

2018

Technical Writing

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Recommended Citation

(2018) "Technical Writing," *MAPWriting*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/mapwriting/vol3/iss1/5>

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Technical Writing

Student Projects Relate to Career Goals



Dr. Sergio Figueiredo

The Technical Writing course is a class focused on guiding students through the creation of technical documents for clients, consumers, and the general public. Some of the content discussed in the class includes the history, function, theory, and ethical practice of technical writing. Dr. Sergio Figueiredo teaches the course. In the following Q&A, he provides some insight into the course content and opportunities for professional development.

Could you provide a brief description of the Technical Writing course and your favorite part about teaching the course?

The purpose of the course is to professionalize students by covering the fundamental subjects that, in my opinion, inform all technical communication and applied writing practices. Practically, this means beginning with a discussion of the histories, philosophies, rhetorics, and ethics of technical communication. In addition, the course aims to prepare students to consider the ways in which research is a way of life in the field, how studies of workplaces and organizational cultures undergird communication practices, the need to develop effective collaborative practices, and how to present material in a way that functions most effectively for users.

My favorite part of teaching this course, though, is that I see it as a foundational course for students who identify Applied Writing as their primary track,

and that I get to professionalize students. And by professionalization, I do not mean some formalistic or standard practice of professional conduct. Rather, my sense of professionalization refers to something that taps into the strengths of each student. Seeing each student develop this sense of professionalization and professional conduct for themselves is probably the best part of teaching this course (other than hearing about students finding jobs using what they have learned in this course).

What sort of projects are developed in the class? What is your favorite one and why?

Some of the more common projects include case studies that apply technical communication theories/heuristics covered in the course, a project proposal or recommendation report for a public institution (e.g., government body), a style guide for a given publication, a handbook for a particular workplace, video tutorials/instructional videos, and the like. Some students, those with more academic interests, are given the option of completing, for their final project, a research essay that engages with some current conversation in the field, such as the role of social justice in technical communication practices. Other students have the option of developing more creative projects.

While I do not usually like to identify a “favorite” project, I do have one in mind that took me by surprise in the best of ways. The project combined elements of multiple topics we covered in the class—the history of the field, early frameworks of the field as it was being formalized that marginalized domestic work, and visual communication. The project built on research into Ibn Sina Avicenna’s poem from the 13th century that was used to transmit Arabian knowledge about medicine to Europe and the role poetry played in teaching pre-literate people (particularly women) how to take care of their bodies (hygiene)—basically, poetry functioned as a mnemonic device. The student, who was once trained as a fine artist and continued to work in the fine arts, built upon this history to develop a creative project that illustrated a series of these medieval poems designed for contemporary audiences.

Could you tell us about some of the student projects that have been created and have led to professional development opportunities beyond the classroom?

The one project that comes to mind is a project that emerged from one of my Web Content Development courses, there was a student who decided to develop the final project as a website revision for the Atlanta Public Schools After School Program. While that project didn't end up being adopted by the APS, that project did set the groundwork for that student's capstone project—a website redesign for a small business, including payment systems. The student completed a full audit of the website, prepared a recommendation report and proposal for a revised version of the business's website, completed a revision of the website for that business, and a handbook for how to maintain and update the website for the business owner. That website redesign was adopted by the business and is currently in use. Similar projects have emerged in the Desktop Publishing and Document Design course I've taught over the past 6 years, including menu redesigns, a visual style guide for a press, and redesigned flyers for student organizations.

In my Technical Writing this semester (Spring 2018), one student has used what he's learned in the course to apply for a technical writing position with a large software company in another state. That student's application resulted in a successful interview that has resulted in a follow-up interview on-site—the company is flying the student in for an in-person interview.

In addition to hands-on experience with technical writing, what other professional development opportunities have you seen the students develop throughout their time in the class?

MAPW students have a lot of opportunities for professional development on campus. One of our students has adapted material from their coursework to develop the *MAPWriting* magazine and to secure a position working with the KSU Digital Commons as a GRA. Another student, from a few years back, started a small business focusing on providing editing and tutoring services to individuals and small businesses. That business was the result of a course project developing promotional materials for a surfing education business, which the student continued to work on beyond the semester in which the course was taught.

Have you taught or will you be teaching any other classes that may have a similar approach to professional development like technical writing? If so, could you provide some info about them?

I've taught three additional courses in the MAPW that are designed for professional development, including Desktop Publishing and Document Design (PRWR

6550), Web Content Development (PRWR 6850), and Writing for Social Media (PRWR 6570). In the Fall 2018 term, I'll be teaching PRWR 6550 in a new format: Design for Publication—this new format reflects the MAPW faculty's decision to update the course to better reflect the kinds of professions for which we aim to prepare students. Design for Publication will focus on preparing students to work as designers and production editors for presses, including for presses that publish novels and nonfiction print books, ebooks, and projects that treat the book as a part of the story experience (i.e., J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *The Ship of Theseus*). Since I work as a production editor for an academic press, student will have the opportunity to work with me on books in the production stage of the publishing process.

The Web Content Development course is also being updated to be a Multimodal Composition course, which will focus on producing multimedia writing projects for a variety of industries beyond book publishing. The last time I taught this course, I taught it as a Multimedia Composition course that focuses on new media forms, including webtexts, audio, and video projects. One student in this course developed a podcast that was featured on the KSU homepage as an example of what industries the MAPW can help prepare students to enter.

In the Fall 2017 semester, I taught a version of the Writing for Social Media course focused on Mobile Storytelling and Public Memory. In this course, students develop augmented reality stories for a host of purposes, including tourism and creative nonfiction. While the professional development aspect of this course may not be as obvious, the works students composed were fascinating. One student explored the potential of mobile and locative media to help develop fundraising practices for nonprofits; one student explored the potential of mobile media to explore the legacies of racism in their hometown; and one student explored the potential of mobile storytelling to encourage citizens to consider the local myths of their hometown (ghost stories).

The courses I teach are designed to allow students to develop their projects that relate to their career goals, which is why I tend to focus on theoretical understandings of how new media and experimental composition practices can be used to extend the work they are already familiar and comfortable completing. Professionalization is not just about learning the standards and best practices of a field, but also about learning those fields in order to discover how they may contribute new approaches and practices to how those fields function. As professionals, we are not meant to maintain the status quo of our fields; professionals attempt to innovate and add something new to how people working in those field do the work that they do.