

Theoretical Dimensions of Technical Communication

TC 501TU Th 6:15-10:00pm

<http://eserver.org/tc501>

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Objective and Description

This graduate course will study theoretical constructs and issues that inform all technical communication. Inherently a multi-disciplinary activity, tech comm draws on theories from fields as different as rhetoric and science, psychology and philosophy, sociology and linguistics. This term we will focus specifically on rhetoric, on the relationships between author, text and reader, and on philosophies of science and language. The purpose of this seminar is to explore relevant theories in sufficient depth and detail to do justice to their complexity, and, at the same time to examine their applicability to technical communication. Students will be expected to comprehend and challenge these theories on their own terms as well as to understand their value for the interpretation and transfer of technical information. Such understanding is crucial to intelligent decisions in professional practice; it allows the technical communicator to look beyond surface issues and see the essential problems and possible solutions. Theoretical knowledge of the field distinguishes the professional from the practitioner.

Course Plan

Our approach will be to develop an understanding of the preeminent schools of theory that underlie contemporary technical communication practice. One of the goals this term will be to evaluate each model for its adequacy in describing the communication process. By reading, comparing, contrasting and (in time) synthesizing the approaches of various theorists, students will over the term develop a theoretical methodology which will be elaborated in a final 'contribution' paper intended to contribute to current debates.

Participation

You are expected to participate in class sessions and conferences as scheduled. Consider this class as part of your professional life and keep in mind that you would not fail to report to work without giving appropriate notice.

Student Responsibility

Your contribution is central to the seminar. You will be expected to read critically the assigned articles, prepare brief written responses to particular assigned readings and participate intelligently and articulately in class discussions. Your grade for the course will be based on the following areas: class participation, including written responses and peer presentations, one late-term exam (date on syllabus, but subject to change), and a term paper (10-12 pages) due the last day of class.

Schedule and Bibliography

Required readings are contained in packet available at the Ave Copy Center, at 4141 University Way NE # 103 (206 633-1837). It will cost (I am told) \$15.99 + sales tax. Also, there will be a few photocopied handouts and web-based readings online at the course website, as occasioned by class discussions.

Meeting Deadlines

Meeting deadlines is a professional responsibility. Therefore, all written assignments must be submitted on the due date. You can receive an extension only if you meet two conditions: 1) contact me before the date on which the assignment is due to explain why you need an extension, and receive written (or e-mail) approval from me. Then 2) submit the assignment within one week after the scheduled due date. Using these procedures, you may submit one late assignment during the term without harming your grade.

Religious Observance

In accordance with university policy, I have worked to avoid having graded assignments due on major religious holidays, but given the variety of such observances, it is often impossible to avoid all conflicts. If you have a conflict between a religious holiday and an assignment, please contact me in advance so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Grading

Participation will be graded not only on the quantity of contributions to in-class discussion but also to its quality: comments should attempt to build upon previous speakers' comments or topics whenever possible.

The papers and exam will be graded on a scale from 0-4. The three major assignments: the short paper, mid-term exam and final research paper, will be judged in one-tenth of a point increments, as follows:

4	Top-notch, excellent, extraordinary accomplishment. Really strong conception and execution. Minor tinkering at most needed to make this comparable to professional-quality work.
3	Very strong work. Everything in order, well conceived and well executed. Minor editing problems at most.
	NOTE: The differences between a 3 and a 4 have to do with a combination of originality, excellence, thoroughness, and attention to detail in execution. Although 4 grades may include comments on sentence level editing, doing this type of editing would not be sufficient to raise a 3 to a 4.
2	Average, but missing some components. No glaring conceptual or execution problems, but nothing particularly outstanding in either department. Topic or problem may be somewhat limited, or execution may be less than optimal.
1	Acceptable, but below average work. Either conception, execution or both

	definitely need to be improved.
0	Not of acceptable quality.

The short writing assignments and supporting work for main assignments will be graded on a \checkmark , $\checkmark+$, and $\checkmark-$ basis, which will equate to a 3, 4 and 2 respectively. Your final grade for the course will be determined using the following breakdown:

Participation	20 %	
Weekly Analysis of Readings	10 %	
F i r s t P a p e r	20 %	%
Mid-Term Exam	25 %	
Final Paper	25 %	
	100 %	

Appointments, Conferences and Communication

I will be glad to meet you during scheduled office hours, before or after class, or by appointment to discuss your work in the course and any questions and concerns you may have in relation to it. I’m also available to answer questions via e-mail or phone. An e-mail message is often the easiest way to be sure you reach me or that I will be in the office when you drop by. You can get in touch with me in a number of ways:

- come to office hours: Thursday, 5:00 to 6:15 p.m., Loew 14C
- send me e-mail: geoffs@u.washington.edu
- call me at my office: (206) 685-3409
- leave a note in my mailbox in the TC Department
- call me at home: (206) 525-9026

If you have an important question or problem during the evening, or on a weekend, particularly when an assignment is due, I don’t mind your calling me at home as long as you call between 9:00 a.m and 10:00 p.m. and not during dinner (5:00 to 7:00 p.m.). If I am not at home, the call will roll over automatically to my cell phone.

Accountability and Plagiarism

In your academic and professional career, you will often draw on work done by others. You are expected to do so, but you are always required to give due credit to the person(s) whose words, thoughts, ideas or phrases you are using. Presenting someone else’s work as your own is never acceptable. Any assignment including non-documented material from another source will receive a failing grade. A second instance will mean failure in the course and may result in further disciplinary action.

Week I: January 9

Course Introduction: The Professional View of Technical Communication

Introduction to the course: themes and topics.
Discussion of the history of TC and its relationship to theory.

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Orwell, George [Eric Blair]. 'Politics and the English Language.' 1946. (packet)

Week II: January 16

Cold War Theories of Technical Communication

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Shannon, Claude and Warren Weaver. Selections from *The Mathematical Theory of Communications*. 1949. (packet)
Kuhn, Thomas S. Selections from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 1962. (packet)
Whitburn, Merrill, et al. 'The Plain Style in Scientific and Technical Writing.' 1978. (packet)

Week III: January 23

Views of Writers (and their Implications)/Views of Audience (and their Implications)

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Gibson, Walker. 'Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers.' 1950. (packet)
Ong, Walter J, S.J. 'The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction.' 1975. (packet)
Coney, Mary B. 'Contemporary Views of Audience: A Rhetorical Perspective.' 1987. (packet)

FURTHER READINGS:

Lanham, Richard. *Revising Business Prose*. 1984. (website: streaming video)

Week IV: January 30

Technical Writing and Discourse Communities

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Coney, Mary B. 'Technical Communication Theory: An Overview.' 1988. (packet)
Fish, Stanley. Selections from *Doing What Comes Naturally*. 'Change.' 1989. (packet)
Zappen, James P. 'The Discourse Community in Scientific and Technical Communication.' 1989. (packet)
Miller, Carolyn R. 'A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing.' 1979. (packet)

Week V: February 6

Disciplinary: The Making of Knowledge, Representation, and Nature of Truth

First paper due.

Exam Preparation Session.

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Charney, Davida. 'Empiricism is not a Four-Letter Word.' 1996. (handout)

Moore, Patrick. 'Instrumental Discourse is as Humanistic as Rhetoric.' (and subsequent commentary) 1996. (packet)

Zappen, James P. 'Rhetoric and Technical Communication: An Argument for Historical and Political Pluralism.' 1987. (packet)

FURTHER READINGS:

Redish, Janice. 'Understanding Readers.' 1993. (website)

Week VI: February 13

Theories of Writing

Mid-Term Exam

Introduction to and discussion of the final paper assignment.

Week VII: February 20

Theories of Writing

ASSIGNED READINGS:

Coney, Mary B. 'Technical Readers and Their Rhetorical Roles.' 1992. (packet)

Goodwin, David. 'Emplotting the Reader: Motivation and Technical Documentation.' 1991. (packet)

Week VIII: February 27

1980s Rhetorical Theory

Bazerman, Charles. 'Writing Well, Scientifically and Rhetorically.' 1988. (packet)

Cooper, Marilyn and Michael Holzman. Selections from *Writing as Social Action*. ('Introduction' and 'The Ecology of Writing'). 1986. (packet)

Week IX: March 6
Postmodern Responses

ASSIGNED READINGS:

- Lyotard, Jean-François. Selections from *The Postmodern Condition*. 1984. (packet)
Nelkin, Dorothy. 'The Public Relations of Science.' 1987. (packet)
Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. Selections from *Remediation: 'Immediacy, Hypermediacy and Remediation.'* 1999. (packet)

Week X: March 13
Rhetoric Revisited

ASSIGNED READINGS:

- Miller, Carolyn R. 'Technology as A Form of Consciousness.' (handout)
Farkas, David K. 'The Logical and Rhetorical Construction of Procedural Discourse.' 1999. (website)

FURTHER READINGS:

- Coney, Mary B. 'Designing (for) Ourselves and (for) Others.' 2000. (website: streaming audio)

Week XI: March 18
Final papers due.