain that experience. Too many of our bright young engineers are pleased to think of themselves as men of few words. Consequently, many of them are in a quandary when they find that they have to answer a letter which requires diplomatic language, soft soaping and perhaps a little padding.

Of course a man can be an engineer without having to write letters, but then there will be reports to write. Certainly one cannot hope to be an executive engineer without being a moderately good writer. However, there are engineers who have no desire to be executives. These need not worry about writing.

The purport of this article is not primarily to boost publication work as a valuable extra-curriculum at Lehigh. Nevertheless, in the opinion of the author it will do no harm to say a little on that subject. At Lehigh most men could learn how to write well by taking an interest in publication work. For engineers particularly, it might well be their main extra-curriculum activity; but only a few are interested. The feeble support and lack of attention given to the various publications is deplorable. Too many of the men now doing publication work have been railroaded in by their fraternity leaders. Most of these leaders do not care about supporting a publication. They do not explain to the new men the value of that type of work. What they want is points for their house. They want their brothers to flourish keys and charms.

It is evident, considering present conditions at Lehigh, why engineers are graduated year after year without knowing how to write proficiently. It is because the majority of them are not interested enough to obtain the necessary experience. If more engineers would go out for publication work, while at college, they would assist in removing the stigma which has been long attached to them. At Lehigh the situation is even worse than it is at other institutions. Even the Arts and Business men are not particularly interested in activities pertaining to writing. Instead of being recognized with the athlete and politician as student leaders, Lehigh's journalists are almost unknown. Every year the student body is astonished when one or two of the more fortunate ones are tapped by Omicron Delta Kappa or Sword and Crescent. How did he 'worm' his way in, they murmur. Then they learn that the dark horse is the editor of this or that publication. Only another grafter, they think and let it pass.

Many engineers could learn to write successfully by being reporters on the *Brown and White* or contributing Editors to the *Lehigh Review*. In the past only a few have taken advantage of that opportunity. The student attitude towards writing in general is typified in the relentless razzing of Lehigh's newspaper. Some hurl criticism at it because it is subsidized. Only a few consider facts which make a subsidization plan necessary. These know that Lehigh is divided into a comparatively small number of living groups. They realize that if the paper were not subsidized it could not exist because the fraternity houses would purchase only one or two papers each. But what do they say? Most of them say, well if it is absolutely necessary to have a subsidy, why have a paper? Then they will no doubt comment that one can not expect much interest in journalism at an engineering college, anyhow.

The whole attitude is there in a nut shell. Most engineers will always be miserable writers until experience teaches them that to take an interest in writing will be to their advantage. It seems inevitable that until that time comes, Lehigh's publications will continue to use crutches.