

Technical Writing: Writing for the User

Professor: *Laura A. Ewing, PhD*



COURSE DESCRIPTION

Technical communication relies on users and their experiences – whether they be visiting websites, viewing videos, or reading manuals. To interpret for “users” and to communicate for “usability” are skills that crucially shape a world that has become inevitably more complex to navigate. Through collaboration with stakeholders and practitioners, technical communicators must address issues of agency, ethics, usability, and accessibility using a variety of technologies. This interactive, open-ended course is designed to provide students with strategies and skills necessary to produce effective, high-quality technical multi-modal and digital documents. We will engage and experiment, as both scholars and communicators, and produce similar texts for industry contexts ourselves. Calling on the evolution of technical communication theory, we will reconcile diverse perspectives and needs, and look toward the future of the field in an age of ever-changing technology and emergent users.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

As a result of this course, students will be able to:

1. Analyze the evolution of technical communication and emerging disciplinary conversations, and assess opportunities for moving forward in the field;

2. Recognize and analyze technical communication documents for effective usability and user agency, while collaboratively reconciling user and stakeholder feedback into cohesive communications;
3. Interpret and resolve the complexities and needs of technical communication users, stakeholders, and interdisciplinary audiences by producing high-quality technical documents;
4. Demonstrate an ethical awareness of the principles of utility, rights, and care for users for stakeholders and technical communication practitioners.

COURSE TEXTS

- ❑ Longo, B. (2000). Spurious coin: A history of science, management, and technical writing. Albany: SUNY.
- ❑ Johnson-Eilola, J., & Selber, S. A. (Eds.). (2004). Central Works in Technical Communication. New York: Oxford UP.

Additional readings will be made available through Blackboard. These readings will include topics on digital writing, usability, stakeholder consensus, technical writing processes, and ethics.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADE BREAKDOWN

- CLASS PARTICIPATION (15%)
- READING RESPONSE BLOG POSTS (20%)
- IN-CLASS PRESENTATION (25%)
- SERVICE LEARNING PROJECT (40%)

Class Participation (15%): This class is designed so that we learn from one another. We will share ideas, pose questions, and help each other work through complicated topics. If you are unable to be present for a class meeting, it is your responsibility to discuss this with me. Participation is necessary for us to conduct productive discussions. You are expected to come to class ready to add to the discussion, having completed all reading and other assignments for that meeting. If at any time you are uncomfortable participating in class, please see me.

Reading Response Blog Posts (20%): A great deal of technical communication occurs through digital writing. To this end, we will discuss various online communication platforms and how they affect the field of technical communication. Furthermore, you will create a blog dedicated to the class readings (you are welcome to use a blog you already have), and

each week you will use that blog space to respond to the readings. High quality blog responses do not merely summarize the readings, but instead place readings in conversation with one another and complicate the ideas set forth. Blog are concise media that require the writer to consider only the most applicable information, therefore posts should be 250 500 words.

In-class Presentation (25%): As you'll see from our readings and discussion, ethics is a major concern in technical communication. To demonstrate your understanding of ethical concerns in tech comm, you will research a real-world ethical problem and present your findings to the class. The presentation should drive our class discussion for that day. Following the presentation you will submit a 3-4 page postmortem analysis reviewing how discussion and debate in the class impacted your findings on the ethical problem you presented.

Community Based Learning Project (40%): Throughout the course, you will conduct a community based learning (CBL) project. Since technical communication is often conducted remotely, this project can be done either in person or virtually. If you do not have a professional relationship to pull from for the project I can assist in setting it up. *In the event that a service learning project is not at all possible, I will assign a case study for you to examine in its place.* This project will consist of the following parts:

- *Pre-reflection Paper (5%):* A formal examination of how you expect your CBL project to impact your understanding of technical communication (2-3 pages).
- *White Paper (25%):* A researched overview of the service learning partner including a needs assessment of the partner/study (5-7 pages).
- *Feasibility Report (10%):* An explanation of what project will be undertaken to meet the needs of the partner and the expected outcome (2-3 pages).
- *Progress Reports (10%):* Weekly updates on the project's progress (online form).
- *Project Deliverables (25%):* All professional documents necessary for the completion of the project (length will vary).
- *Postmortem Analysis (25%):* An analysis of the project's successes and failures. This final analysis will review both the qualitative and quantitative data from the project and presents options for further success in the future (5-7 pages).

Late Work: I strongly discourage, but do accept work up to one week late. Assignments incur a 10% deduction for each class late.

Grading Scale:

A	94-100	C+	77-79
A-	90-93	C	74-76
B+	87-89	C-	70-73
B	84-86	D	60-69
B-	80-83	F	0-59

Unit Topics and Readings

Unit 1: *History of Technical Communication*

- In Johnson and Selber:
 - Connors, R. “The Rise of Technical Writing Instruction in America.”
 - Durak, K. “Gender, Technology, and the History of Technical Communication.”
 - Rutter, R. “History, Rhetoric, and Humanism Toward a More Comprehensive Definition of Technical Communication.”

Unit 2: *Mapping/Gridding the Technical Communication Field*

- In Johnson and Selber:
 - Miller, C. “A humanistic rationale for technical writing.”
 - Driskill, L. “Understanding the Writing Context in Organizations.”
- Kent, T. (2007). The “remapping” of professional writing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* January 21: 12-14.
- Rude, C. D. (2009). Mapping the Research Questions in Technical Communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 23 (2): 174– 215.
- Rude, C. D. (2015). Building Identity and Community Through Research. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 45 (4): 366–380.

Unit 3: *Intersections of Professional Writing and Technical Communication*

- Longo, B. *Spurious Coin*. Intro, Ch1-3.

Unit 4: *Asking Questions: Methodology and Technical Communication*

- In Johnson and Selber:
 - Blyler, N. R. “Taking a Political Turn: The Critical Perspective of Research in Professional Communication.”
 - Charney, D. “Empiricism is not a Four-Letter Word”
 - Sullivan and Porter “On Theory, Practice, and Method: Toward a Heuristic Approach.”
- Blakeslee, A. M. (2009). The Technical Communication Research Landscape. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 23: 129-173.

- Johnson, B. (1998). Complicating technology: Interdisciplinary method, the burden of comprehension, and the ethical space of the technical communicator. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 7(1): 75-98.
- Meloncon, L., & St.Amant, K. (2019). Empirical Research in Technical and Professional Communication: A 5-Year Examination of Research Methods and a Call for Research Sustainability. *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*, 49(2), 128–155.

Unit 5: Risk and Return

- Coogan, D.. (2002). Public Rhetoric and Public Safety at the Chicago Transit Authority: Three Approaches to Accident Analysis. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 16(3), 277-305.
- Sauer, B.. (1993). Sense and sensibility in technical documentation: How feminist interpretation strategies can save lives in the nation’s mines. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 7(1), 63-83.
- Stratman, J. F., Boykin, C., Holmes, M. C., Laufer, M. J., & Breen, M. (1995). Risk communication, metacommunication, and rhetorical stases in the Aspen–EPA superfund controversy. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 9, 5-41.
- Youngblood, Susan. (2012). Balancing the rhetorical tension between right to know and security in risk communication ambiguity and avoidance. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 26(1), 35-64.
- Zoetewey, M. W., & Staggers, J. (2004). Teaching the Air Midwest Case: A Stakeholder Approach to Deliberative Technical Rhetoric. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 47(4), 233–243.

Unit 6: Designing Information

- DeAnda, M. A., & Kocurek, C. A. (2016). Game Design as Technical Communication: Articulating Game Design Through Textbooks. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 25(3), 202–210.
- Gonzales, L. (2017). Converging Fields, Expanding Outcomes: Technical Communication, Translation, and Design at a Non-profit Organization. *Technical Communication*, 64(2), 126–140.
- Lauer, C., & Brumberger, E. (2016). Technical Communication as User Experience in a Broadening Industry Landscape. *Technical Communication*, 63(3), 248–264.
- Michele, W and Zoetewey, M.. (2012). Productive usability: Fostering civic engagement in online spaces. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 21(3), 251- 276.
- Williams, M. F. (2012). Reimagining NASA: A cultural and visual analysis of the U.S. space program *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 26(3), 368- 389.

Unit 7: Management and Control

- Longo, B. *Spurious Coin* Ch. 6, 8
- Pickering, K. (2018). Navigating Discourses of Power Through Relationships: A Professional and Technical Communication Intern Negotiates a Meaningful Identity Within a State Legislature. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 48(4): 441-470.

Unit 8: Making Choices

- In Johnson and Selber:

- Katz, S. “The Ethics of Expediency: Classical Rhetoric, Technology, and the Holocaust”
- Sullivan, D. “Political-Ethical Implications of Defining Technical Communication as Practice.”
- Aldrich, K. Diversity and Design: Understanding Hidden Consequences. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, (28)1: 95-98.
- Ross, D. G., Oppegaard, B., & Willerton, R. (2019). Principles of Place: Developing a Place-Based Ethic for Discussing, Debating, and Anticipating Technical Communication Concerns. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 62(1), 4–26.

Unit 9: Advocacy

- Jones, N. N. (2016). The Technical Communicator as Advocate: Integrating a Social Justice Approach in Technical Communication. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 46 (3): 342–61.
- Molloy, C. (2019). Durable, Portable Research through Partnerships with Interdisciplinary Advocacy Groups, Specific Research Topics, and Larger Data Sets, *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(2): 165-176.
- Rose, E. J. (2016). Design as Advocacy: Using a Human-Centered Approach to Investigate the Needs of Vulnerable Populations. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 46 (4): 427–45.
- Walton, R. (2016). Supporting Human Dignity and Human Rights: A Call to Adopt the First Principle of Human-Centered Design. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 46 (4): 402-426.

Unit 10: Workplace Writing

- In Johnson and Selber:
 - Doheny-Farina, S. “Writing in an Emerging Organization: An Ethnographic Study.”
 - Mirel, B. “Writing and Database Technology: Extending the Definition of Writing in the Workplace”
- Lanier, C. R. (2018). Toward Understanding Important Workplace Issues for Technical Communicators. *Technical Communication*, 65(1), 66–84.
- Lauer, C., & Brumberger, E. (2019). Redefining Writing for the Responsive Workplace. *College Composition and Communication*, 70(4).

Unit 11: Writing Online

- In Johnson and Selber:
 - Howard, T. “Who Owns Electronic Texts?”
 - Selfe and Selfe “The Politics of the Interface: Power and its Exercise in Electronic Context Zones.”
- Behies, J. (2013). The Use of Online Collaborative Writing Tools by Technical Communication Practitioners and Students. *Technical Communication*, 60(1), 28–44.
- Redish, J. (2019). Thinking Globally, Composing Locally: Rethinking Online Writing in the Age of the Global Internet. *Technical Communication*, 66(1), 112–113.

Unit 12: Intercultural Technical Communication

- Ding, H., (2019). Development of Technical Communication in China: Program Building and Field Convergence. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(3): 223-237.
- Cleary, Y.; Slattery, D. M.; Flammia, M., and Minacori, P.. (2019). Developing Strategies for Success in a Cross-Disciplinary Global Virtual Team Project: Collaboration Among Student Writers and Translators. *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*, 49(3): 309-337.
- Hopton, S.B. and Walton, R. (2019). One Word of Heart is Worth Three of Talent: Professional Communication Strategies in a Vietnamese Nonprofit Organization. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(1): 39-53.
- Wang, J. (2019). Simulation Rhetoric and Activity Theory: Experiential Learning in Intercultural Simulations. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 49(2), 213-231.

Unit 13: Gender, Disability, and Technical Communication

- Palmeri, J. (2006). Disability Studies, Cultural Analysis, and the Critical Practice of Technical Communication Pedagogy. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 15(1), 49–65.
- Petersen, E. J. and Walton, R. (2018) Bridging Analysis and Action: How Feminist Scholarship Can Inform the Social Justice Turn. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 32(4): 416–46.
- Frost, E. A. (2016). Apparent Feminism as a Methodology for Technical Communication and Rhetoric. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 30(1): 3–28.
- Cox, M. B. (2019). Working Closets: Mapping Queer Professional Discourses and Why Professional Communication Studies Need Queer Rhetorics. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 33(1): 1–25.

Unit 14: On Science

- Long, B. *Spurious Coin* Ch 4-5, 7
- Walsh, L. (2018) Visual invention and the composition of scientific research graphics: A topological approach, *Written Communication*. 35(1): 3-31.
- Bogomoletc, E. (2019).Scientific Communication: Practices, Theories, and Pedagogies. *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 28(3): 287-289.