PRWR 623: Technical Writing & Information Design | Fall 2014
Section 101, W 5:30-8:10pm, LA 3101
Towson University
Course Syllabus

Contact Information

Instructor: Dr. Elizabeth Angeli, EMT-B
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Office hours: TR 9:30am-10:30am, 2pm-3pm; W 4pm-5pm; by appointment*
        *Email or call me to set up a Skype meeting.

General Course Description

Introduction to the theory and practice of technical writing and information design. Study of rhetorical theory and empirical research supporting best-practice guidelines. Hands-on projects. Not open to students who have successfully completed WRIT 623. Students may retake this course only once without the express permission of the Academic Standards Committee.

Purpose and Topics

The activities and readings in this course are designed to introduce you to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes possessed by professionals in technical writing and information design. The course balances reading and discussion of relevant historical and theoretical topics with hands-on instruction in applying practical guidelines and procedures for designing and developing user-centered technical information products.

Important topics covered in the course include the following:
- Definitions, origins, and development of the technical communication discipline and profession
- Rhetorical foundations, ethics, and conflicts in technical communication
- The importance of document design, cross-cultural communication, and collaboration
- Specialty work roles, major professional organizations, and core competencies of technical communicators
- Technologies and societal trends affecting technical communicators
- User-centered design methods and usability testing for documents
- Considerations of style and tone in designing technical communication

Course Goals

In completing the requirements of the course, students will be able to do the following:

- Discuss various definitions and the rhetorical foundations of technical communication
- Summarize the origins and development of technical communication as a specialty field of writing and information design
- Explain the major ethical concerns affecting technical communicators
- Identify research methods appropriate to the field
- Define and discuss the core competencies of technical communicators
- Discuss trends in information-management, communication technologies, sociopolitical conditions, and demographics likely to have important repercussions for technical communicators
- Create user-centered documents by conducting peer reviews and informal usability tests of technical information documents

These learning outcomes incorporate all four of the learning outcomes established by the Towson University English Department, which are as follows:

Read
Interpret written materials flexibly: understand that although multiple meanings are possible, textual evidence needs to support individual interpretations of the literature being read as well as the implications drawn from it.

Write
Write in a variety of forms (e.g. expository, argumentative, imaginative, business/technical) as appropriate to audience, purpose, and occasion, using evidence to support interpretations.

Research
Use research skills that include understanding of methods, technology, and conventions.

Reflect
Be reflective and lifelong learners.

Information Literacy and Technological Competence
Use software as appropriate to writing and research.

Global Awareness
Engaging intellectually in the experiences and views of people with different cultural backgrounds and beliefs.

Required and Recommended Textbooks and Software

Required Textbooks
The following are required textbooks for this course. They are available from the campus bookstore and can also be purchased online at Amazon.com. We will be using

these books frequently throughout the course; they may even find permanent homes on your bookshelves. The following texts are intended to serve as reference material for you throughout your career.

Johnson, R. R. (1998). *User-centered technology: A rhetorical theory for computers and other mundane artifacts*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
ISBN: 978-0-79-143931-9

Rude, C. D., & Eaton, A. (2011). *Technical editing* (5th ed.). New York: Longman.
ISBN 13: 978-0-20578671-8

Williams, R. (2008). *The non-designer's design book: Design and typographic principles for the visual novice* (3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: Peachpit Press.
ISBN 13: 978-0-321-53404-0

I will post additional required and recommended readings on Blackboard, either as hyperlinks or as downloadable electronic files (PDFs, PPTs,).

Recommended Textbooks
American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE.

Garfield, S. (2011). *Just my type: A book about fonts*. London: Profile Books.

Hackos, J. T., & Redish, J. C. (1998). *User and task analysis for interface design*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Johnson-Eilola, J., & Selber, S. A. (Eds.) (2004). *Central works in technical communication*. New York: Oxford University Press.
ISBN: 978-0-19-515705-5

---. (Eds.) (2013). *Solving problems in technical communication*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
ISBN: 978-0-22-692407-6

The University of Chicago Press. (2010). *The Chicago manual of style: The essential guide for writers, editors, and publishers* (16th ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Required Software
You are required to develop documents in this course as files in Microsoft Word and the Adobe Creative Cloud (CC). Thus, you must have ready, convenient access to Microsoft Word and CC. Any Towson student can purchase Microsoft Word, or the Office suite, at a regular academic discount from the University Union Bookstore. You can also access Office and CC through the Towson virtual workspace: http://vw.towson.edu

Required Computer Technology Access and Knowledge

This course is delivered through Blackboard and Towson email. Students must have routine, ready access to computer technology and the requisite knowledge enabling them, at a minimum, to perform all of the following tasks efficiently:

- Send and receive Towson email. At a minimum, you must check your Towson email account daily.
- Subscribe to the tech-whirl listserv to read current discussions in the field: http://www.techwr-l.com/about-technical-writing-discussion-groups.html
- Download and open PDF, Word, PowerPoint, and Internet files
- Use Microsoft Word and CC to produce well-formatted, easy-to-read documents fulfilling the requirements of written assignments
- Use Word's track changes feature
- Access CC from home using Towson's Virtual Workspace: http://tinyurl.com/ppqcv8b
- Use Blackboard to
  - read, download, and print pages and documents,
  - submit assignments, and
  - complete any assigned Blackboard quizzes and surveys online.

I have found that students who have an open and willing attitude to learning new technology find the learning experience more enjoyable. Take a positive approach to the new technologies you will be learning throughout the semester.

Required File Naming Convention

People in workplace setting share a massive amount of information. To help ensure that no one's work will become lost over the course of the semester, you must the following naming convention for saving and submitting the work you complete: lastname_623f14_assignmentname_date.docx. For example, my file for the doc design assignment would look like this: angeli_623f14_docdesign_9-17-14.docx. Any file not submitted in this form will not be counted, must be resubmitted, and will be considered late.

Required Time Commitment

Most students in this course should assume that on average they will need at least 6 to 9 hours a week to keep up and perform reasonably well. As in any new work routine, students may need more hours during the initial weeks as they learn to carry out the assignments in a way that balances efficiency (time required) and effectiveness (extent of coverage, depth of comprehension). You may need more time in some weeks to work on your major course project.

My Responsibilities as Instructor

Throughout the course, I will do the following:

- Establish and explain course objectives, assignments, evaluation criteria, and schedule to ensure student comprehension

- Lead and moderate discussions of assigned readings, encouraging students to express their opinions
- Publish and maintain Blackboard site containing the course syllabus, the course schedule, an updated weekly agenda, journal articles, and links to Web resources that can help students carry out the assignments
- Maintain a regular schedule of office hours reserved for consultation with students and make myself accessible through email and Skype
- Review and comment on plans and drafts related to the project assignment (late assignments will not receive comments)
- Return graded evaluations of graded assignments within two weeks of when they are handed in
- Reply to emails within 24 hours Monday though Friday and within 36 hours Saturday and Sunday

Your Responsibilities as a Student

To receive a credit-earning grade in this course, you are expected to do the following:
- Abide by the course policies
- Participate actively and cooperatively in class discussions and group work
- Appropriately apply prerequisite knowledge, including:
    - citing and formatting papers following APA or CMS style;
    - using proper grammar and style;
    - revising writing; and
    - creating Microsoft Word and InDesign documents.
        --- Note: Contact me ASAP if you need help with these items.
- Ask questions you have regarding assignments, deadlines, concepts, etc.
- Hand in carefully written and edited project documents that fulfill the purpose and scope detailed in the instructions for the assignment
- Demonstrate professional standards for reliability, communication, pro-active problem solving, critical analysis, and cooperation in working on group and individual projects

Grading

The course is worth 200 points. The following chart outlines grade ranges and points.

Percentage Range	Point Range	Letter Grade	Quality Points
100-93%	200-186	A	4.00
92-90%	185-180	A-	3.67
89-83%	179-166	B+	3.33
82-75%	165-150	B	3.00
74-50%	149-100	C	2.00
49-0%	99-0	F	0.00

The numerical course grade is determined by component grades given during the semester for the following activities and deliverables. I will distribute grading criteria for assignments and projects on Blackboard. In general, the grades mean the following:

A range: Exceptional work. Work needs little to no revision and would be completely acceptable for its rhetorical situation. Student attended most, if not all, classes; was always prepared for class; and consistently and effectively participated in class discussions. Student clearly demonstrates characteristics and skills needed in the technical writing field.

B range: Above average work. Work needs some revision and is mostly acceptable for its rhetorical situation. Student attended most, if not all, classes; was mostly prepared for class; and participated effectively in class discussions. Student demonstrates most characteristics and skills needed in the technical writing field.

C range: Average work. Work needs revision and may or may not be acceptable for its rhetorical situation. Student may or may not have attended all classes; was not consistently prepared for class; and participated minimally or ineffectively in class discussions. Student may demonstrate characteristics and skills needed in the technical writing field but needs to improve.

F: Unacceptable work. Work would not be acceptable for its rhetorical situation. Student missed many classes, was not prepared, and did not participate. Student does not demonstrate characteristics and skills needed in the technical writing field.

Class Discussion (20 points) and Assignments (40 points): 60 points
Each week you will contribute to class discussions, and most weeks you will complete assignments. Assignments will be worth 5 points and are designed to prepare you for class discussion and practice your technical writing skills. Please see the 5-point assignment rubric on Blackboard.

Discussion Questions: 20 points
For 10 weeks this semester, you will post three discussion questions (DQ) to Blackboard before class (4pm on Wednesdays). I will create a board each week that they are due. DQs should show that you have completed the readings, thought critically about them, and synthesized them with other readings. Each post is worth two points. Please see the DQ rubric and examples on Blackboard.

Major Course Project: Document Redesign (DR) – 120 points total
Effective document writing, revising, and design are crucial skills in today's technical workplaces. In this major project, you will compose a set of documents that presents your suggestions for a redesign of a document that is used in your field of study or workplace. The redesign will include content and design revisions; choose accordingly. This project's deliverables are due throughout the semester and are as follows.

The original document should be around 1,500 words or 3 single-spaced pages. You should revise the document substantially, including changes to content and design. As such, be sure to select a document that needs quite a bit of work.

You will act as if the company that originally created the document is your client this semester. For example, if you revise a document that Towson's Academic Achievement Center created, the Center will be your client. If you choose a document that your workplace created, your workplace will be your client.

Information Report – 20 points (due Wednesday, 10/1)
To prepare a deliverable for a client, you must conduct research on the client's background, needs, values, and expectations. A supervisor may ask you to write an information report about the client so that your team can learn how to best respond to the client's requests.

You will write a 3-page single spaced/1,500 word information report about your client. For your report, you should answer the following questions:
- What is the company's history?
- What is the company's mission statement?
- What are the company's values?
- What would readers at this company expect to see in your document redesign?
- What unique features of the company would help you craft your redesign and report?

When answering these questions, connect the answers to this project. For example, instead of giving a whole history of the company, consider what information is relevant for this project and your needs as a technical writer.

You should consult any and all resources available to you: Internet, interviews, brochures, etc. Properly cite any sources you use.

Draft and Memo (due Wednesday, 11/12)
You will turn in the original document and a draft of your redesign. To explain the choices you made for the revision, you will turn in a one-page memo briefly explaining these choices and arguing for their effectiveness. We will meet in one-on-one conferences the week before Thanksgiving to talk about your project.

DR Final, Analytical Report, and Presentation (due Wednesday, 12/17) – 100 points
Based on feedback you receive from me and your colleagues, and through informal usability testing, you will revise your redesign. This revision should be significant, as we will have covered eight more weeks of material by this point. You will turn in your revised document, the original document, and your analytical report.

In addition to the revision, you will submit a 3,000-3,500 word analytical report. This report will support the revisions you made by referencing scholarship, usability results, and your own research. You must follow APA or CMS citation style but may format your report as you see fit (follow best document design practices).

You will present your redesign and report to the class during finals week. In a 15-minute presentation, you will showcase your project to the class.

Additional Notes on Grading

The following items will count against your final grade:
- being absent
- delivering late or perfunctory work
- routinely participating in discussions in a passive, pro-forma way
- failing to complete or doing rushed, unprofessional work

Deadlines for Assignments and Penalties for Missing Them

Most assignments, except DQs, are due during class unless otherwise noted. All assignments are due on the due date. I will post deadlines for all assignments in advance. Late work will receive zero credit and no feedback unless you have received an extension.

If a serious and unavoidable problem arises, you should contact me in writing prior to the deadline. At that point, we can determine if an extension can be granted.

Absences

This class is a community of learners. It is vital that you do your share of community building. You will learn from one another. Given the importance of student-student and student-teacher interaction in this course, there are penalties for missing class.

What Counts as an Absence?

You are absent if you miss a class or arrive/leave more than 30 minutes into class. Don't miss class unless you have no choice. Missing class will affect your course grade.

From the Towson student handbook:

> "Should the student be absent from a significant portion of the course, the instructor will make the decision about whether the student can meet the learning objectives and course requirements in order to pass the course and communicate this to the student in a timely manner.

> If a student expects a period of prolonged absence, he or she must submit a plan for completion of missed experiences including time frame for the approval of the faculty. This plan is to be submitted prior to the expected prolonged absence.

> Students are expected to adhere to all university attendance policies. Students who are absent from class are responsible for any missed work.

> Absences due to illness, bereavement, or athletic events require documentation in order to be considered for an excused absence. Absences due to religious holidays are excused on the holiday date(s). Absences due to travel associated with observance of religious holidays are unexcused."

You can miss one class without penalties. Do your best to be present each week in case you need to miss class unexpectedly. Email or call me if you must miss class.

Penalties for Absences
At the end of the course, I add up the absences to see if a course grade penalty applies. If you have more than one absence that does not fall within the parameters of the handbook guidelines, the following penalties apply:

- Two absences lowers a final grade by half a letter grade.
- Three absences lowers a final grade by a whole grade.
- Four or more absences results in an F for the course.

Code of Conduct

You are expected to govern your communication and interaction in a courteous and respectful behavior. I will caution and counsel violators in private. Repeated serious violations will be reported to the Graduate Studies Committee, as stipulated in the Graduate School catalog.

Academic Integrity

You will be held to the traditional standards for academic honesty, which are codified for Towson University students in the Student Academic Integrity Policy. Violating this policy is likely to have grave consequences for your grade in the course and could even lead, in severe cases, to dismissal from the university.

Students caught cheating will immediately receive a grade of F on the assignment and may result in a grade of F in the course, depending on the severity of the situation. I will report the incident to the Office of Judicial Affairs. For definitions of cheating, see Appendix F of the Undergraduate Catalog, particularly the sections on plagiarism and cheating, sections V.A. and V.C.

To ensure you do not plagiarize, we will use APA or CMS citation style. Consult APA or CMS citation rules online (Purdue OWL: APA, APA Style Blog, Purdue OWL: CMS). You may also buy the APA Manual, 6th edition or the CMS, 16th edition.

Students Needing Accommodation for a Disability

Students needing accommodation due to a disability should contact me. You will need a statement from Disability Support Services authorizing your accommodation. You may contact Towson's Disability Support Services at 410- 704-2638.

Bibliography

In addition to the required books, you will be reading, in whole or in part, the works listed below. Electronic copies are provided on Blackboard.

Alley, M., & Neeley, K. A. (2005). Rethinking the design of presentation slides: A case for sentence headlines and visual evidence. *Technical Communication, 52*(4), 417-426.

Bernhardt, S. (1986). Seeing the text. *College Composition and Communication, 37*(1), 66-78.

Cho, M. (2013). The science behind fonts (and how they make you feel). The Next Web.

Available online at: http://thenextweb.com/dd/2013/12/23/science-behind-fonts-make-feel/#!s9x5l

Gregory, J. (2004). Writing for the Web versus writing for print: Are they really so different?, *Technical Communication, 51*(2), 276-285.

Houser, R. (1997). What is the value of audience to technical communicators?: A survey of audience research. International Professional Communication Conference '97 Proceedings: Crossroads in Communication. Available online at http://www.userfirst.net/presentations/audience.htm

Mazur, B. (2000). Revisiting plain language. *Technical Communication, 47*(2), 205-211.

Redish, J. C. (2000). What is information design? *Technical Communication, 47*(2), 163-166.

Redish, J. C., & Selzer, J. (1985). The place of readability formulas in technical communication. *Technical Communication, 32*(4), 46-52.

Securities and Exchange Commission. (1998). Plain language handbook: How to create clear SEC disclosure documents. Office of Investor Education and Assistance, U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, Washington, DC. Available online at http://www.sec.gov/pdf/handbook.pdf

Course Schedule*

Please use this schedule for long-range planning. I will write out a weekly schedule every Monday by noon and post it on Blackboard under the corresponding week.

Week: Topic	Readings (to be done before class)**	Deliverables***
1: 8/27 Intro to the Course	1. Syllabus	Join tech-whirl: http://www.techwr-l.com/frequently-asked-questions.html#subscribe
2: 9/3 Historical and Disciplinary Foundations	1. Durack, "Gender, Technology, and the History of Technical Communication" (PDF) 2. Rutter, "History, Humanism, and Rhetoric" (PDF) 3. Dobrin, "What's Technical about Technical Writing?" (E)	DQ, introductory memo
3: 9/10 Theoretical Foundations	1. SP: Ch. 5 (E) 2. Miller, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing" (PDF) 3. Slack, Miller, & Doak "The Technical Communicator as Author: Meaning, Power, and Authority" (PDF)	DQ
4: 9/17 Genre	1. Bernhardt (PDF) 2. Rude, "The Report of Decision Making: Genre and Inquiry" (PDF) 3. Gregory "Writing for the Web Versus for Print" (PDF) 4. Johnson-Sheehan: Ch. 9 (E)	DQ
5: 9/24 Audience	1. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 2 2. Redish (Ch. 2, PDF) 3. Houser (PPT)	Stakeholder map
6: 10/1 Ethics	1. Katz, "The Ethics of Expediency" (PDF) 2. SP: Ch. 9 (E) 3. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 21	DR: Information report
7: 10/8 Research	1. Creswell: Ch. 1 and 3 (PDF) 2. Sullivan & Porter, "On Theory, Practice, and Method: Toward a Heuristic Research Methodology for Professional Writing" (PDF)	Research plan for DR
8: 10/15 User-centered Design	1. Johnson: Ch. 1-4, 6	DQ

9: 10/22 Visit from Carolyn Klinger - Document Design	1. Williams: pp. 11-90 2. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 18 3. Cho "The Science Behind Fonts (and How They Make You Feel)"	DQ
10: 10/29 Information Design	1. Redish "What is Information Design?" 2. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 17 3. Alley & Neeley "Rethinking the Design of Presentation Slides" (download PDF)	DQ
11: 11/5 Editing, Plain Language	1. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 1 and 6 2. Mazur "Revisiting Plain Language" 3. *A Plain English Handbook Ch. 6*	DQ, Revise webtext from technical to plain language
12: 11/12 Usability, Accessibility	1. Usability 2. Purdue OWL Usability Report 3. 10 Principles of Effective Web Design 4. Web Accessibility 5. Web Accessibility Initiative	DQ, DR: Draft, memo
13: 11/19 Conferences	Bring questions to your conference	
14: 11/26 Thanksgiving Break	Happy Thanksgiving!	
15: 12/3 Readability	1. The Readability Test Tool 2. Flesch-Kincaid Readability Test 3. Purdue OWL: Paramedic Method 4. Purdue OWL: Five Principles of Readability 5. Redish & Selzer "The Place of Readability Formulas in Technical Communication" (PDF)	DQ, Revise webtext for improved readability; submit original and revision as Word doc (cite source)
16: 12/10 Cross-cultural Communication	1. Rude & Eaton: Ch. 20 2. Bosley, "Cross-Cultural Collaboration: Whose Culture Is It, Anyway?" (PDF)	DQ
Finals Week: 12/17 5:15-7:15pm		DR, report, presentation

*Subject to change. I will notify you via email and Blackboard of all changes.
**E = readings are on e-reserve; PDF = readings are posted as PDFs on Blackboard under "Readings"
***You will have more assignments due; this schedule is an outline of what our semester will look like.