On disciplinary writing and thinking and becoming an everyday scholar

The people I meet often think about writing in one of two ways: (1) “Ugh—I just can’t write,” or (2) “Writing is easy, and I’m planning to write a book when I can just find the time.” I don’t think either of these attitudes is right. I believe that good writing can be learned: it’s a skill, like tying your shoe or computing integral calculus. I also believe that truly amazing writing takes time, conscious effort and purpose, and sweat. I have been writing more than a decade. It’s never been easy. But, it has been doable. The thing about writing is this: it is shallow enough that anybody can do it, it’s learnable; and it is deep enough that I will spend my entire career learning and improving, and I’ll never be bored. The first rule about this class: you’re writers.

Simply put, this class is about disciplinary inquiry wrapped around a theoretical and practical foundation of technical communication. We will read a lot (yes, writing classes involve a good amount of reading; prepare yourselves for that); we will talk all the time (it’s important that we say out loud what we’re thinking in our heads); we will write of course; we will conduct writing workshops where we will share our writing (you need to be ready for this: I will not be the only person reading your writing); we will revise, revise, revise; finally, we’ll edit (the distinction between revising and editing is a big one, an important one; you’ll need to take notes). And the whole time, we will evaluate and reflect on the communication characteristics unique to our chosen disciplines and projects.
“We are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, moods, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field.”
—Jenny Edbauer, “Unframing Models of Public Distribution”

**ENG 3342:**
**TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION**

[ introduction ]

This is a professionally-oriented writing course. Students will develop individual processes for composing technical reports and documents (this includes assembling, organizing, drafting, and revising technical information for the production of written documents and oral reports suitable for internal/company use and public, non-expert communication).

In this class, students are invited and encouraged to critically investigate the scholarship of technical writing as well as the related field of rhetoric and composition, design, scientific or medical rhetoric, among others. To demonstrate a growing understanding of the concepts introduced by the course readings, students will develop and present on the theories and pedagogies of writing (composition) of their own disciplinary areas of interest.

This course is designed to help students mature as professional communicators through a variety of discourses. Approach this course, the material, and the other students with thoughtful consideration and meaningful effort, the skills learned in this class should transfer to areas both academic and professional. For an official description of this course, click [here](#).

[ what happens in ENG 3342 ]

Through a variety of discourses (we will discuss in class, online, asynchronously, via webcam) we will investigate a variety of topics, starting with technē, and moving on to technology in the workplace, internet texts, visual rhetoric and design, remix and reimagining, and other topics from related areas of interest that you may have. This class is based on praxis, the intersection of theory and practice. These concepts will lead us as we critically analyze and produce technical documents (primarily through discussion and exercises derived from cases provided by the reading materials, and our own research).

**3342 FAQ:**

The things everyone really wants to know but doesn’t exactly want to ask.

1. **Is this a hard class?**
   I like to call it challenging. I’m not interested in frying your brain. But I’m also not interested in being an “easy A.” This class should force you to push your limits.

2. **Will there be a lot of writing?**
   This is a writing class.

3. **Why do I have to take this class?**
   Glad you asked. In fact, that’s kind of the focus of this class: why does anyone need to be a good technical communicator? What is “good” anyway? I’m not going to give you an answer in this space, but I encourage you to use our class as a space for figuring that out. If, at the end of the semester, you still searching for an answer, we can discuss it one on one.

4. **Can I know my grade?**
   I will be using Bb grade book this semester. If you need something more than that, email me and I’m happy to discuss your progress.

5. **Is there a final exam? When?**
   This is a writing class and instead of a final exam, we have a final portfolio over your semester’s work.

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**OFFICE HOURS** are Tuesdays and Thursdays 9:00 am - 3:30 pm in ELABS 266 and on Zoom. Appointments are also available.
**materials**

Bring your materials every day and be prepared to use them. *How much would it suck to come to class but lose out on participation because you didn’t have your stuff?*

1. cloud storage (we will use Google Drive and One Drive (available through your email), but you may also want to have Dropbox or other cloud storage to keep your work);

2. a PDF reader (these are available for free);

3. access to the class texts (available through our class Bb website);

4. regular access to a computer with Internet and REMIND APP;

5. UTRGV email: I will email the class 1-3 times each week with anything from reminders to important info – you MUST check your email REGULARLY;

6. consider bringing a laptop or tablet to class with you; smartphones should work fine (otherwise, you may have to work with someone for in-class quick research);

7. you may need access to digital manipulation software (e.g. Photoshop).

**ONLINE sections won’t need these exact materials. Access to Bb and email will be most important.**

**individual topics**

In order to fully address the full scope of this class and all the tasks and assignments, you will focus on one of the following individual topics during the semester: your current major/area of study, your anticipated professional field, your current work or volunteer field, or your anticipated area of study (if you are as yet undecided or plan to continue your education into graduate school). This will lend some continuity to your work this semester.

**writing, revision, feedback**

Writing is a work in progress (despite what you may or may not have experienced in school so far). One of my goals this semester is to help you develop an idea of what that process is for you and your discipline. Here’s what I know: whatever the discipline and whatever the genre, there is always (or there should be) a process of creation and evaluation and remaking. This is, perhaps, one of the most crucial aspects of this course. As such, you should expect to meet with me, individually and in small groups, throughout the semester. While I will not assign grades to each stage of the writing process (other than participation), you will be required to rethink and revise (create and evaluate) parts or all of each writing assignment based on the feedback you receive from me and your peers. Keep track of your drafts and the changes you make. Doing this will contribute to a portfolio of your work that spans the whole semester.

**reading**

You are expected to read and respond to a considerable amount of scholarship and popular media, and then to contribute to discussions related to these readings. Don’t plan on skimming. Read thoroughly and annotate. Prepare questions and talking points for class. Be prepared to be a scholar.

**grades**

I am not a fan of what grades have become: achievements instead of measures of actual learning. I am more interested in what you take from this class than what grade you make. This is not to say that I don’t want you to get good grades. I do, as long as those grades translate into obtained knowledge and skills. That said, I am always happy to let you know where you stand in class and what you can do to demonstrate your progress.

“writers create readers and readers create writers”

–Lisa Ede & Andrea Lunsford, *Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked*
ASSIGNMENTS:
DESCRIPTIONS IN BRIEF

Your written work is a reflection of your capabilities and efforts and comprises the majority of your final grade. You are therefore expected to produce high-quality, sophisticated documents. Neatness, visual appeal, and mechanical and grammatical correctness are important (although these do not, alone, guarantee a well-made text, or a desirable grade). Your written documents should have appropriate margins, spacing, pagination, and formatting. Your productions in electronic and other media should be well-designed. In short: take pride in your writing and aim to produce professional-quality work.

[reading responses + reflections + participation] 20%
Our course is reading intensive and the success of our class really depends on engaging with our ideas and projects and texts. Over the semester you will need to respond to our reading (sometimes with a summary, sometimes with an analysis, sometimes with something more creative like a meme or a mind map). We will also take time to reflect on the content and our writing tasks. These specific moments comprise the course’s overall “participation.”

[email memo] 5%
Email is a primary mode of communication in professional settings. For our first assignment, you will compose an memo introducing yourself. You will also propose your “individual topic” for me to approve. The tone of your email will be professional, and the format will be based on your analysis of email genre conventions (and then you will use this format for all email communication this semester).

[audience analysis] 5%
Having a sense of the goals, values, and biases of your potential audiences can be useful knowledge when composing effective and efficient communication. Through these invention activities, you will analyze, predict, and invent various potential audiences for your projects. You will complete one analysis worksheet for both the written and remix iterations of the instructions document (detailed below).

[genre analysis] 15%
Students will analyze a text-based, written genre from their academic discourse community for its discursive and rhetorical features. The final draft will look like a little like an infographic.

[instructions document three ways, including user test design and usability report] 30%
You will plan, write, and test a technical document for an audience that will instruct them how to complete a task, develop a skill, or learn content related to your discourse community (the “individual topic” you chose at the beginning of the semester). This project will be the most writing-intensive assignment for this course, and thus will require significant planning, drafting, feedback, revision, and editing components. Students will be expected to theorize, discuss, and apply concepts of end-usability and author function throughout this process. You will design and conduct a user test for these instructions and write a usability report of the whole process. Then, you will “translate” your instructions document in two other ways: (1) as a YouTube video, and (2) a multimodal “remix.” See the assignment descriptions for more guidance.

[feedback] 10%
You will give your classmates feedback on their instructions document at least two times this semester, following the posted instructions.

[professionalization project] 15%
Students will develop a digital professional footprint. This will also serve as a portfolio of the work we have done this year. The platform is up to you (common choices are personal websites and LinkedIn profiles).

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GOALS FOR ENG 3342

[ state and institutional goals ]
Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Exemplary Objectives for Communication:
1. to understand and demonstrate writing and speaking processes through invention, organization, drafting, revision, editing, and presentation;
2. to understand the importance of specifying audience and purpose and to select appropriate communication choices;
3. to understand and appropriately apply modes of expression, i.e., descriptive, expository, narrative, scientific, and self-expressive in written, visual, and oral communication;
4. to participate effectively in groups with emphasis on listening, critical and reflective thinking, and responding;
5. to understand and apply basic principles of critical thinking, problem solving, and technical proficiency in the development of exposition and argument;
6. to develop the ability to research and write a documented paper and/or to give an oral presentation.

[ departmental goals ]
Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for English:
1. SLO1—Students will articulate the historical, theoretical, cultural, and/or personal significance of language and literature.
2. SLO2—Students will analyze and interpret a variety of texts, using a range of theoretical approaches and disciplinary modes of inquiry.
3. SLO3—Students will demonstrate a broad and foundational knowledge of the traditions of American, British, Ethnic, and/or World literatures by critically situating specific works of literature within these traditions.
4. SLO4—Students will write coherently and demonstrate a consistent use of the conventions of a variety of genres, including, but not limited to, the academic essay.
5. SLO5—Students will apply appropriate research methodologies to understand and/or illuminate specific questions about language and literature.
6. SLO6—Students will demonstrate information literacy through the use, analysis, and evaluation of appropriate resources, including, but not limited to, those found in electronic databases and websites.
7. SLO7—Students in certification tracks will demonstrate knowledge and skills in the areas of writing, literature, reading, oral communication, media literacy, and English language arts pedagogy.

[ instructor course objectives ]
1. to develop students’ appreciation for the power and possibilities of language (THECB 2, 3; SLO 1, 2, 3);
2. to encourage express themselves effectively in writing and composing (THECB 1, 2, 3, 5; SLO 1, 2, 3);
3. to foster increasing competence and confidence in writing (THECB 1, 2, 3, 5; SLO 1, 3);
4. to create a learners’ community by developing frequent opportunities for collaboration, oral communication, and exchange of ideas (THECB 4, 5; SLO 1, 3);
5. to introduce students to expectations for technical writing (THECB 5, 6; SLO 1, 3).

INSTRUCTOR and INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES

[ Attendance and Drop by Instructor Policy ]
“The student is expected to attend all classes and laboratory sessions. It is the responsibility of the student to inform each instructor of absences. When, however, in the judgment of the instructor, a student has been absent to such a degree as to impair his or her status relative to credit for the course, the instructor may drop the student from the class with a grade of ‘DP’ or ‘DF’” (HOP 5.2.4). For more information on university policies that affect you in terms of drops and such, see the chart at the end of this syllabus.

[ Late Work ]
Late work makes life hard for all of us, so don’t count on turning any in. If you know of an upcoming absence, complete and turn in your work early. The class is designed so that you can miss some work in an emergency without it destroying your standing in the class. But I can’t guarantee that late work will be accepted or graded. (Here’s the deal: I want to be a compassionate teacher and listener. I make late work decisions on a case by case basis and take prior performance into consideration.)

[ Materials in Class and Punctuality ]
Bring everything every day, and be on time. If we start an activity and you don’t have the necessary materials or walk in late, you won’t be able to constructively contribute to the work we do in class.

[ Accommodating Students with Disabilities ]
If you have a documented disability that will make it difficult for you to carry out the work as we have outlined and/or you need special accommodations/assistance because of the disability, please contact immediately the Disability Services Office (DSO), University Center Rm. 322. Appropriate arrangements and accommodations can be made. Verification of disability and processing for special services, such as note takers, extended time, separate accommodations for testing, is required and will be determined by DSO. Consult DSO Coordinator at (956) 316-7005.

[ Plagiarism and Academic Integrity Statement (department approved) ]
Dishonest acts, such as plagiarism (using words or a specific author’s ideas from another source without acknowledging the source) or collusion (having other people write parts of your paper for you), may result in an “F” on the assignment and may lead to a disciplinary hearing conducted through the office of the Dean of Students, which could result in suspension or expulsion from UTPA (this policy is consistent with the Student Conduct Code printed in the UTPA Student Guide). If you have questions about whether your use of other sources (such as books, websites, friends, writing center tutors) is fair or not, please ask before turning in the work that you have a question about.

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REFLECT: What questions or concerns do you have? Or, perhaps, what are you excited about?

THINK FORWARD: What do you bring to this class? What are you hoping to get out of this class?
SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT AS WE BECOME TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

Is this doodle “technical communication”? Why or why not? What does it mean to communicate information? How “good” or how specific does something need to be before we call it “technical communication”?

This doodle was drawn by Frank Gehry.

Frank Gehry is a world-famous architect, and this doodle became one of the renowned Guggenheim Museums. Google “Frank Gehry Guggenheim” and look at the different buildings he has designed. Much of his work begins as a doodle, just a few marks on a page. From those few marks, something brilliant comes.

And if he can do it, why not us?