

Technical Writing

English 424, Fall 2004

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Overview: Learning to Design for Difference

In this course we will think about and practice technical communication. While that sounds straightforward, some commentators have pointed out that the word works to be something of an oxymoron:

tech-ni-cal

- 2.a.** Having special skill or practical knowledge especially in a mechanical or scientific field: *a technical adviser*. **b.** Used in or peculiar to a specific field or profession; specialized: *technical terminology*.

com-mu-ni-cate

—tr.

- 1.a.** To convey information about; make known; impart: communicated the new data to our office.
b. To reveal clearly; manifest: *"Music . . . can name the unnamable and communicate the unknowable"* (Leonard Bernstein).

—intr.

- 1.** To have an interchange, as of ideas.
2. To express oneself in such a way that one is readily and clearly understood:
"That ability to communicate was strange in a man given to long, awkward silences" (Anthony Lewis). (American Heritage Electronic Dictionary 1992)

Thus 'technical' is concerned with boundaries of knowledge—you only know something if you are a member a particular community—and those who are not, don't know it, and/or can't understand it. There is hierarchy implicit here—it's like you're either good enough, smart enough, or you're not. Communicating, on the contrary, seems to be about the ability to not just to bridge difficult boundaries—giving people a way to get across, but about making sure people on either side of the divide really understand each other.

Thus this course is about getting you to think about communication differently – shifting away from an oversimplified and pass-the-buck "pipe" or "tube" metaphor, and getting you to see communication as something that requires design. Thus it is situational, and will prove a tremendous asset for your careers. Even now, as you move on with your college degrees and become more and more knowledgeable about different things, it becomes more and more important that you don't take your own knowledge for granted, and even more importantly, that you don't take your audiences and stakeholders for granted. In addition you will come to see good Technical Communication practices as acting professionally, ethically, and successfully.

Objectives:

- Rhetorical Awareness
- Document Design and Common TC Genres
- Significant Practice in Writing & Style
- Communication Process Awareness and Documentation
- Presentation Awareness both in Print and Orally

Required Text:

Professional Writing & Rhetoric. Tim Peeples. NY: Longman, 2003.

Projects:

- Team Introduction Memo
- Creative Rhetoric Scenario
- “Handbook” Articles from Peeples
- The Airbag Case
- Context/Genre Analysis
- Reflections and Contextualizations
- Portfolio

Policies:

Attendance 424 is a workshop course – you learn by doing, and that happens in class. During a regular semester I will allow 3 absences without penalty. Use them wisely. After that each absence will drop your *final* course grade by 10%. Thus six absences means the *best* you can do (with A work) is a D. And of course you are responsible for whatever we go over and do in class those days, regardless of your absence. So have contacts (more than one!) among your classmates who you can call/email/meet with to make sure you can make up for missed work, and just try to be here. If you show up, do your work, and try, the rest usually takes care of itself.

Grading 424 is a course that emphasizes the “situatedness” of writing and communication situations, and the process of development that documents and other communication tools must go through to be effective. So while the final documents for any given project do count a good deal, the process of development and course participation for each count as well, and in two ways: for each final document there will be a paper trail of draft and planning documents, but there will also be memos making the case for what was learned and how the document developed through the project. So everything you do in the course counts for something, from asking questions and discussing the reading, to the process documents that might not seem important, like planning. And by the end you will see why. The grading scale is the standard 100-90, 89-80, 79-70, 69-60, 59-down, A through F respectively, with pluses and minuses. Generally speaking, 25% of each project grade is participation and doing the work (having drafts done, reading, asking, etc.) 30% is the process documentation, and 40% is the final document(s).