Course Number/Title: COMM 4962: Writing for Technical Communication (cross-listed as COMM 6940).
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:
Communication Intensive Learning Outcomes:
- analyze specific communication situations, including audiences and purposes for effective communication.
- communicate effectively in more than one course-relevant genre (e.g. résumés and cover letters, instructions, flyers, and proposals).
- write clearly and succinctly.
- identify and apply appropriate genre and design conventions, such as language, images, graphics, typography, organization, and tone.

Course Outcomes:

- (1) Identify 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.
- (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 communication those proposed solutions to a professional audience using appropriate genre conventions, and considering specific contexts, including how the technological, cultural, and social contexts.

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
Journals (20 total) (CI)	15 total X 8 points each = 120 points	12%
Résumé and Cover Letter (CI)	120 points	12%
Instructions and Memo (CI)	120 points	12%
Document Design with Graph and Memo (CI)	120 points	12%
Group Proposals (CI)	150 points	15%
Final Group Presentations (CI)	100 points	10%
Peer Review	4 total x 35 points each= 140 points	14%
Participation	26 required days x 5 points each = 130 points	13%
TOTAL	**1,000 points**	**100%**

*CI refers to Communication Intensive Assignment.
*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 uncles otherwise noted.

Assignment Descriptions

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

12 (15total x 8 points each=120 points/12%. Graded on complete/incomplete).
These are short (100-word minimum) journal assignments where you will respond to questions about the readings (posted online and below). These questions are meant to (a) help direct your reading, and (b) "scaffold" you into major assignments. You can (and should!) use the writing that you do for the reading journal assignments on your major assignments.

***Résumé and Cover Letter* (120 points/12%).**
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* (120 points/12%).**
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* (120 points/12%).**
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.

Group Proposals and Individual Memo **(150 points/15%).**
Many technical writers work in teams to write proposals for Requests for Proposals (RFPs). In this assignment, you will practice writing in teams by responding to an imaginary RFP to propose a change or solution to some problem at RPI or Troy generally. You can (and should) draw from some of the ideas that your team members came up with for the flyer assignment. 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. Again, you may draw from your flyer assignment. The audience for this assignment is an imagined team of administrators and a grant office at RPI. 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 at your company to report on your team's work. The memo should follow a standard memo format. You will be graded on the content and format of the proposal (as a group) and the memo (individually).

Final Group 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 35 points each=140 points/14%. 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.

Participation **(25 total x 5.2 points each=130 points/13%. Graded on complete/incomplete).**
I recognize that participation can take many forms, so I do not grade based on you "appearing" to be paying attention. In general, if you show up to class complete the in-class activities that we do in class, you will receive credit. This semester has 28 total class periods. You may miss up to three total class periods without penalty. After three absences, you will lose points. If you show up for class more than **5 minutes** late, or if you leave more than **5 minutes** early, you will only receive half credit.

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	• Introduction Day • Get into groups for next class [4 groups for Rude's reading: Everyone reads p.174-187. Then groups focus on 1) Disciplinary Questions (p. 187-192), 2) Pedagogy Questions (p. 193-198), 3) Practice Questions (p. 198-202), 4) Social Change Questions (p. 202-204)].	**In-Class Reflections** • 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) Get into groups!
Week 1: Friday September 1 Day 2	Define Tech Comm in Class. • Groups report back on the specific questions. • 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,)	**Read**: Caroline Rude. "Mapping the Research Questions in Technical Communication." 4 groups for Rude's reading: Everyone reads p.174-187. Then groups focus on 1) Disciplinary Questions (p. 187-192), 2) Pedagogy Questions (p. 193-198), 3) Practice Questions (p. 198-202), 4) Social Change Questions (p. 202-204)]. **Read:** Suzanne Last. 1.2. "Conventions and Characteristics" (pg. 15-17). **Journal:** Given this definition of technical writing, what writing have you already done that is a kind of technical writing? Or, what kind of writing do you anticipate that you will

		do that will constitute a kind of technical writing?
Week 2: Tuesday September 5 Day 3	**NO CLASS:** RPI on Monday Schedule	**NO CLASS:** RPI on Monday Schedule
Week 2: Friday September 8 Day 4	• Instrumental technical communication versus rhetorical technical communication • Talk about chronological and functional résumés • Talk about basic punctuation, and why grammar is rhetorical. • What is the rhetorical situation around a job ad? Job application? • Begin making résumés	**Read:** Preparing Job Application Materials. Ohio State Press **Read:** Suzan Last and Candice Neveu. "1.3. Understanding the Rhetorical Situation." *Technical Writing Essentials.* (pp. 17-22). **Journal:** What is the rhetorical situation around a job application?
Week 3: Tuesday September 12 Day 5	• If technical communication entails questions about social impact, social justice is an important question. • 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). • Talk about Business Letter styles and Block format. • Talk more about grammar • Begin on cover letters • I suggest also looking for what kinds of documents you might use in these jobs.	**Read:** Jones, Moore, and Walton. "Disrupting the Past to Disrupt the Future: An Antenarrative of Technical Communication" *Technical Communication Quarterly.* **Read:** Sasha Costanza-Chock, "Introduction: #TravelingWhileTrans, Design Justice, and Escape from the Matrix of Domination" in *Design Justice.* (only pages 1-9). **Journal:** According to Jones, Moore, and Walton, what common threads emerge under the broad umbrella of inclusivity in TPC and why do they matter for social justice? Please define the 3P's. Why do they say that TPC

		work always privileges some perspectives over others? (p.222).
Week 3: Friday September 15 Day 6	- 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? - Talk about mock interview and possible interview questions	**Read:** Suzan Last. Chapter 2 "Professional Style" (pp. 37-56) **Journal:** What is tone? What kind of "tone" do you want to strike in a cover letter? Résumé? Why? What are some strategies you think you can use to achieve that?
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	- 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 *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics.* **Journal:** How do these articles complicate our ideals about "professional"? Who is defining "professional" and who does that privilege? How do these articles complicate job

		applications, and writing in "professional" settings more generally?
Week 5: Tuesday September 26 Day 9	• 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 (and job ad PDF) due.** **In class participation points: Mock Interview in Class**

UNIT 2: INSTRUCTIONS

Week 5: Friday September 29 Day 10	• What is the rhetorical situation around: Text messages?, Email?, Letters?, Memos? • Talk about memo format. • **Looking ahead to the Instructions Assignment.** • Begin selecting task for instructions assignment. • Look through examples on Microsoft, and here, here, here, and here.	**Read:** Suzanne Last. 3.2. Headings (pp.71-78) and 3.3 Lists (pp 79-82) *Technical Writing Essentials.* Suzanne Last. 7.1. Text Messages, Emails, Memos, and Letters. (pp. 179-190). *Technical Writing Essentials.* **Journal:** Which of the document types in 7.1. do you have familiarity with? Please outline the rhetorical situation around one of them and explain how that alters the communication.
Week 6: Tuesday October 3 Day 11	• Why do we define things and what are the important types of definitions? • **In class**: Use the template for a technical description in class. • *Redefine* the technical term for lay audience, business audience, and expert audience. • Talk about notes, cautions, warnings, and dangers, and when to use them.	**Read:** Suzanne Last "7.4 Technical Descriptions" (pp. 203-207) and Suzanne Last. "7.7. Writing Instructions." (pp. 225-229). **Journal:** Based on the reading about writing instructions, what are some tasks that you think you might do for this upcoming assignment? Do you think fixed-order steps, variable-order steps, alternate steps, nested steps, or step-less

		instruction are best for the instructions you will complete for this upcoming assignment? Why?
Week 6: Friday October 6 Day 12	• In class comparison of instructions. • Do a rhetorical analysis of the situation around the instructions that you will write.	**Read:** Markel and Selber. Chapter 20. **Journal:** What do Markel and Selber add to Last's suggestions for writing instructions? How can you use this on your upcoming assignment?
Week 7: Tuesday October 10 Day 13	**Peer Review of Instructions**	**Draft of Instructions Due**
Week 7: Friday October 13 Day 14	• Discuss some of the troubles of imagining an audience. • Please pay particular attention to 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.) • 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?	**Read:** Costanza-Chock. "Chapter 2: Design Practices: Nothing About Us, Without Us." In *Design Justice.* **You ONLY need to read from**: "Imagined users: Whose Tech?" (pg. 76) to "Design Process: From Participation to Accountability" (pg. 84).
Week 8: Tuesday October 17 Day 15	• 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.	**Major Assignment: Instructions Due**
UNIT 3: DOCUMENT DESIGN AND GRAPHICS		
Week 8: Friday October 20	• Discuss the four principles of design. • How does design affect where documents circulate? • Continue to identify sources of data.	**Read:** Markel and Selber. Chapter 11: Designing Print and Online Documents.

Day 16		**Journal:** Please list and define the four principles of design, according to the reading. What are some of the main differences between designing documents for online circulation (online documents) versus circulation in the physical world (print documents)? How do you want to circulate your flyer?
Week 9: Tuesday October 24 Day 17	• Talk about the difference between graphs and tables. • What is the purpose of a graph or chart? • 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.	**Read:** Markel and Selber: Chapter 12: Creating Graphics. **Journal:** What do you think the purpose of a graph is? Is it to help readers consume information more efficiently and reduce cognitive load? To be persuasive? What kind of graphs do you think you will use for this upcoming project? (Please select between bar graphs, line graphs, and pie charts). What "story" do you want the graph in your upcoming assignment to tell?
Week 9: Friday October 27 Day 18	• Discuss graph distortions. • Be prepared to give informal presentation examples of the graph distortions you found in class (may be done via WebEx). • How will you avoid making these distortions on your upcoming assignments?	**Read:** Kosslyn. "How people lie with graphs." **Journal:** Please find an example of one of these graph distortions. Include an image of the graph and explain how it is distorted and how that changes the argument being made.

Week 10: Tuesday October 31 Day 19	**Peer Review for Document Design/Flyer and Graphics Assignment**	**Draft of Flyer and Graphics Due**
Week 10: Thursday November 3 Day 20	• 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?	**Read:** Dragga and Voss: "Cruel Pies: The Inhumanity of Technical Illustrations." *Technical Communication.* **Journal:** What are some other concerns that come up with graphs beyond just misrepresenting data? Dragga and Voss challenge the idea that graphs are just meant to be expedient to readers; what, then, do you think are some of the other purposes of graphs and charts? What are your thoughts on their solutions?
Week 11: Tuesday November 7 Day 21	• Conflict Management Styles Quiz • Information literacy concepts: Scholarship as conversation. • Please complete the following trainings about Scholarship as Conversation in class. You will turn in the badges that you earn for participation points for today's class. • Percipio Link • Survey Link • Look at Example Proposals (if time)	**Major Assignment: Flyer with Graphic + Memo Due**
UNIT 4: PROPOSALS		
Week 11: Friday November 10 Day 22	• 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?)	**Read:** Suzan Last: Chapter 4: Teamwork and Communication. (pp. 104-130). **Journal:** Given some of Last's examples, what are some of the ways that you might use collaborative writing in your job or life

	• Please note, some of these models have been developed in U.S. centric contexts and may reflect biases. • Look at Example Proposals	outside of this class? What has your experience been like with team projects in the past? If you have had any conflicts, what strategies that Last suggests could you have used to prevent or address the conflict? Alternatively, if you have had no conflicts, what do you think you did to prevent conflicts?
Week 12: Tuesday November 14 Day 23	• 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. • Look at some example RFPs.	**Read:** Suzan Last: 7.2. "Proposals" (pp. 191-199). **Journal:** What is the purpose of a proposal? How might you use proposals in your field?
Week 12: Friday November 17 Day 24	• Discuss deliverables. • Discuss the project proposal and details. • Focus on budgets and how to estimate budgets. • Focus on timelines and how to estimate timelines. • (May be on WebEx).	**Read**: Markel and Selber. Chapter 16: Writing Proposals. **Journal**: What is the "deliverable" in your upcoming project? Please pay particular attention to the sections about estimating budgets and timelines. How can you implement these strategies in your upcoming assignment?
Week 13: Tuesday November 21 Day 25	• What is scoping and framing and what is the issue with "problem framing" (see pages 121-122). • How does scoping and framing limit the issues that we address? • Whose interests are we centering when we frame our problems?	**Read**: Sasha Constanza-Chock: Chapter 3: Design Narratives: From TXTMob to Twitter.

	• 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?	
Week 13: Friday November 24	No Class for Fall Break	
Week 14: Tuesday November 28 Day 26	• Look at the TEDtalk examples you brought to class for participation points. • 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."	**Read:** Markel and Selber. Chapter 21: Oral Presentations. 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.
Week 14: Friday December 1 Day 27	**Peer Review of Project Proposal**	**Draft of Proposal Due**
Week 15: Tuesday December 5	• 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?	**Read:** Godwin Agboka "Participatory Localization: A Social Justice Approach to Navigating Unenfranchised/

Day 28	• How might you implement a participatory localization approach in the future?	Disenfranchised Cultural Sites."
Week 15: Friday December 8 Day 29	• Last Day of Classes • Oral Presentations	**Major Assignment: Proposals Due the beginning of class.** **Major Assignment: Oral Presentations done DURING class.**
Week 16: Tuesday December 12	Study Session [no assignments]	
Week 16: Thursday December 15		