

Technical Writing

English 424, Fall 2005

Professor: Dr. Steven T. Benninghoff
Class Meets: 4:00 – 5:15 TTh Pray-Harrold 312
Office: Pray-Harrold 613-L
Office Hours: 1-4 TTh, and by appointment (AIM: stbenninghoff)
Email: (best way to reach me) steve.benninghoff@emich.edu
Website: <http://benninghoff.emich.edu/424F05/>

Overview: Learning to Design for Difference

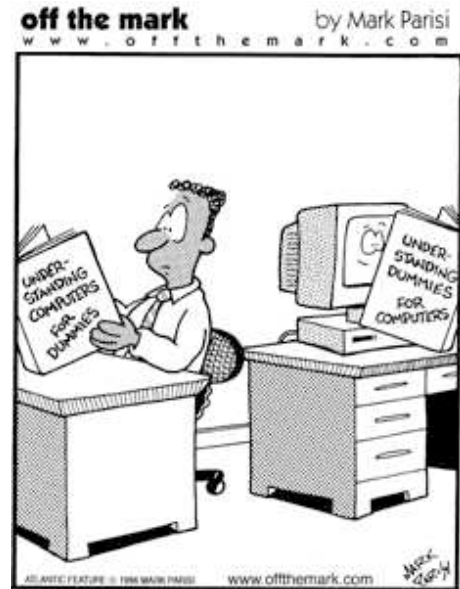
The goals of this course are for students to learn and practice the fundamental principles of technical communication (TC). TC sounds complicated, and indeed it often is, but the core principles are the same ones we ought to recognize and practice in any “writing situation.” One problem this course has to deal with is the usual, oversimplified understanding of the word *writing*. We tend to fall into the notions of writing either from great authors and poets—literature, on the one hand, or the negative attitude towards freshman composition, exercises in hoop-jumping, on the other. But this course will introduce you to the far more common practices of writing—people trying to get things done, in an increasingly complex and technological world.

And because people today know lots of specialized things, but rarely share the same areas of specialization, we need to think carefully about who we are trying to serve through writing: what do-and-don't they know, what do-and-don't they want, and realize that what we are trying to do through writing only comes through meeting that audience's needs. Indeed the misperception of “writing” can be explained most simply in understanding that *to write* means: 1) *to design*, 2) *for others*, and 3) *for the particular situation*. To that end, our coursework focuses on analyzing audiences and situations, crafting documents that try to meet the needs of the situation, testing these documents to see how well our “prototypes” work, and revising both our understanding of the situation and the documents we've written to work in it.

One final way this course works differently than the “normal” writing course, is that sort of like a math class, here you get part of the credit for “showing your work”. In most writing classes, students trade drafts, with each other or the teacher, who then mark up the text with comments and errors, and the text gets revised and turned in. What happens to what was learned in that process? Where is the learning that happened in the revision process documented, or counted? Here, since we recognize how important analyzing the situation, and strategizing to meet the needs of the situation, are, for each project we also write a document about the design process—writing a memo about writing a memo, as someone always notes -- because in the end, that is what I am trying to teach, and you learn, the process of assessing situations and designing information to meet their needs.

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 2 absences without penalty. Use them wisely. After that each absence will drop your *final* course grade by 10%. Thus four 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 that count at that time, but there will also be writing in the portfolio (contextualizations and reflections) 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.