

Course Number/Title: COMM 6940: Writing for Technical Communication (cross-listed as COMM 4960).

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Department of Communication and Media

Fall 2023

Time/Dates: Tu/Fi 10:00AM-11:50 AM In-Person

Location: Darrin 235

Instructor Name: Corinne Jones

Title: Assistant Professor of Scientific and Technical Communication

Email:

Phone:

Office Hours: 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM. In-Person or WebEx. If you need to meet outside of that time, please email me so that we can make alternative arrangements.

Office Location: Sage 4404

Course Description

According to Caroline Rude, technical communication asks: “How do texts (print, digital, multimedia, visual, verbal) and related communication practices mediate knowledge, values, and action in a variety of social and professional contexts?” (p. 176). These questions can be focused on practice, design, development and information management systems, and social change. Thus, this course is meant to (1) introduce students to major approaches to technical communication and (2) help students in technical professions or professional fields prepare for the types of research, writing, and information presentation that they may do in their careers after graduation. Specifically, “expert” writers and speakers must convey complex technical information to non-specialist audiences with different knowledges, skills, assumptions, and goals. Writers must learn to articulate, explain, and interpret information for these different audiences, and they must adapt their technical communications for specific local purposes and contexts. Therefore, students will learn about major genres or categories of technical communication, how the needs of audiences can help guide writing and communication, and techniques to craft writing and communication to suit the specific purposes and interests of local audiences. Moreover, students will learn about the basic social implications of technical communication.

Learning Outcomes

After completing this course, students will be able to:

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- (1) Independently identify, summarize, and evaluate key questions and concerns for technical communication, including social, cultural, and technological concerns.
- (2) Recognize and apply genre conventions for different audiences and technical communication situations and evaluate their effectiveness.
- (3) Differentiate between audiences and examine relevant context features for different types of documents.
- (4) Create documents that communicate to specific audiences given using appropriate genre conventions, and responding to specific contexts, including how the technological, cultural, and social contexts shape specific media products.

- (5) Propose solutions to local problems, and effectively communicate those proposed solutions to a professional audience using appropriate genre conventions, and considering specific contexts, including how the technological, cultural, and social contexts.
- (6) Assemble, evaluate, and synthesize academic literature to explore their own interests within Technical Communication, and present topics to lay audiences of undergraduate students.

Required Texts

All reading material will be available through the library, hyperlinks embedded to web resources embedded in the syllabus, or as PDFs through Blackboard.

Other Required Materials

- Computer, Internet access, and familiarity with computer programs and technology
- A word processing program (e.g., Microsoft Word)
- PowerPoint, or some other presentation program
- A PDF reader (e.g., Adobe Reader)
- All papers must use MLA or APA formatting (See the Purdue OWL site <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>.)

Grade Breakdown:

Grade Breakdown	Points	Percent
Weekly Annotations (for weekly readings) (10 total)	10 total x 12 points each = 120 points	12%
Annotated Bibliography for Literature Review	80 points	8%
Literature Review*	150 points	15%
Résumé and Cover Letter	100 points	10%
Instructions and Memo	100 points	10%
Document Design with Graph and Memo	100 points	10%
Individual Proposals*	150 points	15%
Final Presentations	100 points	10%
Peer Review	4 total x 25 points each= 100 points	10%
TOTAL	1,000 points	100%

*Bolded Assignments are assignments for graduate students.

*I do not take do participation points for graduate students. You will miss important information if you miss class, so please email me.

*There is no form of grade “resurrection” built into this grading. Rather, you have multiple small assignments so that one poor grade will not result in failure. There are no formal means to appeal grades. Extra credit will be available throughout the semester.

*Assignments are graded based on the rubric on each assignment (see specific assignments for details).

*Grades will be reported via Blackboard, and most assignments will have a portion submitted in learning management system. Some work will be completed in class (see assignment prompts

and schedule below for specifics). All major assignments are due by the announced date and time except in the event of a medical or personal emergency (which includes COVID-19 related issues). Coursework is due by class time unless otherwise noted.

Assignment Descriptions

Please be aware, you *will* do a *lot* of reading and writing for this class.

Weekly Annotations (10 total x 12 points each = 120 points Graded complete/incomplete).

These are short (200-word minimum) annotated bibliography assignments where you will respond to the readings (posted online and below). These will include (a) end of paper references/citations, (b) a paragraph summarizing your understanding of the major theses of the articles, and (c) a paragraph evaluating these sources. The purpose of these assignments is to give you practice *independently* identifying core theses, summarizing information, evaluating it, and putting it in conversation with other literature. You can (and should!) use the writing that you do for the weekly assignments on your major assignments. You will notice that you have **fewer weekly annotations** than your undergraduate peers because graduate students are also completing **seven independent annotations** for your literature review (see below), although you will also have some additional assigned readings to which undergraduate students will not respond. **These will be due before the class period for the assigned reading.**

Annotated Bibliography (80 points).

This annotated bibliography is much like your weekly annotations. However, it is composed of seven sources that you choose independently to begin to develop a literature review about a subfield/lens within Technical Communication. Each annotation will include (a) end of paper references/citations, (b) a paragraph summarizing your understanding of the major theses of the articles, and (c) a paragraph reflecting on possible uses for these sources and putting them into conversation with other literature on the topic. This assignment is meant to give you practice *independently* identifying core theses, summarizing information, evaluating it, and putting it in conversation with other literature. It is meant to scaffold you into the literature review; you can use the writing that you do for theses annotations on your major assignments, *and* you should use these to begin to identify common themes across the literature. **You will manage your own time with this. These will all be due by class time on October 24.**

Literature Review (150 points/15%).

The literature review should be about 1,500 words and answer: What are some of the major questions and themes that define a particular subfield of technical communication that is interesting to you? What “gaps” still remain in the literature? Using a modified version of the Creating a Research Space (CARS) model, it will include an introduction, broad definition of your topic and how it relates to Technical Communication, an overview of the literature divided into major themes, future directions and questions, a conclusion, and an appendix of suggested further reading. It will use at least seven scholarly sources about your topic, and one scholarly source from our class to explain how and why this topic is important for Technical Communication. This assignment can (and should!) draw directly from your independent literature review annotations.

Résumé and Cover Letter (100 points/10%).

You will turn in three files for this assignment: (1) a PDF of a relevant job ad, (2) a résumé, and (3) a cover letter (of at least 200 words). You will be graded on how well you tailor the materials to the ad and follow standard genre conventions that respond to the specific audience of professionals in your field.

Instructions and Memo (100 points/10%).

You will write an external-facing set task-oriented of instructions for a task with which you are familiar. The audience for these instructions are for lay undergraduate students at RPI. They will be from at least 300 words and include some sort of illustration. The instructions will be accompanied by a 300-word internal-facing memo that you would write for a supervisor or peers that explains how the instructions respond to the undergraduate audience at RPI. The memo should follow a standard memo format. You will be graded on the content and format of the instructions and the memo.

Document Design/Flyer with Graph/Chart and Memo (100 points/10%).

You will practice basic principles of document design and developing graphs/charts by designing a flyer that attempts to persuade readers to *do* something here at RPI or in Troy more generally (e.g. join a club, expand food options, etc.). This assignment is meant to build on the skills you developed on your previous two assignments as the audience for a flyer will include both lay undergraduate students at RPI and potential audiences of administrators and other stakeholders. You will also need to think about the format of your flyer to decide how to circulate the document. The flyer itself will include at least 100 words. It will be accompanied by a 550-word internal-facing memo that you would write for others in your organization to explain why your document design is effective and should be adopted. The memo should follow a standard memo format. You will be graded on the content and format of the flyer and the memo.

Individual Proposals (150 points/15%).

Many technical writers work in teams to write proposals for Requests for Proposals (RFPs). In this assignment, you respond to an imaginary RFP to propose a change or solution to some problem at RPI or Troy generally. Alternatively, as graduate students, you may choose to develop this proposal as a research proposal, similar to what you might do for a thesis proposal. You should decide based on your goals after this class. You can (and should) draw from your previous assignments. The proposal will be between 2,000-3,000 words and include (1) a cover page, (2) an executive summary, (3) an introduction and background (4) a problem statement, (5) a project description, (6) a list of your team's credentials (7) a timeline, (8) a budget, (9) a conclusion, and (10) references. The audience for this assignment is an imagined team of administrators and a grant office at RPI, or a thesis advisor. You will also use another graph or chart in this assignment. The proposal will be accompanied by a 500-word internal-facing memo that you would write for a supervisor to report on your work. The memo should follow a standard memo format.

Final Presentation (100 points/10%).

Teams also sometimes present their proposals to the granting agencies. Thus, you will also practice presenting your proposal as a team for your final project. The audience for this

assignment is the imagined granting agency from the proposal assignment. It should persuade the granting organization (1) that you have a thorough understanding of the issue that you are proposing to address, (2) that you have the best solution to that issue, and (3) that you can deliver on your proposal. The presentation will be between 8-10 minutes long. Everyone will present at least one section, and it will include a visual aid. You will be graded on the content and format of the visual aid (as a group) and your individual presentation skills (individually).

Peer Reviews (4 total x 25 points each=100 points/10%. Graded on complete/incomplete).

For peer reviews, you will bring in nearly complete drafts of your upcoming assignments (excluding memos). These are meant for you to practice getting feedback from actual readers (your peers) and myself. These are also meant for you to practice putting yourself in the position of the reader. The author will at least one substantive question about the clarity, etc. of their draft. The peer reviewer will answer and fill out a peer review chart. After feedback, the author will write a revision plan before leaving class.

Syllabus Statements

Tentative Schedule (changes will be announced via the learning management system)

Week	In-Class Activities	Readings and Assignments Due (Due at the beginning of class unless otherwise stated!)
UNIT 1: JOB APPLICATION MATERIALS		
Week 1: Tuesday August 29 Day 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction Day • Look ahead to extra assignments for graduate students. • Talk about the difference between Weekly Annotations and the Annotated Bibliography. • Talk about the Information Literacy links • Percipio Link • Survey Link 	In-Class Reflections <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think this class will be about based on the goals? • “Who is the audience you imagine when you write?” (Due at the end of class) • What are your goals after this class? Do you want to work in industry? A specific company? A non-profit? Or, do you want to pursue a research career/PhD, where you would need to write a thesis?
Week 1: Friday September 1	Define Tech Comm in Class. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups report back on the specific questions. 	Read: Caroline Rude. “Mapping the Research

Day 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The General Public • Talk about job application assignment. • Begin to look for job applications on sites. • Talk about job document presentation assignment. • Examples of documents used in jobs (1,2,3.) • Graduate students determine what sub-field/perspective you want to focus your literature review on to begin working on your literature review! 	<p>Questions in Technical Communication.”</p> <p>Read: Suzanne Last. 1.2. “Conventions and Characteristics” (pg. 15-17).</p> <p>Weekly Annotation1: for Rude.</p>
Week 2: Tuesday September 5	NO CLASS: RPI on Monday Schedule	NO CLASS: RPI on Monday Schedule
Day 3		
Week 2: Friday September 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instrumental technical communication versus rhetorical technical communication • Talk about basic punctuation, and why grammar is rhetorical. • Talk about Business Letter styles and Block format. • What is the rhetorical situation around a job ad? Job application? 	<p>Read: Preparing Job Application Materials. Ohio State Press</p> <p>Read: CV vs. Résumé Guide.</p> <p>Read: Suzan Last and Candice Neveu. “1.3. Understanding the Rhetorical Situation.” <i>Technical Writing Essentials</i>. (pp. 17-22).</p> <p>Please complete: Information literacy concepts: Scholarship as conversation. You will turn in the badges that you earn for participation points for today’s class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percipio Link • Survey Link
Day 4		
Week 3: Tuesday September 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If technical communication entails 	Read: Jones, Moore, and Walton. “Disrupting the Past

<p>Day 5</p>	<p>questions about social impact, social justice is an important question.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about social justice in technical communication. If we are always privileging someone in our communication, how do we determine whose needs we will center? • Discuss the difference between impact and intention. • How might we apply these principles to the situation that Costanza-Chock describes? • Watch: “Biased Hiring Algorithms” (2:48) and The Bias Problem with Hiring Algorithms (2:49). • Begin making résumés • I suggest also looking for what kinds of documents you might use in these jobs. 	<p>to Disrupt the Future: An Antenarrative of Technical Communication” <i>Technical Communication Quarterly</i>.</p> <p>Read: Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Introduction: #TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination” in <i>Design Justice</i>. (only pages 1-9).</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 2 for Jones, Moore, and Walton.</p> <p>Although you do not need to write about it, in class, be prepared to talk about why they say that TPC work always privileges some perspectives over others? (p.222), and the Design Justice principle: “We prioritize design’s impact on the community over the intentions of the designer.”</p>
<p>Week 3: Friday September 15</p> <p>Day 6</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is reader-centered writing versus writer-centered writing? • What is tone? • Practice constructive writing in class. • Cover Letters. • Look at examples here, and here. • Which ones work well? Which ones don’t work well? 	<p>Read: Suzan Last. Chapter 2 “Professional Style” (pp. 37-56).</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk about mock interview and possible interview questions. 	
Week 4: Tuesday September 19 Day 7	Peer Review of résumé and cover letter.	Draft of résumé and cover letter due.
Week 4: Friday September 22 Day 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is “professional” really? Who is defining it, and who does that privilege? How can we square the need to “be professional” and get a job with the power dynamics and social impacts implicit in defining “professional”? Complete résumé and cover letter. 	Read: Katie Manthey. “ Editor’s Introduction: Dress Practices as Embodied Multimodal Rhetoric ,” and Brittany Hull, Cecilia D. Shelton, and Temptaous Mckoy, “ Dressed but not tryin’ to impress: Black women deconstructing ‘professional’ dress .” Both in <i>Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics</i> . Weekly Annotation 3 for either Manthey, or Hull, Shelton, and McKoy (you pick!).
Week 5: Tuesday September 26 Day 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mock interviews in class. Virtual Shopping Spree! Find examples of clothes you might wear to an interview and turn them in for participation points. Looking ahead to the Instructions Assignment. 	Major Assignment: Résumé and Cover Letter Due. In class participation points: Mock Interview in Class
UNIT 2: INSTRUCTIONS		
Week 5: Friday September 29 Day 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the rhetorical situation around: Text messages?, Email?, Letters?, Memos? Talk about memo format. 	Read: Suzanne Last. 3.2. Headings (pp.71-78)and 3.3 Lists (pp 79-82) <i>Technical Writing Essentials</i> . Read: Suzanne Last. 7.1. Text Messages, Emails, Memos, and Letters . (pp.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking ahead to the Instructions Assignment. • Begin selecting task for instructions assignment. • Look through examples on Microsoft, and here, here, here, and here. 	<p>179-190). <i>Technical Writing Essentials</i>.</p> <p>Read: Menno, Jong, and Karreman. “Effects of a Culturally Adapted Manual Structure on Western and Chinese Users” pp. 163-182.</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 4 for Menno, Jong, and Karreman.</p>
<p>Week 6: Tuesday October 3</p> <p>Day 11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we define things and what are the important types of definitions? • In class: Use the template for a technical description in class. • <i>Redefine</i> the technical term for lay audience, business audience, and expert audience. • Talk about notes, cautions, warnings, and and dangers, and when to use them. 	<p>Read: Suzanne Last “7.4 Technical Descriptions” (pp. 203-207) and Suzanne Last. “7.7. Writing Instructions.” (pp. 225-229).</p> <p>Read: Jones and Williams. “The Social Justice Impact of Plain Language: A Critical Approach to Plain-Language Analysis”</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 5 for Jones and Williams.</p>
<p>Week 6: Friday October 6</p> <p>Day 12</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class comparison of instructions. • Do a rhetorical analysis of the situation around the instructions that you will write. 	<p>Read: Markel and Selber. Chapter 20.</p>
<p>Week 7: Tuesday October 10</p> <p>Day 13</p>	<p>Peer Review of Instructions</p>	<p>Draft of Instructions Due</p>
<p>Week 7: Friday October 13</p> <p>Day 14</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss some of the troubles of imagining an audience. • Please pay particular attention to the issues that Costanza-Chock 	<p>Read: Costanza-Chock. “Chapter 2: Design Practices: Nothing About Us, Without Us.” (entire chapter).</p>

	<p>brings up about imagining users, and think about how those same issues can apply to imagining readers. How does this complicate how we imagine readers for our writing? (Pay particular attention to the part about user-personas and what D.E. Wittkower says on page 83.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we imagine audiences without reinscribing stereotypes about the audience? • How can we think about this in the context of using our audience analysis worksheets? 	<p>Weekly Annotation 6 for Costanza-Chock.</p> <p>Write about what is relevant to you but, please be prepared to talk about the issues that Costanza-Chock brings up about imagining users, and think about how those same issues can apply to imagining readers. How does this complicate how we imagine readers for our writing? (Pay particular attention to the part about user-personas and what D.E. Wittkower says on page 83.)</p>
<p>Week 8: Tuesday October 17</p> <p>Day 15</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to identify issues or problems you might like to create a one-page flyer about. • Start to find data sources that could help you create a graphic. 	<p>Major Assignment: Instructions Due</p>
UNIT 3: DOCUMENT DESIGN AND GRAPHICS		
<p>Week 8: Friday October 20</p> <p>Day 16</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the four principles of design. • How does design affect where documents circulate? • Continue to identify sources of data. 	<p>Read: Markel and Selber. Chapter 11: Designing Print and Online Documents.</p>
<p>Week 9: Tuesday October 24</p> <p>Day 17</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about the difference between graphs and tables. • What is the purpose of a graph or chart? 	<p>Read: Markel and Selber: Chapter 12: Creating Graphics.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What “story” do you want the graph in your upcoming assignment to tell? • Practice using Excel to create charts (look at resources on instructions and pg. 321 in Markel and Selber) • Continue looking for sources for data. 	Annotated Bibliography Due.
<p>Week 9: Friday October 27</p> <p>Day 18</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss graph distortions. • Discuss examples. • How will you avoid making these distortions on your upcoming assignments? 	<p>Read: Kosslyn. “How people lie with graphs.”</p> <p>Please find an example of one of these graph distortions.</p>
<p>Week 10: Tuesday October 31</p> <p>Day 19</p>	Peer Review for Document Design/Flyer and Graphics Assignment	Draft of Flyer and Graphics Due
<p>Week 10: Friday November 3</p> <p>Day 20</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss the inhumanity of graphs and charts. Have you seen this in your everyday life? • Revisit the purpose of graphs and charts. • What are some other options for graphs and charts? 	<p>Read: Dragga and Voss: “Cruel Pies: The Inhumanity of Technical Illustrations.” <i>Technical Communication</i>.</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 7 for Dragga and Voss.</p>
<p>Week 11: Tuesday November 7</p> <p>Day 21</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict Management Styles Quiz • Review Information literacy concepts: Scholarship as conversation for your UPCOMING LITERATURE REVIEW (which you may take time in class to finish while your 	Major Assignment: Document Design/Flyer and Graphics + Memo Due

	undergraduate peers take the Information Literacy course).	
UNIT 4: PROPOSALS		
<p>Week 11: Friday November 10</p> <p>Day 22</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select teams to work with on the next two projects. • Follow the GRIP Model: Elect a team leader, determine goals, determine roles and set the agenda/work schedule, determine ground rules, and processes. • What Document Control Modes will you use? • How will you communicate with your team (text, email? Length between response time?) • Please note, some of these models have been developed in U.S. centric contexts and may reflect biases. 	<p>Read: Suzan Last: Chapter 4: Teamwork and Communication. (pp. 104-130).</p> <p>Read: Clay Spinuzzi. “Guest Editor's Introduction: Technical Communication in the Age of Distributed Work”</p> <p>Literature Review Due.</p>
<p>Week 12: Tuesday November 14</p> <p>Day 23</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building from some of the flyers that you already created, does your team want to propose to perform a task? Provide a product? Provide a service? • What are the different parts of the proposal? • Look at example proposals here, and try to identify these parts. 	<p>Read: Suzan Last: 7.2. “Proposals” (pp. 191-199).</p> <p>Read: Michelle McMullin and Bradley Dilger. “Constructive Distributed Work: An Integrated Approach to Sustainable Collaboration and Research for Distributed Teams”</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 8 for McMullin and Dilger.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look at some example RFPs. 	
<p>Week 12: Friday November 17</p> <p>Day 24</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss deliverables. Discuss the project proposal and details. Focus on budgets and how to estimate budgets. Focus on timelines and how to estimate timelines. 	<p>Read: Markel and Selber. Chapter 16: Writing Proposals.</p>
<p>Week 13: Tuesday November 21</p> <p>Day 25</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is scoping and framing and what is the issue with “problem framing.” How does scoping and framing limit the issues that we address? Whose interests are we centering when we frame our problems? How might this apply to the problems statements that you are developing for your proposals? Define asset-based approaches versus deficit-based approaches. Does the community already have resources to address issue that your proposal is trying to address, and how can you build from those existing resources to support solutions that are already working? 	<p>Read: Sasha Constanza-Chock: Chapter 3: Design Narratives: From TXTMob to Twitter.</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 9 for Costanza-Chock.</p> <p>Although you can write about what is interesting to you, in class, be able to define scoping and framing, and please briefly outline the issue that Costanza-Chock identifies with “problem framing,” and how scoping can limit the issues that we address (see pages 121-122). Define “asset-based” approaches versus “deficit-based” approaches.</p>
<p>Week 13: Thursday November 24</p>	No Class for Fall Break	

<p>Week 14: Tuesday November 28</p> <p>Day 26</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss presentation skills. • Discuss effective visual aids and slides (pg. 600). • Discuss organizations and transitions (pg. 604-613). • Use the chart on page 621. • Watch: “How to Coordinate a Team Presentation.” 	<p>Read: Markel and Selber. Chapter 21: Oral Presentations.</p> <p>There is no journal for this reading, but you should come to class having watched a TEDTalk (from https://www.ted.com/talks). Have general notes about how the talk exemplifies some of the key characteristics of a good oral presentation according to Markel and Selber, OR how it does NOT follow those standards. I will come around to check if you have these notes and they will count for participation points.</p>
<p>Week 14: Friday December 1</p> <p>Day 27</p>	<p>Peer Review of Project Proposal</p>	<p>Draft of Proposal Due</p>
<p>Week 15: Tuesday December 5</p> <p>Day 28</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss localization in the context of power and social justice. • If we were to implement a participatory localization approach, how might you reimagine this project? • How might you implement a participatory localization approach in the future? 	<p>Read: Godwin Agboka “Participatory Localization: A Social Justice Approach to Navigating Unenfranchised/ Disenfranchised Cultural Sites.”</p> <p>Weekly Annotation 10 for Agboka.</p>
<p>Week 15: Friday December 8</p> <p>Day 29</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last Day of Classes • Oral Presentations 	<p>Major Assignment: Proposals Due the beginning of class. Major Assignment: Oral Presentations due DURING class.</p>

Week 16: Tuesday December 12	Study Session [no assignments]	
Week 16: Thursday December 15		