

# Professional Writing Theories and Practices

—Fall 2020—

## *Course*

ENGL 715/815

Tuesdays 7:10p-9:50p EST

Synchronous on Zoom

engl715fall2020.slack.com

ptwodu.wordpress.com

## *Professor*

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Zoom appointments, M-F 8a-1p

## *Course Description*

“Professional writing” operates as an umbrella term to refer to the field of study that researches and practices writing—broadly construed to include textual, digital, and visual communication—in a variety of business, governmental, technological, scientific, and public contexts.<sup>1</sup> From the mundane paperwork of a banking institution to the technical literature used to communicate severe environmental risks, this writing affects all of our lives in profound but oftentimes unassuming ways. This course provides an overview of the interdisciplinary field by way of historical context and major case studies and gives students an opportunity to engage meaningfully in one of the many content areas constituting this diverse and always-emerging field of study.

## *Learning Objectives*

By the end of the semester students will: (i) have a working definition of professional writing and an understanding of the scope and nature of the field; (ii) be familiar with the major theoretical positions and research methodologies and the scholarship they produce; (iii) participate meaningfully in group discussions of significant literature in the field; and (iv) critically engage with a single content area of the field.

## *Course Delivery*

This course is an online synchronous course and will meet via Zoom. Each student is responsible for having reliable internet connectivity, standard-quality cameras, and microphones. Poor audio and visual can affect class flow. If you anticipate issues with these requirements, please contact me immediately.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for my submitted rationale for changing the name of this course, along with ENGL 775.

### *Attendance*

Given the current pandemic, all students will be attending class via Zoom. Each student gets one excused absence without penalty; a second absence without due reason or documentation will affect your final grade (one-third of a letter grade for each unexcused absence). Consistent lateness will also impact a student's final grade, with three lates translating into one absence. The class begins at 7:10pm EST, but students should be logged in to Zoom by 7:00pm EST to ensure proper functioning of technology.

### *Participation Guidelines*

A significant amount of time will be spent engaging in group discussion and in-class activities. Graduate-level discussion is already an artful form of communication that requires careful rhetorical attention to depth, continuity, and respect; trying to maintain the same level of artfulness in a virtual medium is challenging—but expected. I ask that all students maintain a healthy self-awareness of how much time and space they are occupying in discussion, and whether or not they are carefully and respectfully listening, challenging, and building off of peers' discourse. I reserve the right to ask a student to leave our virtual classroom space if they are being racist, sexist, classist, homophobic, ableist, or just plain disrespectful or toxic.

### *Accommodations*

The Office of Educational Accessibility (OEA) is the campus office that works with students who have disabilities to provide and/or arrange reasonable accommodations. If students experience a disability that will impact access to any aspect of the course, they must present the professor with an accommodation letter from OEA to ensure that appropriate accommodations are available to the student. Students are encouraged to self-disclose disabilities that have been verified by the OEA by providing Accommodation Letters to their instructors early in the semester in order to start receiving accommodations. If a student feels that they will experience barriers to their ability to learn and/or test in the course but do not have an accommodation letter, please consider scheduling an appointment with OEA to determine if academic accommodations are necessary. Their website is [www.odu.edu/educationalaccessibility](http://www.odu.edu/educationalaccessibility).

### Course Texts

The following texts will serve as the foundation of the course. Only those *without* an asterisk (\*) need to be purchased. The rest will be available as full text PDFs on the course website. Books are listed in order of reading.

- \*Kuhn, Thomas S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. U of Chicago Press.
- \*Johnson-Eilola, Johndan and Stuart A. Selber (Eds.). 2013. *Solving Problems in Technical Communication*. U of Chicago Press.
- Longo, Bernadette. 2000. *Spurious Coin: A History of Science, Management, and Technical Writing*. SUNY Press.
- Willerton, Russell. 2015. *Plain Language and Ethical Action: A Dialogic Approach to Technical Content in the 21st Century*. Baywood's Technical Communications Series.
- Williams, Miriam F. 2010. *From Black Codes to Recodification: Removing the Veil from Regulatory Writing*. Baywood's Technical Communications Series.
- Johnson, Robert R. 1998. *User-Centered Technology: A Rhetorical Theory for Computers and Other Mundane Artifacts*. SUNY Press.
- \*Spinuzzi, Clay. 2015. *All Edge: Inside the New Workplace Networks*. U of Chicago Press.
- Angeli, Elizabeth L. 2019. *Rhetorical Work in Emergency Medical Services: Communicating in the Unpredictable Workplace*. Routledge, ATTW Book Series.
- \*Sauer, Beverly. 2010. *The Rhetoric of Risk: Technical Documentation in Hazardous Environments*. Routledge.
- \*Simmons, W. Michele. 2007. *Participation and Power: Civic Discourse in Environmental Policy Decisions*. SUNY Press.
- Ding, Huiling. 2014. *Rhetoric of a Global Epidemic: Transcultural Communication about SARS*. Southern Illinois UP.
- Fountain, T. Kenny. 2014. *Rhetoric in the Flesh: Trained Vision, Technical Expertise, and the Gross Anatomy Lab*. Routledge, ATTW Book Series.
- Scott, J. Blake. 2003/2014. *Risky Rhetoric: AIDS and the Cultural Practices of HIV Testing*. Southern Illinois UP.
- \*Teston, Christa. 2017. *Bodies in Flux: Scientific Methods for Negotiating Medical Uncertainty*. U of Chicago Press.
- \*Geisler, Cheryl and Jason Swarts. 2019. *Coding Streams of Language: Techniques for the Systematic Coding of Test, Talk, and Other Verbal Data*. University Press of Colorado.
- \*Moore, Kristen R. and Daniel P. Richards. 2018 *Posthuman Praxis in Technical Communication*. Routledge. (Introduction only.)

### *Plagiarism Policy*

Plagiarism is the act of claiming ownership over work that is not your own or willfully resubmitting for credit your own work from previous courses or contexts. If students in this course attempt to plagiarize they will more than likely fail the course.

### *Withdrawal*

A syllabus constitutes a contract between the student and professor. Participation in this course indicates a student's acceptance of its contents, requirements, and policies. Students should review the syllabus and the course requirements as soon as possible. If a student believes that the nature of this course does not meet their interests, needs, or expectations (amount of work involved, class meetings, assignment deadlines, course policies, etc.), they should drop the class by the drop/add deadline given in the Old Dominion University Schedule of Classes.

### *Weighting Scales & Late Work*

This course uses only letter grades, which are enumerated as such:

A	92.5-100	B+	87.5-89.9	C+	77.5-79.9	D	60-69.9
A-	90-92.4	B	82.5-87.4	C	72.5-77.4	F	<60
		B-	80-82.4	C-	70-72.4		

Work will be penalized a full letter grade for each day late. In-class activities cannot be made up or revised.

### *Assignments*

There are different expectations for students enrolled in the course as M.A. or certificate students and those as Ph.D. students for two reasons: (i) the nature of the programs are distinct, and (ii) the goals of students at these levels vary.

#### M.A. & Certificate

UX Project <i>Due: Varies</i>	15%
Annotated Bibliography <i>Due: Oct. 13</i>	40%
Seminar Paper or Workplace Artifact <i>Due: Dec. 11</i>	45%

#### Ph.D.

UX Project <i>Due: Varies</i>	10%
Response Papers <i>Due: Sept. 22, Oct. 20, Nov. 17</i>	15%
Book Review <i>Due: Oct. 13</i>	30%
Research Proposal <i>Due: Dec. 11</i>	45%

### *UX (User Experience) Project*

A portion of this class will be spent working on a real user experience (UX) project in the field. The client might be an external client, one at Old Dominion University, or one I am currently working with. The timeline is rather fluid, but the goal is to expose students to an applied project in the field of technical communication to illuminate how theory translates into practice. Students will engage in best practices in UX, including but not limited to: user research, persona building, wireframing, accessibility, design, and storyboarding. Credit will be received for completing in-class and out-of-class activities related to the project. Much of the work will be co-dictated by myself and the organizational or project director. It is useful to think of this portion of the grade as the participation portion of the grade, since a good deal of the work will be done in-class and in groups.

### *Response Papers*

Response papers, of which there will be three, will be written as one-page, single-spaced documents, in 12-point Times New Roman typeface, with 1" margins at legal size (8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"x14"). They will be submitted via email as a Word document immediately before class, three times over the semester (see due dates above). These response papers might articulate an argument, explore a line of questioning, challenge an existing assumption, or propose an alternate direction for research. The nature of each response should reflect the creative license of the student, but must synthesize in productive ways the readings done during the previous few weeks. Synthesize here means not only the inclusion of each text covered, but a way of putting all the readings—and even outside readings—into conversation with each other with the student's own personal flare.

### *Book Review*

Ph.D. students will write a review of a book in their related area of research for the semester. Suggested books can be found in the respective area lists. Book reviews will be between 2000 and 2500 words in length and will be submitted for publication by the end of the semester at an appropriate journal. A high-quality manuscript of the review must be completed and submitted to the professor by October 13, but need not be submitted to the journal until after the student receives feedback. Reviews are the best way to get your publishing feet wet.

### *Annotated Bibliography*

The annotated bibliography is designed to refine a student's ability to summarize and synthesize texts around an identifiable topic or for an identifiable purpose. The annotated bibliography for this class will consist of 10 annotations of journal articles circulating around a specific topic or area of inquiry. Here are the specific parameters:

- Title Page: Use APA format to create a cover page.
- Introduction: 250-words that frame the chosen topic.
- Annotations 1 through 6: 250-word annotations of articles covered in class.
- Annotations 7 through 10: 250-word annotations of outside articles.
- Conclusion: 250-words identifying main themes and future directions for research.

All of these components will be submitted as one Word document to the professor by October 13. Drafts of individual annotations can be sent to the professor for feedback up to and including October 5.

### *Workplace Artifact*

The workplace artifact option is designed for students who are coming into class with minimal academic experience in English or little interest in pursuing academic goals beyond their current endeavors. This option can be tailored to the students' own professional background, experiences, and future career in mind. The core feature of the artifact is that it brings value to a professional workplace of any kind. The artifact has to be a completely original and cannot be derivative of a previous project. Some examples of a workplace artifact might be:

- White paper on a given topic that would bring about the requisite knowledge for an organization or industry to make informed decisions.
- Instructional documentation leading users through a task of significance.
- Website on a technical or environmental topic that is designed to facilitate understanding for a public audience.
- Promotional campaign for a cause, candidate, or product.

Given the flexibility of this option, students must receive approval to complete their desired project beforehand, no later than October 12. Students must email by that date a one-page informal proposal to the professor outlining the nature of the artifact, the work involved, and the viability or usefulness of the artifact in a professional setting. Zoom meetings are encouraged.

### *Seminar Paper*

The seminar paper is a traditional academic paper that is 4500 words in length. This option is designed for masters-level students who plan on continuing to pursue academic goals (e.g., present at conferences, apply to Ph.D. programs) and, as such, should contain an original argument based upon scholarship in the field. Original arguments can be made by bringing two concepts together in a productive way, applying a theory to a new area of research, crafting a challenge to a tenet or argument existing in the field, or by highlighting ethical questions about a certain theory or practice—just to name a few. It is expected that students conduct a considerable amount of self-directed research for the paper, as no more than half of the references can be from the required readings from the course syllabus. It is useful to aim for about 16 references in this scope of project. APA formatting is required. Drafts of the paper can be sent to the professor for feedback up to and including November 24.

### *Research Proposal*

Ph.D. students will submit an original research proposal that outlines a prospective project in the field of professional and technical writing that is feasible in scope, relevant to the subject areas covered in class, and befitting of the student's abilities and academic or nonacademic trajectories. Students might wish to craft a proposal that works as a first step towards developing a dissertation prospectus or journal article. The research itself need not be conducted during the semester, but the proposal should be airtight in its readiness to be applied in the following months. Students should set up individual meetings with the professor to talk through potential topics and their viability, and how the proposal might serve as a springboard for a larger project. Research proposals must contain at minimum:

- Abstract: Condensed description of the proposed research.
- Introduction: Contextual statement of proposed research, ending with a pointed research question.
- Literature Review: In-depth exploration of relevant work.
- Artifacts: Statement or list of the things to be studied and why.
- Methodologies/Methods: Specified articulation of how you will study those things.
- Statement of Importance: Prescient argument for what this research might contribute.

All elements must be submitted as one Word document (min. 6000 words) in APA format.

*Reading & Work Schedule: Overview*

Each week there will be three types of required reading: one book, select chapter from *Solving Problems in Technical Communication (SPiTC)*, and articles from other publications. All work will be submitted via email or Slack by class start time.

	<i>Book</i>	<i>SPiTC</i>	<i>Article</i>	<i>Due</i>
Sept. 1	Kuhn	Ch. 5	Latour; Miller	
Sept. 8	Longo	Ch. 7	Basquin	
Sept. 15	Willerton	Ch. 15	Katz	
Sept. 22	Williams	Ch. 9	Haas	Response Paper 1
Sept. 29	Johnson	Ch. 12	Sullivan & Porter	
Oct. 6	Spinuzzi	Ch. 3	Winsor	
Oct. 13	Angeli	Ch. 11	Herndl & Licon	Ann. Bib./Bk Rev.
Oct. 20	Sauer	Ch. 18	Dragga & Voss	Response Paper 2
Oct. 27	Ding	Ch. 17	Selfe & Selfe	
Nov. 3*	Simmons	Ch. 14	Chisnell	
Nov. 10	Scott	Ch. 6	Moore	
Nov. 17	Fountain	Ch. 16	Barton & Barton	Response Paper 3
Nov. 24	Teston	Ch. 1	Kolodziejewski	
Dec. 1	Geisler & Swarts	Ch. 2	McNely et al.	
Dec. 8	Moore & Richards	Ch. 8	Walton et al.	Final Proj. (Dec. 11)

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\* no class meeting (*Election Day*)



## Appendix A

Below are the current course descriptions followed by the proposed revisions to the course descriptions for ENGL 715/815 and ENGL 775/875. Here are the points of rationale:

- Generally the rationale in both cases is to align the title of our courses with the language of the journals and job titles in the field they are entering into. Professional writing is a holdover from generations past; it needs to be updated.
- The proposed changes bring the descriptions in line with the common nomenclature of the fields represented in the courses.
- In terms of ENGL 775, this course was just taught for the fourth time in six years. It certainly justifies giving it a new number.
- In terms of ENGL 715, the proposed is more of a modification of nomenclature. This change specifically would ensure that the theory and pedagogy sequence are connected by shared language. This is imperative.
- Many of the students I am chairing (dissertation-wise) are in the field of technical communication. A few are on the job market now. When search committees look at graduate transcripts, it looks better to have the course names of ENGL 715 and 775 bear a field-based title. It helps with professionalization and scholarly identity.
- ENGL 775 will be easier to market with its own number and description in the catalog.

### Current Course Descriptions

*ENGL 715. Professional Writing Theories and Practices. 3 Credits.*

This course surveys the history of professional writing, competing theories and research methodologies in the field. The tensions between workplace practices, professional writing scholarship, and professional writing pedagogy will also be explored.

*ENGL 775. Seminar in English Studies – Pedagogy and Curriculum Design. 3 Credits.*

This course introduces students to literacy theory and challenges them to apply it in specific disciplines within English Studies. Prerequisite: ENGL 715 recommended. *Note: The word “pedagogy” in the current catalog for 775 needs to be corrected anyway. Please have this changed ASAP.*

## **Proposed Course Descriptions**

*ENGL 715. Technical Communication Theories and Practices. 3 Credits.*

This course surveys the history of technical communication as both an academic field and workplace practice, explores its cornerstone theories and research methodologies, and asks students to develop a research project situated in one of the many sites of contemporary technical communication practice.

*ENGL 7XX. Teaching Technical Communication. 3 Credits.*

This course introduces students to the field of technical communication by way of classroom practice with the goal of professionalizing students as teachers of technical communication (or technical writing). Students are asked to design undergraduate course materials and projects, which will be informed by our exploration of the extensive boundaries of the field and critical consideration of the most pressing questions facing technical communication scholars and the most common problems facing technical communication practitioners today.

**Prerequisite:** ENGL 715 recommended. *Note: This course needs a new number assigned to maintain 775 as the pedagogy seminar placeholder. May I request 716, so that it is placed immediately under 715 in the catalog?*