

ENG 381: Technical Communication

Department of English & Journalism • Western Illinois University • Fall 2013
Section 1 (STAR# 82507): T R 9:30am to 10:45am, Simpkins 214
Bradley Dilger, Professor of English

Contact information

I text, web, tweet, Facebook, Skype, Gmail chat, etc. and welcome conversations with you in all those forms. However, I don't use voice mail due to my poor hearing. Please text or email me instead.

Email: cb-dilger@wiu.edu (preferred for now); cbdilger@gmail.com
Phone/text: 309-259-0328 (expect slow reply after 7:00pm, when grrrl bath+bed begins)
Social media: cbdilger (Skype, Facebook, Google chat, Twitter)
Mailbox: Simpkins 122, M–F 8:00am–4:30pm
Office: Simpkins 213 (hours M 9–11, T 11–1, and by appt.)
Web: <http://faculty.wiu.edu/CB-Dilger/>
I do not use WesternOnline, so please don't look there for course materials.

Talk to me! Like all faculty, I get a lot of email. So please re-email if I don't reply to a message. Or just call. Again, I'm always happy to talk to you—I'm not giving you my phone number just for show.

Introduction

ENG 381 Technical Communication. (3 sh). Study of characteristics, concepts, and procedures involved in technical communication; practice in producing various types of technical communication including written and online formats.

This Writing in the Disciplines (WID) course provides an introduction to technical communication, the art and craft of writing useful, informative, reader-centered communication. I define “tech comm” broadly: from canonical examples like correspondence, progress reports, instructional manuals, and web applications, to less often considered forms like signage, visuals used for decision support, and product labeling and packaging. Quite often, it involves explaining difficult information to a non-expert audience—which can be very challenging—especially in a high-stakes environment.

This semester, we will learn technical communication by doing, with extensive use of examples from my experience as a professional technical communicator—and hopefully from your experiences as well.

ENG 381 has two prerequisites: ENG 180 and ENG 280. If you have not earned credit for both those courses, you cannot take this course unless you have considerable writing experience. **Prerequisites will be enforced. Please contact me immediately if you have not finished 180 and 280.**

Our primary text is Paul Anderson's *Technical Communication: A Reader Centered Approach, 7/e*, ISBN 978-1-4282-6393-2. Please buy it immediately and read it carefully, early, and often.

Objectives and core content

Students who earn an A in the course will exit with thorough, generalizable knowledge of:

1. Approaches to writing which (a) consider the needs of readers first and foremost, (b) maintain a high standard of ethics, and (c) attend to diverse, global audiences.
2. Usability and persuasiveness, two concepts which can guide the production of effective technical communication. You'll learn (a) in-depth definitions, and (b) best practices for application.

3. Methods for producing effective, reader-centered technical communication, especially (a) audience analysis, (b) usability testing, (c) document management, and (d) checklisting.
4. Writing in technical communication style, which is (a) detailed but not verbose, and (b) highly usable thanks to its use of advanced organizers, lists, tables, and other features.
5. Basic principles and best practices for (a) designing eye-pleasing documents, and (b) breaking up long documents into grouped or sectioned documents.
6. Common technical communication forms, such as memos, letters, instructions, and progress reports.

What's left out

In the past, I have covered some material from Anderson's *Technical Communication* which I will be skipping this semester in order to focus on the *writing* part of technical writing—it's not that I don't value this content, but I'd rather go in depth on one thing than blast through three.

You are welcome to draw upon this content, and I am happy to work with you individually to use graphics in your work, build effective presentations, etc.

Content	Ch	Reason omitted
Research methods	6W	We could do a whole course on research methods! The lack of depth here makes the chapter much less useful.
Critical thinking	7	This chapter repeats user-centered theory with little elaboration.
Graphics	13, 13W	As above, this could be a whole class—indeed, a whole major, as it is for many of you!
Networked communication	17	Much of this content is out of date given the importance of social media and the growth of mobile computing.
Oral presentations	19	Given that public speaking is a gen-ed requirement, we need not focus here; everyone has the basics already.
Creating web sites	20	Another “whole class” topic (see: ENG 480), and some very out of date suggestions here (tables for layout).
Research reports	24	You can use this material on your own as needed. I will be sharing examples which speak specifically to our assignments.
Feasibility reports	25	
Documentation, examples	Appx	

Guide to success

I want you to find this class valuable, learn every day, and earn a high grade. Here's how:

- 1) **Read this syllabus carefully** and try to abide by all of its policies, in letter and spirit. Ask me about anything which isn't clear to you.
- 2) **Ask me if you need help.** I'm easy to contact, and happy to help you as much as my schedule permits. You've got my phone number, email, etc. Stop by my office; if I'm not busy, I'm glad to sit down with you. Email or text me any time—though know that I probably won't answer after 7:00pm since I am actively involved in my kids' bedtimes. I will follow up with you as soon as I can after your call; if I don't, feel free to follow up yourself.
- 3) **Use the detailed schedule to keep up.** I use a web-based schedule to publish any changes to the schedule and provide detailed suggestions for preparing for class. Please read it carefully and often; doing so will make your study time far more productive.

- 4) **Buy the texts and do the reading.** Unfortunately, experience dictates I must specify: I expect you to buy the course texts immediately, and bring each text we're reading to class the day we read it. If you read on screen, bring the device(s) on which you read. If I think you aren't reading, I will I ask you to drop the class.
- 5) **Take notes in class.** As we discuss the readings, I will supplement them by calling on my experience and other relevant work in my field. I will also point out where Anderson's advice is questionable and/or where you can turn for better information. Most, if not all, of this extra-textual content will not be available to you unless you attend class and take notes. Know ahead of time that I will not provide you a "study guide" for the final. You, however, can make your own, by taking notes in class.
- 6) **Try the exercises in the books.** While they are sometimes cheesy, Anderson's examples and exercises offer a fine way to engage the material. Doing these exercises can show what skills and knowledge you have (not) mastered. Your attempts don't have to be polished; just sketching out something rough can help. Sharing exercises in class is a plus.
- 7) **Try to apply what you're learning to your field.** Our course assignments will often suggest that you use your work experience or knowledge about your field in this course. I encourage this even if you feel like a novice. Writing scholars have long argued trying to engage the written forms of social work, law enforcement, chemical engineering, or education is how budding professionals (like you!) learn the languages and cultures of their fields.
- 8) **Come to class ready to engage.** Class participation is a substantial part of your grade. Speak up and be engaged. As you read, take notes, and think about our core assignments, make lists of things which look confusing or questionable. I will give you many, many opportunities to focus our discussions on your needs. Do not waste this opportunity!
- 9) **Bring relevant examples to discuss in class.** We are exposed to technical communication all the time: instructions, forms, advertising, license agreements, etc. If you see texts which touch on principles we're discussing this semester, bring them to class for discussion.
- 10) **Read the assignments carefully.** I put lots of effort into assignments for my courses, completing all assignments myself, and usability testing assignment sheets with my colleagues. Each assignment contains lists of objectives which connect with the overall goals for the course. You should use these objectives, the assignment schedule, and your readings to build checklists for each assignment: "What do I need to do? When? What resources can I call upon? What do I need to ask for help with?" If anything is hard to understand, please ask me for clarification.
- 11) **Start all the assignments well in advance.** The proverbial "night before" won't cut it for most projects. Spreading out your work is far more effective, too. For example, working two hours a day for five days produces much better quality results than a ten hour marathon writing session.
- 12) **Take care of your data.** Back up all your work-related files frequently (via flash drives, cloud storage, and/or email to yourself) and ensure your backups are safely stored. Keep separate versions of each assignment—ideas, drafts, final, etc. Save all graded assignments.
- 13) **Follow up quickly after drafts.** I do my best to return your work to you quickly and with substantive, helpful comments. The best thing you can do, upon getting a draft back from me: review it immediately, then contact me to clear up any questions and discuss the way forward.
- 14) **Tell me what grade you want to earn.** While I'm happiest when all my students strive for high grades, if you just want to pass, tell me, so I'll know you aren't slacking or having a hard time. (Cynical? No. Just pragmatic. I know not everybody looooooves this stuff as much as I do.)
- 15) **Contribute positively to the class community.** Do your own work, and do it as well as you can. In class, add positively to the discussion. Be nice. Be interesting. Be funny. If you do community-based work, do your best to create a good impression.

Assignments

Detailed handouts for all assignments will be distributed in class and published on the course web site. You will receive a grade of F for the course if you do not complete all parts of the three major assignments (J1, I2, P3).

1. **Job materials (J1).** A résumé and cover letter specifically targeted to a real-world internship or job announcement. 100 points.
2. **Instructions (I2).** A set of instructions for a task such as using the web to register for courses, writing an evaluation portfolio, or operating a machine. (No recipes!) 200 points.
3. **Technical communication project (P3).** An individual technical communication project which serves a personal need or that of a service-learning client. 300 points.
4. **Class participation (CP).** Evaluated twice: weeks 1-5 (50 pts), weeks 6-15 (100 pts). 150 points.
5. **Reading responses (RR).** Required any week readings are assigned. Completed via Google Docs. Evaluated twice: weeks 1-5 (50 pts), and 6-15 (100 pts). 150 points.
6. **Final examination (FX).** Comprehensive; mixed format (short answer and essay). 100 points.

Policies

All policies which normally apply to courses taught at WIU apply to this course. See the “Student rights and responsibilities” at <http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php> for the full story.

- 1) Accommodations for **special learning needs are gladly arranged.** Contact me ASAP.
- 2) **Attendance and active participation are required.** Consistently under-prepared students will be asked to drop. Reading and bringing course texts to class is part of preparation. Missing two or fewer classes will not hurt your participation grades. Missing three to four will reduce them. Missing more than four will likely result in failure. See the class participation handout for details.
- 3) **Ethical and professional conduct is required:** academic integrity, collegiality in class, and professionalism when dealing with the community as part of course activities. Academic integrity violations will result in a failing grade for the assignment and possibly the course. Refer to <http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php> for WIU’s policy on academic integrity.
- 4) **I welcome feedback from you** about the course at any time. Contact me, put a note in my mailbox, or speak to Dr. Mark Mossman, chair of English & Journalism.
- 5) **Grading** uses a 1,000 point system based on powers of ten: A=100–90, B=89–80, etc. Keep all graded assignments, and track your own grades. See the Grading section below for more.
- 6) **Mind all deadlines.** I don’t accept late work, unless you have prior permission, or unless extreme circumstances warrant. Please use the detailed schedule (link on the course web site) to keep up.
- 7) **Your privacy is important to me.** I don’t want to know your WIU or Social Security numbers. Please don’t put them on your assignments or in emails to me.

Grading

The table at below left shows the points allocated per assignment. Drop a zero to see the percentage of your final grade that each assignment represents.

The table at below right shows how I figure grades:

- I use the “Normal %” to figure the points you earn for an assignment of a given “Letter” grade. For example, a “B+” on the first class participation evaluation earns you 44 points ($88\% \times 50$).

- “Point range” is the range by which final grades are assigned. I do not assign D+ or D– grades.

Assignment	Points
Job materials (J1)	100
Instructions (I2)	200
Technical communication project (P3)	300
Class participation, weeks 1–5	50
Class participation, weeks 6–15	100
Reading responses, weeks 1–5	50
Reading responses, weeks 6–15	100
Final examination	100
Total	1000

Letter	Normal %	Point range
A	95	1000–930
A–	91	929–900
B+	88	899–870
B	85	869–830
B–	81	829–800
C+	78	799–770
C	75	769–730
C–	71	729–700
D	65	699–600
F	50	599–0

Five notes on grading:

- 1) Please track your own grades. See the course web site for a spreadsheet which can help. If you think I’ve made a mistake while grading, or evaluated your work unfairly, please let me know.
- 2) I often grade drafts with completion of assignment in mind, rather than quality of writing—meaning strong effort and attention to your task can make up for other problems. On the other hand, if in my judgment your work fails to meet the requirements due to lack of engagement, you’ll need to try again.
- 3) You will receive a final grade of F if you do not complete all milestones for the three major assignments (J1, I2, P3).
- 4) Academic integrity violations will result in a F grade (1%) for the assignment. Severe violations will result in a final grade of F as well. All suspected violations are reported, as per WIU policy.
- 5) In the past, I have been too loose with “Incomplete” grades. Going forward, I must allow them for documented military service, medical emergency, or death in the family. Generally speaking, I do not oppose retroactive withdrawals; that is often a better alternative.

WIU policies

WIU requires or requests that I include the following university policies on this syllabus.

WID: This course has been designated to meet the Writing Instruction in the Disciplines (WID) graduation requirement. WID courses provide instruction in the processes and formats for the writing content and style needed to be an effective professional in a student’s chosen field.

ADA: In accordance with University policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), academic accommodations may be made for any student who notifies the instructor of the need for an accommodation. For the instructor to provide the proper accommodation(s) you must obtain documentation of the need for an accommodation through Disability Resource Center (DRC) and provide it to the instructor. It is imperative that you take the initiative to bring such needs to the instructor’s attention, as he/she is not legally permitted to inquire about such particular needs of students. Students who may require special assistance in emergency evacuations (i.e. fire, tornado, etc.) should contact the instructor as to the most appropriate procedures to follow in such an emergency. Contact Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 309-298-2512 for additional services.

Prerequisites: It is the responsibility of the student to comply with the prerequisites/corequisites for a course that he/she plans to take. Instructors who place the appropriate information on the syllabus and emphasize it during the first three class periods may exclude a student from the class who does not meet the prerequisites/corequisites by sending a note to the student with a copy to the registrar within the first two weeks of the term.

Writing Center: The University Writing Center is available to assist you with general and specific questions on writing assigned in any discipline and at any academic level. The one-on-one assistance available at the University Writing Center is valuable for generating ideas, talking about global-level issues such as organization, and even working through grammatical problems. The main location is in Malpass Library (third floor, west side); satellite locations are in Simpkins Hall 025, Bayliss Hall Basement, and Tanner Hall 108. See wiu.edu/uwc for hours. Call for an appointment (309-298-2815); be sure to bring a copy of your assignment.

Course schedule

This schedule is only an outline, and will certainly change.

After week one, please use the updated, detailed schedule on our course web site.

All readings with chapter numbers are from Anderson, *Technical Communication*. Other readings will be distributed in class and on our course web site. In consultation with you, I will select the review readings for weeks 14 and 15 and post them in week 13.

#	dates	Focus	Readings	Key assignments & activities
1	8/20, 8/22	Introductions; reader-centered thinking	Ch 1, Introduction; Ch 2, Job materials	Purchase text Email intro with job posting
2	8/27, 8/29	Defining usability & persuasiveness	Ch 3, Objectives; Ch 4, Usability; Quesenbery, 5Es	J1 draft 8/29
3	9/03, 9/05	Putting usability & persuasiveness to work	Ch 5, Persuasion; Scott, Rhetoric	Revise J1 draft
4	9/10, 9/12	Key genres for instructions project	Ch 22, Letters & memos; Ch 27, Instructions	J1 final 9/12
5	9/17, 9/19	Usability testing	Ch 16, Testing; Krug, Testing	I2 prospectus 9/19 CP self-eval #1 9/19
6	9/24, 9/26	Writing in tech-comm style	Ch 8, Organization; Ch 8W, Organization; Ch 9, Style; Lanham, Paramedic method	Write and test I2 draft
7	10/01, 10/03	More on usability testing, writing style	Review week 5 and 6 readings	I2 draft 10/01 10/04
8	10/08, 10/10	Document design	Ch 14, Design	Midterm course evals 10/08
9	10/15, 10/17	Studio week: time to work on your projects	None	I2 final 10/17 10/21
10	10/22, 10/24	Project management; proposals	Ch 18, Collaboration; Ch 21, Clients; Ch 23, Proposals; Gawande, Checklist	Begin P3 work
11	10/29, 10/31	Key parts of writing; organizing document groups	Ch 10, Beginnings; Ch 11, Endings; Ch 12, Front & back matter	P3 proposal 10/31 11/01
12	11/05, 11/07	Research in techcomm; key genres for semester project	Ch 6, Research; Ch 26, Progress reports	Write P3 draft
13	11/12, 11/14	Revision in techcomm	Ch 15, Revising	Begin progress report
14	11/19, 11/21	Review week 1: Subject matter and readings TBD	TBD	P3 draft 11/19 11/21
Th	11/26, 11/28	Thanksgiving break; no classes	None	
15	12/03, 12/05	Review week 2: Subject matter and readings TBD	TBD	Final course evaluation 12/03 CP self-eval #2 12/05
Ex	12/12	Exam week	None	Final exam 12/12 8:00am P3 final 12/12 Optional J1 rewrite 12/12