Foundations of Technical Communication

English 5371 • M 6-7:30 Central Time • Texas Tech MOO

Course description & purpose

English 5371 is designed to introduce graduate students in TCR to the field of technical communication. It focuses on technical communication theory – i.e. the scholarship of TC. This course is not intended to cover “tools” (e.g. FrameMaker) or teaching per se, except insofar as these topics are part of a larger emphasis on the theoretical foundations of technical communication. For the most part, this is a reading course designed to ground the practice, research, and teaching of TC itself.

The course will address questions such as: What is technical communication? What is the history of technical communication? What are the similarities and differences among the sites of technical communication (e.g. workplace vs. academy)? How do technical communicators construct knowledge? What are the ethical values of our profession? What are the roles for technical communicators in institutions and society? How is the field being formed and what is its relationship to composition, rhetoric, cultural studies, and other fields? Where is the field headed?

Required texts

Purchase the required texts from an online bookseller such as Amazon.com:

3. A small number of supplemental readings available through electronic reserve at TTU Library. To access them, go to http://www.library.ttu.edu/ul/ and click Course/E-Reserve from the navigation bar on the left. Then search for “Zdenek” to locate the supplemental readings for this class.

Course website, WebCT, MOO, & office hours info

- The course website contains class notes, the course schedule, and other info: http://www.faculty.english.ttu.edu/zdenek/courses/5371/fall06/.
- If changes need to be made to the course schedule, you will find an updated version on the course website.
- A WebCT site has been created for this course: http://www.webct.ttu.edu. We will be using the discussion board feature on WebCT to discuss the readings asynchronously. Login using your eraider username and password. If you don’t see the course listed after you log in, let me know and I’ll add you to the WebCT roster for the course.
• This course meets every Monday at 6 p.m. Central Time in the English Department MOO room for this course: http://moo.engl.ttu.edu:7000/
• I will be available virtually during my office hours (Monday 4-6 p.m. Central Time and by appointment). To chat with me during my office hours, send a Yahoo instant message to: seanzdenek.

Grading
Your final course grade will be calculated according to the table below, using the standard curve of 90-100% = A; 80-89.9% = B; 70-79.9% = C; 60-69.9% = D; 0-59.9% = F. Under no circumstances will grades be rounded up or down.

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<tr>
<th>ASSIGNMENT</th>
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<tr>
<td>MOO Appetizers</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reading responses</td>
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<tr>
<td>Textbook recommendation report</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Book review</td>
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<td>Seminar Paper</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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Assignments
Review the course notes (on the course website) for detailed information about each assignment. Here is a short summary of each assignment:

**MOO Appetizers**
To facilitate MOO discussions, 3-4 students each week will be assigned discussion questions. Discussion questions will be emailed to the class on Wednesdays. When you are assigned a discussion question, you should write your response to your discussion question in advance of the MOO session. Your response should take the form of a tightly focused position statement (3-5 sentences) that you can simply copy and paste into the MOO when you are called upon to do so. You should also be ready to explain your position. Ideally, each question (and your response) should facilitate class discussion. Depending on the number of students enrolled in the course, you may or may not be assigned a discussion question (i.e. MOO appetizer) every week. Students will be assigned to questions on a rotating basis (how often you are assigned a question will depend upon how many students are enrolled in the course and how many questions we are able to cover adequately in the MOO).

The student assigned to question #1 each week will be responsible for providing a clean transcript of the MOO session. A transcript is created automatically of course, but it will be the job of one student each week to untangle the discussion threads and provide a more ordered, cleaned-up account of our MOO interactions. The final transcript should be posted to WebCT in the appropriate discussion topic.

**Reading responses**
Compose a written response to the reading assignments each week, and post it to WebCT in the appropriate discussion topic. Responses are due at least 2 hours before the start of the MOO session on the days assigned. See the course schedule for due dates and topics. Each response should be in the range of 600-750 words. Each of your responses should have a descriptive subject line and title (as
opposed to “Response 1”). The content of each of your responses should do all of the following (in this order):

1. Address a question, concern, or problem of interest to you;
2. Synthesize the readings into themes or topics that will enable you to explore this question or issue (at least 1/2 of your response);
3. Discuss the implications for one of the following (at least ¼ of your response)
   a. How do these readings inform teaching (courses you’ve taken, courses you’re teaching)?
   b. How do these readings inform practice (tech writing jobs you’ve had, other jobs you’ve had that require you to write, communicate with people and technology, and/or be user advocates)?
   c. How do these readings inform research (your own research interests, past and present)?
   d. How do these readings inform other readings in this course?
4. Discuss briefly how your response relates to at least two other WebCT posts for that week. (If you are the first person posting in a given week, relate your post to two other posts from previous weeks.)
5. Optional but encouraged: Respond to one or more replies to your post(s) from a previous week. (It may be easier to respond to a reply to your post in a separate message, and I encourage you to post additional messages as necessary.

When discussing implications, you are encouraged to draw upon your own experience as a teacher of technical communication and/or as a practicing technical writer. If you do not have experience teaching or practicing technical communication, then you should consider how the readings inform your knowledge (i.e. where you are coming from academically, where you are going, where we as a class have traveled thus far in the readings).

You will want to demonstrate in your reading responses that you have read all the assigned readings. But more importantly you will want to show in your writing that you have read critically and carefully, that you have given thought to the questions and issues raised in the readings, and that you have thoughtfully considered the implications (for teaching, practice, your academic background, and/or the course). Approximately 1/4 of each of your responses should be devoted to a discussion of implications.

We will use the reading responses during class to jump-start discussion. You will also undoubtedly find your responses immensely useful when it is time for you to design a topic for the final report.

**Textbook recommendation report**

Choose a topic for an undergraduate course you are interested in teaching. Assume your “students” are comprised of TC majors either at TTU or your own home institution. Possible topics include: Style, editing, case studies in TC, web design, ethics in TC, manuals, usability testing, grant and proposal writing, reports, the capstone course to the major, document design, the sophomore service course, etc. Write a recommendation report (1500 words minimum) that evaluates at least three possible textbooks for this course and recommends one textbook that meets your criteria. Imagine that your audience for the report is the undergraduate teaching committee charged with making a textbook selection for your course. See Ch. 6 in *Central Works* for an overview of the recommendation report genre. You will be expected to adhere to the conventions discussed in this chapter. The course notes will also include additional information about the assignment, as well as sample recommendation reports.
Book review
Write a scholarly book review of Sauer’s *The Rhetoric of Risk*. Your book review should adopt the tone, form, and style of a book review you might find in a tech comm. journal (e.g. TCQ, JBTC, JTWC). The review should be 1500-1800 words in length.

Seminar paper
Plan and execute a report that explores a question, trend, or issue of interest within the context of the course. The final product should be of superior quality, suitable for presentation at a regional or national conference. The report should also be based extensively on outside research (i.e. a comprehensive review of the literature).

The reports of MA students should be in the range of 3500 words; doctoral students’ reports should be in the range of 5000 words. The report should serve as the culmination of your work over the semester.

A proposal for the seminar paper (approx. 300 words) will be due a couple weeks before the seminar paper is due (see the course schedule).

Expected learning outcomes
Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

1. Define technical communication from multiple perspectives, identifying the values and beliefs that support different ways of defining technical communication (definition outcome);
2. Historicize the practice and profession of technical communication (history outcome);
3. Situate technical communication in terms of its relationship to the workplace and the academy (sites outcome);
4. Situate the field of technical communication in terms of how knowledge is constructed in the field (methods outcome);
5. Apply readings in ethics and power to cases, issues, and trends in technical communication (ethics outcome)
6. Identify how the field of technical communication is being formed (e.g. through the influences of other fields, such as composition) and where it is headed (formation outcome).

The sixth outcome is intended to emphasize the impact that other fields are having and have had (rhetoric, writing studies, cultural studies) on the formation of technical communication as an academic discipline.

Methods for assessing the expected learning outcomes
The expected learning outcomes of the course will be assessed through:

Weekly written responses to the readings; landmark essays that cover each of the outcome areas (definition, history, pedagogical and academic sites, methods, ethics & power, field formation now and in the future); numerous seminar-style discussions of the issues raised in the readings, especially in terms of the implications of the readings for teaching and practicing technical communication; writing assignments that are intended as “gateway” opportunities for graduate students to become familiar with and enter the academic side of the profession (textbook recommendation, book review, reading critique, seminar paper).
Course policies

- Be prepared for class by doing the assigned reading and writing in advance.
- Submit all required assignments to be eligible for a passing grade.
- Be on time for class.
- Expect to attend every MOO meeting. The success of the course depends upon your regular attendance. If you are absent one (1) time, your final course grade will be reduced 5%. Two or more absences will warrant a failing grade in the course. I do not excuse absences.
- Talk with me during the first two weeks of class to discuss your special needs or ADA accommodations, if any.
- Expect to participate actively in MOO and WebCT discussions.
- Respect the views of others.
- Do not plagiarize. Your work must be your own. If you borrow words or ideas from another writer, you need to make it explicit (through proper citation) that the words/ideas in question are not your own. If you use someone else’s paper as your own (e.g. a paper found on the Internet), you are in violation of the University’s policy on academic integrity. Please keep in mind that the penalty for plagiarism can be severe. See me immediately if you have questions about the University’s policy on plagiarism.
- Submit your work on time.
- Submit all assignments(with the exception of reading responses) as WebCT email attachments to the instructor. Reading responses should be posted to the WebCT discussion board. Late work is penalized 10% per day. Assignments more than five days late will not be accepted.
- Feel free to discuss course questions and concerns with me during my virtual office hours (on Yahoo IM), by appointment (on Yahoo IM or in the MOO), or via email. I will do my best to respond to your email queries within 24 hours, except during weekends and holidays. My Yahoo account name is: seanzdenek. Please note that I will not be checking the messages on my office phone on a regular basis. If you want a quick reply, you’re better off sending me an email or looking for me on Yahoo IM during office hours.