The study of ancient ‘technical and scientific’ texts has attracted increasing attention from classical scholars over the last 15 years. These texts have been discussed from many perspectives and with a range of methods; but seen as sources for the history of science and technology, they tend to be studied under the aegis of the various disciplines. Among these, the history of ancient medicine traditionally represents the most developed field. Yet in other areas of technical expertise, too, the analysis of textual strategies, rhetoric and styles of argumentation has promoted the comparative study of texts belonging to different disciplines; and by putting the category of ‘technical and scientific’ writing in relationship with other genres, scholars have clearly shown the cultural and literary complexity of these texts. This conference will focus on one particular textual aspect which seems to have been a guiding concern for most authors of these texts: their applicability, i.e. the extent to which the successful mastery of their contents expresses itself in practical performance, and in the extra-textual realization of the norms, rules and procedures described within the texts themselves. This expectation of extra-textual applicability often marks and distinguishes the role of the author: he or she normally ends up affirming that the work he has written may not have stylistic excellence, but has the advantage of being directly applicable. Yet the transition from reading to action is by no means straightforward. This difficulty concerning the applicability of ancient literature merits further discussion. It is important to acknowledge the centrality of the motif of ‘use’ to the structure and rhetoric of so-called ‘technical and scientific’ texts, but also to focus on the highly problematic status of considering a literary phenomenon in terms of theories of knowledge.