

Introduction

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GOALS AND KEY FEATURES OF THIS RESOURCE BOOK

Designed for teachers of introductory technical communication courses, this book has four primary goals, each of which are tied to a key feature of the text:

- **to provide teachers key performance outcomes around which they can structure technical communication courses:** each chapter focuses on one or more key performance outcomes considered important by recognized scholars and experienced teachers of technical communication. (See the “Outcome” identified at the beginning of each chapter.) Teachers are encouraged to choose from this longer list to assemble a set of outcomes appropriate for their local institution, situation, students, and curricula.
- **to give teachers evidence they can use for shaping their technical communication class:** the resource book identifies arguments that business and industry leaders have made in support of each chapter’s performance outcome. (See the section entitled “What Business and Industry Tell Us” in each chapter.) Each chapter also examines these arguments in the context of contemporary academic research in technical communication. (See the section entitled “What Academic Research Tells Us” in each chapter.)
- **to provide teachers with overviews of assignment sequences designed to address targeted outcomes with students:** each chapter of this resource book provides teachers with an overview of an assignment sequence that will help them address the targeted outcome that serves as the focus of the chapter. (See the “Assignment Sequence” section of each chapter.) This overview explains how experienced teachers of technical communication approach and work through the assignment sequence.

- **to provide teachers assignment materials and sample texts for each performance outcome:** in the appendices of each chapter, this resource book provides assignment sheets, activity worksheets, additional materials, and samples of student work that teachers can use in connection with the assignment. (See the appendices for each chapter.)

WHY WE CREATED THIS RESOURCE BOOK

The authors of the following chapters have written this book because, like most teachers, we care about good teaching. We also think that students in technical communication courses deserve the very best instruction our profession can provide. For this reason, we have attempted to create a book that provides teachers of introductory general education courses in technical communication with a rich series of creative and carefully crafted resources for their classrooms. We have tried to provide resources that will meet the needs of both teachers and students, and that will fill some important gaps in contemporary courses of this kind.

Why did we tackle this specific project? Why shape it as we did? The teacher/scholars in this collection have experiences teaching technical communication in four-year- and two-year-college settings, institutions characterized by technical and liberal arts curricula, and departments that specialize in technical communication and teach that course as one among many writing courses. In doing this work, we have observed some things that have encouraged us to formulate our approach in this book:

1. We have noticed that many teachers of the introductory course in technical communication want an alternative to designing their course around the typical chapters of a textbook: writing reports, writing memoranda, creating charts and graphs, etc. In this book, we provide such alternatives, organizing each chapter around one or more key performance outcomes for students that some twenty experienced teacher/scholars consider important to address in the introductory technical communication classroom. One key goal of this book is to offer teachers a range of innovative pedagogical approaches and resources from which to choose.

We understand, of course, that good teachers will tailor their instruction to specific student populations, department goals, and institutional missions, and that they will not subscribe to *all*, or even *most*, of the outcomes we have identified in these chapters. The goal is to provide teachers with a relatively broad range of such outcomes from which they can choose some options, designing a course that meets their needs and the needs of students. Teachers can select those outcomes around which they want to focus their technical communication class, choosing from the longer list at the end of this Introduction.

2. We have noticed that many teachers often find introductory courses in technical communication less than engaging, less than amenable to creative approaches. We believe this situation persists, in part, because it is difficult to find a collection that samples some of the most engaging assignments that teachers are now providing students in these courses. Although some of this work takes place in contemporary textbooks, most of which are packed full of valuable and useful information, such

volumes are generally written by a single author and, thus, are focused around the vision and pedagogical approaches of one person, even when the author's thinking is informed by the best work in the field. While we do not want to duplicate the efforts of some very fine textbooks, we know of no resource collection that focuses on the best technical communication assignments by a range of experts in the field.

For this reason, we have designed this book to accompany a wide range of the technical communication textbooks that teachers are now using for the introductory course. We have also recruited the perspectives of specialists in technical communication, visual rhetoric, usability studies, technology studies, junior-college pedagogies, media studies, professional editing, workplace writing, collaboration and teamwork, oral communication, and writing in the disciplines.

3. We have observed that many students who take the introductory course in technical communication consider the class more as a requirement to get out of the way than a course that will prove critical to their success after graduation—and that they let their teachers know their opinion on this score! To address this situation, we have included a rich set of specific performance outcomes culled from contemporary business and industry sources. We hope that teachers can use this information to convince students of the importance of individual performance outcomes. We have also set this information within the context of academic findings that have some bearing on the target outcome. We hope such sources will provide teachers valuable help in understanding why they would want to shape a course around any particular set of outcomes. We also hope that teachers will find both the evidence from business and industry, and that from academic sources, to be useful in conversations with colleagues about the similar courses and the basic design of technical-communication courses.

4. We have noticed that some teachers of the introductory technical-communication course have few departmental and institutional venues in which they can share assignments, approaches, and questions about their courses. But good teachers are *always* interested in more good assignments and seeing what other professionals do in their courses. Teachers of technical-communication courses are no different. To this end, we have assembled assignments and instructional materials that teachers can use in the introductory technical-communication classroom to address targeted performance outcomes. We hope teachers will modify these instructional materials in ways that supplement, expand, or extend the materials contained in the textbooks they already use. And we hope they will share their successes with other teachers. We have tried to feature assignments that communicate via *multiple* channels of meaning—not only through words, but also through images, graphic elements, and design elements.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHORS IN THIS COLLECTION

Although they come from institutions from around the country, all of the authors represented in this collection have taught (at one time or another and in one capacity or another) at Michigan Technological University—or they have studied with a faculty member who did.

Michigan Tech is a relatively small institution in the Upper Peninsula, but one known for its technical and engineering curricula. Its scientific and technical communication curricula has been formed, to a great extent, around the intellectual vision of faculty scholars such as Jim Kalmbach, Marilyn Cooper, Anne Wysocki, Dickie Selfe, and, Art Young, who served as the Chair of the Department of Humanities from 1978–1995. From Michigan Tech, Art went on to fill the very first endowed chair of Technical Communication in the country—the Robert S. Campbell Chair at Clemson University.

Many of the contributors to this book have been graduate students in Michigan Tech’s Rhetoric and Technical Communication program. Johndan Johnson-Eilola, for example, was the first Ph.D. to graduate from this program, and Stuart Selber was the second. All of these former students—whom we now are very proud to call colleagues—have made their own very productive mark on the profession of composition studies. Like Teresa Kynell Hunt and Karla Kitalong, Danielle DeVoss, Gary Bays (who was a graduate student at Michigan Tech before we even had a graduate program), Patty Ericsson, and Jerry Savage, they have authored key articles and books that have helped other teachers and scholars understand various aspects of a large and varied field. Like Michael Moore, Michael Martin, Ann Kitalong-Will, and Pete Praetorius, they have played important leadership roles of one kind or another at their institutions and in the professional organizations to which they belong. Like Jennifer Sheppard and Tracy Bridgeford, they have made new kinds of connections and contributions to our thinking and our practice. Like Summer Smith Taylor (who studied with Stuart Selber and now works with Art Young) they have become good friends and marvelous colleagues.

All of these people, we are proud to say, have helped shape the thinking of our field in highly productive ways.

We dedicate this book to Michigan Tech and to the Department of Humanities, which has given a rich set of resources to us all.