

ENGL 7/8890:

Special Topics in Technical and Professional Writing

Course Description

Navigating a host of dominant and discipline-defining topics pertaining to technical and professional writing, this seminar interrogates technical and professional writing as an epistemological rupture—a space where knowledge-making, power, and communication perpetually collide and reconstitute one another. Beginning with the ancient Greek concept of “Techne”—productive knowledge is distinct from both episteme (theoretical knowledge) and praxis (ethical action)—we trace how technical and professional writing has always occupied a liminal, contested, and generative position in human meaning-making. Techne was never merely instrumental. When Aristotle distinguished it from science and ethics, he inaugurated a tension that haunts our discipline: Is technical writing a neutral conduit for pre-existing knowledge, or does it actively constitute what counts as knowledge? This course argues that every historical moment of technological transformation has forced this question into crisis, revealing technical communication not as applied rhetoric but as primary site where epistemologies are born, contested, and die. For instance, medieval scriptoria did not simply copy texts—they created visual-verbal grammars that determined what could be known and by whom. Renaissance anatomical theaters did not just display bodies—they invented observational protocols that made the body legible as text. Similarly, enlightenment encyclopedias did not merely organize knowledge—they enacted classificatory regimes that naturalized particular ways of seeing, knowing, and being. Each moment reveals technical communication as world-making.

The twentieth century’s professionlization of technical and professional writing attempted to stabilize this instability through standards, style guides, and methodologies. Yet this very systematization exposed deeper fault lines: Whose language is ‘plain’? Whose users are ‘centered’? What bodies are ‘normal’ in usability testing? The field’s maturation paradoxically revealed its constitutive exclusions—the cultural assumptions embedded in every ‘neutral’ documentation practice, every ‘universal’ design principle, every ‘objective’ technical description. Contemporary crises render these tensions ungovernable. For example, health communication during pandemic conditions exposes the violent consequences of literacy assumptions, cultural incompetence, and information gatekeeping. Likewise, crisis communication in algorithmically-mediated environments reveals how platform architectures predetermine what can be communicated before any message is composed. In the same vein, organizational communication in globally distributed workforces demonstrates that documentation does not translate across cultures because it embeds epistemologies that don’t translate. In this scenario, artificial intelligence came to detonate the foundation. When machines generate documentation, write code, translate languages, and produce reports indistinguishable from human-authored texts, what remains of technical writing as professional practice? The question is not whether AI replaces technical and professional communicators—it’s whether AI reveals that what ‘technical and professional communication’ was always already a distributed socio-technical system that never belonged to human intentionality alone.

To put the matter in perspective, this course refuses resolution, examining how neuroscience destabilizes reader-based prose by revealing that cognition itself is distributed across brains, bodies, and environments. Along this line, we explore how Indigenous technical knowledge expose

Western documentation's metaphysical commitments to linear time, discrete causation, and atomized authorship. We investigate how TikTok's algorithmic rhetoric instantiates post-literate technical communication where documentation is performative, ephemeral, and collectively authored through remix and response. We theorize technical and professional writing not as a discipline that applies rhetorical principles to specialized contexts, but as the material-discursive apparatus through which *techne* becomes thinkable in any historical moment. From clay tablets documenting Mesopotamian astronomy to large language models generating pharmaceutical documentation, technical and professional communication is where human negotiate what it means to know, to make, and to share knowledge.

Last but not least, this is technical and professional communication's radical proposition: every act of documentation is a metaphysical claim about what exists, an ethical claim about who matters, and a political claim about who decides. We have never merely written about technology. We have always written technology into being.