



## COM 313 – Technical Writing (Section H01, Honors) Fall 2024

**Classroom:** Faculty Memorial Hall, FMH 305

**Tuesdays & Thursdays, 2:30pm – 3:50pm**

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### Instructor information

#### Name

**Michael Laudenbach, PhD**  
*Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences*

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#### Contact Info

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#### Office location

**Cullimore Hall 310 (in the music technology hallway)**

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#### Office hours

**TR, 12:30pm – 2:15pm, or another time by request**  
**I'm also happy to meet over Zoom.**

### Course Description

This is an advanced writing course combining theory with practice to prepare students as technical writers. Students will analyze complex communication situations and design appropriate responses through tasks that involve problem solving, rhetorical theory, document design, oral presentations, ethical considerations and gender equity issues.

Technical writing describes the process of turning complex knowledge into usable forms to be shared with colleagues and peers, or less-expert audiences, like community stakeholders. To be effective technical writers, we must learn to do so across genres and media, and with a keen sense of audience, purpose, contexts, and constraints. In this course, you will sharpen your abilities to communicate information effectively, ethically, and authentically to people with different expectations and readers with specific needs.

### Learning Objectives

- Learn and apply methods of textual and rhetorical analysis to identify patterns in professional and technical writing genres, as well as describe the impact of those patterns on readers.
- Understand genres as recurring rhetorical situations, shaped by discourse communities and historical/cultural contexts.
- Develop and apply an understanding of how a document's organization, labels, formatting, and overall design strategies contribute to its effectiveness.
- Develop and apply strategies for making complex information accessible to non-expert audiences in both oral and written communication contexts.
- Improve your writing and develop a polished and professional prose style that varies appropriately according to audience, purpose, and context.
- Draw on and apply research on how people read and use documents.

- Increase your skill in writing collaboratively with others.
- Practice being a more reflective writer, aware of and able to articulate your own writing decisions.

## Required Materials (nothing!) and Learning Resources

- There are no required books to purchase. All readings will be uploaded and distributed via Canvas.
- We will supplement our learning with digital tools designed at Carnegie Mellon University and tested in prior writing classrooms to confirm impact on learning.
  - *DocuScope Classroom* is a tool for visualizing and analyzing rhetorical choices in text. We will use this tool to analyze sample texts and drafts of our own work.
  - *myProse* is a tool that uses a constrained large language model (GPT-4) to help you turn your notes into complete sentences and paragraphs.

## Grade Assessment

Final course grades will follow NJIT's scale, which does ***not*** include A+ or any minuses.

A = 90 or above    B+ = 87-89    B = 80-86    C+ = 77-79    C = 70-76    D = 60-69    F = less than 60

The final course grade will be calculated using the following categories. On Canvas, you can view the assignments and their point values:

<u><b>Deliverable</b></u>	<u><b>Weight</b></u>
Short Assignments (homework, in-class activities, low-stakes tasks, etc.)	25%
Project 1: Job Application Package	20%
Project 2: Policy or Funding Proposal	20%
Project 3: Technical Presentation	20%
Project 4: Instructional Document	15%

*Please note that the total point value for each individual project includes drafts, peer reviews, and reflections preceding the final project.*

## Academic Integrity

We will have thorough and considered conversations about academic integrity, plagiarism, and what it means to synthesize knowledge and cite sources in different contexts. Ultimately, if you are presenting someone else's work as your own in a writing course, you are only doing yourself a disservice. Here is the university's official language:

"Academic Integrity is the cornerstone of higher education and is central to the ideals of this course and the university. Cheating is strictly prohibited and devalues the degree that you are working on. As a member of the NJIT community, it is your responsibility to protect your educational investment by knowing and following the academic code of integrity policy that is found at: [NJIT Academic Integrity Code](#).

Please note that it is my professional obligation and responsibility to report any academic misconduct to the Dean of Students Office. Any student found in violation of the code by cheating, plagiarizing or using any online software inappropriately will result in disciplinary action. This may include a failing grade of F, and/or suspension or dismissal from the university. If you have any questions about the code of Academic Integrity, please contact the Dean of Students Office at [dos@njit.edu](mailto:dos@njit.edu)."

## Description of Major Projects

### **Project 1: Job Application Package**

#### **Communicating Professional Expertise to Employers**

Write and design a set of documents (résumé + cover letter, or personal statement) that narrate your professional skills for a real-world audience of busy but invested readers

### **Project 2: Policy or Funding Proposal**

#### **Persuading Decision-Makers to Fund or Support an Initiative**

Identify an existing problem in your disciplinary field of interest and write a proposal for a new policy or a modification to an existing policy that addresses the problem. Alternatively, you may choose to instead identify a real-world problem or project that needs decision-makers' support. Write a proposal that details why your idea is worth their time and/or funds.

### **Project 3: "Tech Talk" Presentation**

#### **Giving Informative Technical Talks to Public Audiences**

In no more than three or four minutes, and with well-designed slides, engage and inform a non-expert audience on a technical matter that you are familiar with or a project that you've contributed to. This can

### **Project 4: Technical Instructions**

#### **Helping Novice Users Navigate Something Using "How To" Documents**

In small teams, write, design, user test, and revise a set of "how to" procedural documents that help a real-world user accomplish a task successfully.

***Note: For Projects 2, 3, and 4 in this course you will be selecting topics that you authentically care about, so start brainstorming early!***

## Grading & Attendance Policies

Occasionally, and if it benefits the whole class, I will offer extensions to everyone and announce them in advance. **Late work that has not been granted an extension will receive feedback but lower points.**

I do **not** deduct points from your grade for missing class. However, other aspects of your grade are affected by in-class participation and completion of daily tasks. We meet 28 times total this semester. Everyone gets a free day or two without penalty to account for inevitabilities, but if you start to willingly miss class for no good reason, your grade will likely suffer.

Excused absences are reserved for documented professional commitments, illness, or religious observances; as with any other professional context, make requests for excused absences in courteous advance. When you miss class for something unforeseen, send me an email whenever you are able. Use your best professional judgment here: what's most important is your acknowledgement that you have looked on Canvas and know what you need to do for the upcoming class. If you are uncertain about something, let me know.

## General Expectations & Resources

- We should arrive on time for class, whenever possible.
- We should be present for each other's ideas and should listen to understand first rather than to evaluate first.
- We should listen to each other with assumptions of good will, respect, and charitable intention.
- We should use inclusive, invitational language to build a class community that does not alienate but rather says promotes the diversity of thought, culture, and identity. If anyone feels that we are not building an inclusive and safe

culture within our class, please talk to me so that we can do better. And if you do not think you can talk to me about concerns, you can always reach out to your advisor or report concerns to the

- Students and teachers should deliver written work on time. If the work is not on time, we should communicate with each other about the lateness.
- Students and teachers should communicate about problems or concerns that arise. If students feel uncomfortable about an aspect of the course, they should share that concern with the teacher. Concerns can be about anything specific to our course material, pace, rigor, or classroom interactions.

### **Accessibility Accommodations**

As your teacher, I want to empower you to become your own advocate for your learning. If there are improvements that I can make in class to help you access material more easily, please tell me. I'm happy to do anything to improve your learning experience.

If you have needs that require more formal accommodations, you can contact the **Office of Accessibility Resources and Services** at [OARS@NJIT.EDU](mailto:OARS@NJIT.EDU), or visit the office in Kupfrian Hall 201 to discuss your specific needs. According to their website, "a Letter of Accommodation Eligibility from the office authorizing student accommodations is required."

### **Inclusive Language**

In this class, we will talk *a lot* about how our words impact the world around us. I take a reader-oriented, people-first view of language and standards, and I encourage you to make decisions about your written language choices according to how your reader may respond. This view means that we use language to connect with a community of readers and that we do not use language which might exclude or alienate anyone. When we communicate, we do not want to create an "othering" effect with our language. One more recent example for writing inclusively is to use non-binary gendered pronouns. The emerging convention for using gendered pronouns is that we should consider writing in a rhetorically inclusive style.

The National Council of Teachers in English (NCTE) gives us some examples on their website [for gender neutral language: http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang](http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang). Whenever possible, we aim to use our language to build connection with our audience. Using inclusive language can help us make that connection.

**Note:** Language conventions are tricky and situated in various social contexts—they are almost never simple. In other words, reason about them. Ask people how they want to be referenced in your writing. Don't apply language formulas.

### **Guidelines for Self-Care (C-CAPS)**

This semester should be challenging, engaging, and fruitful. However, don't be embarrassed if you're having trouble staying afloat. Ask for help. All of us benefit from support during times of struggle. You are not alone.

The busier we get, the easier it is to forget about maintaining a healthy mental state. If you are struggling and need course-related assistance or accommodations, please do not hesitate to reach out to me for a request—no personal details needed.

There are many helpful resources available on campus, including the [Center for Counseling and Psychological Services](https://www.njit.edu/counseling/) (C-CAPS). Here is a quote from their web page (<https://www.njit.edu/counseling/>):

“Personal issues, family, emotional, and other concerns can be challenging and may impact your academic, personal, and overall functioning. C-CAPS provides safe, non-judgmental, and confidential services including individual and group counseling and workshops.

Staffed by psychologists and professional counselors, C-CAPS can help with the transitions and stresses of college life and other psychological concerns or difficulties.

Services provided are in a hybrid manner – remotely via phone, video conferencing, and in-person. Initial consultation meetings are typically held remotely. To schedule a meeting with C-CAPS, contact (973) 596-3414 or email [counseling@njit.edu](mailto:counseling@njit.edu).”

While it's easier said than done, you can make proactive choices so that you can act with resilience as you face the unfolding demands and expectations of college life. Being resilient means that you can bounce back from setbacks and disappointments and that you can take on somewhat intimidating tasks. Resilient people make sure that they get sleep, eat a variety of foods, stay connected with friends, and get some physical exercise.

**There are a variety of campus resources meant to support your well-being if you experience hardships like housing or food insecurity. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the CAPS team or myself for help.**

### **Use of Technology in the Classroom**

We will frequently need to access Canvas, Google Docs, and other online spaces for our activities and analyses for this course. You should bring a laptop or tablet to each class. While using your devices, please be courteous of your peers and instructor and **refrain from engaging in activities on your devices that may distract others (and you!)**. Professional use of technology is instrumental for professional communication, and fostering those good habits starts in the classroom.

Personally, I **do not** believe in policing the use of large language models (LLMs) or restricting your access from useful tools like Grammarly. In fact, we will be working with some of these tools during the semester. We will have discussions about the affordances and drawbacks of generative AI tools, as well as critical discussions surrounding AI ethics. These tools have many pitfalls, including a , but they are powerful enough to produce (mostly) convincing output. Still, that output is dogged by erroneous claims and a somewhat stale style of writing. These points of critique will be explored during weeks 5 & 6, and we will consult recent research literature to do so.

This course is meant for you to practice identifying rhetorical and linguistic strategies that you can put into your writing toolbox. Your use of tools like ChatGPT for text generation—not content generation—will only be strengthened by practicing the writing *yourself* in this course, applying principles to the other classes you may be taking this semester. If you rely on generative AI rather than engage with the course material and activities, you would only be doing yourself a disservice.

**To put it more formally: you may use LLMs, but if you do, you must cite the model and explain how you used it in your writing process. If you present machine-generated text as your own, you are engaging in plagiarism, and I will need to follow the procedures described in the above section on academic integrity.** (I can tell you that, if I were to assess it as your own work, a purely LLM-generated paper would not receive a high grade, no matter how good your prompt engineering may be. We will talk about this more over the course of the semester.)

## Course Schedule (Abridged)

Theme/Topic	Major Projects Due
Week 1 – Technical Writing & Rhetorical Analysis	
Week 2 – Writing & designing usable and skim-able documents	
Week 3 – Reader-oriented design for job market materials	Project 1 DRAFT
Week 4 – Editing and assessing linguistic choices	Project 1 FINAL
Week 5 – Exploring large language models (LLMs) & critical approaches to AI	
Week 6 – Communicating novelty, expertise, and credibility in proposals	
Week 7 – The Importance of Brevity in Communication: Emails, Executive Summaries, Data Reports	Project 2 DRAFT
Week 8 – Strategies for Accommodating Technical Information for Non-Experts	
Week 9 – Slide Design	Project 2 FINAL
Week 10 – Proposal Presentations	Project 3 FINAL
Week 11 – Designing instructional materials	
Week 12 – Social research methods and user-testing	
Week 13 – Synthesizing research as a team (Thanksgiving Break)	Project 4 PROGRESS REPORT
Week 14 – Group Conferences	
Week 15 – Writing Workshop & Course Wrap-Up!	Project 4 FINAL (due during finals week)  <i>This class does <b>not</b> have a final exam.</i>