

Technical Writing

English 424, fall 2006

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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



Texts:

We have one required textbook purchase, a selection of readings on research in the field:

- Required: *Professional Writing & Rhetoric*. Tim Peebles. NY: Longman, 2003.

We will also look at parts of “cover-all” Technical Communication textbooks in eReserves or online. I suggest you pick up a copy that’s an edition old or so as an additional reference. We will be using bits from:

- *Information in Action*, Killingsworth,
- *Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach*, Paul Anderson, and possibly
- *Professional Writing Online*, Johnson-Eilola, Sullivan, and Porter.

Another book you will likely find useful is:

- *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*. Robin Williams.

We’ll be using *NDDB* in 484 in the Winter term as well.

Projects:

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

Policies:

Participation English 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.

Plagiarism Plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately passes off another's words or ideas without acknowledging their source. For example, turning another's work as your own is plagiarism. If you plagiarize in this class, you will likely fail the assignment on which you are working and your case may be passed to the university for additional disciplinary action. Because of the design and nature of this course, it will take as much (or more) work for you to plagiarize in it than it will to actually complete the work of the class.

Public nature of writing

Since academic writing is writing directed toward an audience, you should consider the writing that you do in this course "public," that is, writing that others will read. We will be doing a great deal of draft work-shopping, and I often will use examples of/from workshop practice to share with the class. As a practicing technical or professional writer you will need to learn to be open to testing, feedback, and development, and demonstrations of issues for the whole group are far more effective than generalizations. Also, as this course develops an online portfolio of your work, finished versions of *some* your work, process, and descriptions will eventually be online. We will discuss relevant issues at the time of these assignments.