



Department of

Technical Communication

Mercer University

TCO Factsheet, Mercer University

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Technical Communication is an Exciting Career Field

Technical communication is broad, rapidly expanding career field. Every type of industry uses technologies and needs to communicate well with many constituents. That means that they all need technical communicators!

Historically, the field was limited to writers and editors. While many jobs still require these skills, the field has grown by leaps and bounds. Today technical communicators may also specialize in graphics and design, multimedia, instructional design and training, interface design and usability, or knowledge manager. The job market remains promising into the foreseeable future since technology continues to infiltrate every area of our lives.

Technical Communication is a Recognized program

Mercer University School of Engineering's Bachelor of Science degree in technical communication, established in 1991, was the first in the Southeast. It has received national recognition as a model program in *Education in Scientific and Technical Communication: Academic Programs That Work* (Keene, 1997). The technical communication department (TCO) also offers a respected Master of Science degree in technical communication management. Targeted towards working professionals who want to be leaders in their companies, the MS degree is offered entirely by distance learning to students from around the world.

Every TCO faculty member holds a doctorate degree and is active in professional societies and scholarship. They serve in leadership roles for professional societies, such as the IEEE Professional Communication Society. They have received awards and recognition for significant contributions to the Society for Technical Communication. They are also active in American Society for Engineering Education and others. Because of their hard work and the excellence of the graduates, Mercer's TCO program is recognized around the country.

Technical Communication Job Areas

Technical communication graduates are in demand in a wide variety of job areas, such as:

- Multimedia—web design, graphic design, video production, instructional design for computer-based delivery
- Documentation—computer software, business processes, research and test results, corporate policies, ISO 9000 and other quality assurance
- Marketing & Public Relations—brochures, newsletters, product materials, publicity and outreach, media promotions and advertising, corporate communication, human resources

- IT Support—help desks, instructions and manuals, training development and delivery, hardware and software support, technology management
- Knowledge Management—intranet development, corporate planning, knowledge capture, best practices, user and task analysis, information development and distribution
- Manufacturing—process and product quality assurance, testing and design, business practices, organizational communication, information management
- Instructional Design & Training—corporate training, process development and implementation, instructional products and delivery, assessment of learning
- Education & Public Service—course development, technology support, media consultant, community services management and promotions, public health delivery, training
- Defense-related Industries—proposals, reports, documentation, instructional design and training, electronic performance support
- Usability—task analysis, user advocacy, usability testing, product improvement, interface design

Skills of Technical Communicators

Combining strengths in both the technical and human areas, technical communicators bring a wide variety of skills to many informational tasks. BS graduates will be minimally competent in all these skills, while MS students will be able to take leadership roles.

- **Writers & Editors**—skilled in understanding the specific audience and purpose for any communication product; able to write for print documents or for online information; adept at integrating visual and verbal communication; able to document highly technical products and manage information development processes involving teams; skilled in proposals and technical reports
- **Designers**—talented in graphics and visual communication; able to apply creativity in a practical, usable product; skilled in understanding parameters for implementing designs in a work setting; able to connect with target audiences and deliver on time; skilled in developing and integrating many types of media
- **Project Managers**—experienced in analyzing and managing communication processes throughout the life of a project; able to communicate effectively up and down the chain of command; skilled at breaking tasks into small units and creating timelines; strong team players or leaders; adept at documenting projects
- **Instructional Designers & Trainers**—able to apply cognitive theory to real-world practice; learner-focused and practical; skilled users of different media to fit the learner's needs; able to assess knowledge and convey information effectively; quick learners of technical products or processes who can immediately teach others; strong collaborative skills
- **Usability Specialists**—able to evaluate products and processes in terms of user needs; skilled in applying appropriate testing procedures that are cost-effective and promote improvements; experts in analyzing web-based or

paper-based products for usability and functionality; able to work with design teams to develop superior products and avoid re-work

- ***IT Support Specialists***—skilled in trouble-shooting applications, systems or processes; able to design help systems appropriate to the task and environment; advocates for users of IT and equipment; developers of training and documentation for people and products

- ***Information Designers***—knowledge managers who can design information portals, intranets, kiosks, etc., for information delivery to many audiences; aware of cultural and international constraints on communication; able to create information once to be used many times; creative producers of usable information for target audiences

By careful advising and working with individual students, faculty advisors help students select courses that will provide not only a solid broad foundation, but also some specialization within the field. Thus, students may select a minor in business, information technology systems, languages, graphic arts, and many other areas.

Technical Communication Class Projects

In every TCO majors class, the primary term project is a real-world problem to solve. Students have designed newsletters and brochures for industries; developed instructional materials for clients; created and edited web sites; developed CDs and videos; completed technical editing of articles for professionals; tested industry-developed products for usability; prepared research reports on knowledge management; and developed and presented training for clients and faculty. Because of this experience, students graduate with an impressive portfolio of products to demonstrate their skills.

Technical Communication Ties to Industry

Mercer's TCO Department maintains close ties with industries and practitioners around the country.

- Faculty members have experience working and consulting in industry. In addition, they teach practitioners in the MS program and keep abreast of current trends and practices.
- Alumni are located in a wide variety of jobs and companies. They belong to a departmental e-mail distribution list and share job-related information with each other, with young students, and with faculty.
- Students work for a full semester in an industry internship and deliver a report and a seminar upon completion of that work semester. Students, faculty, and other employers are invited to attend.
- Employers regularly contact the TCO Department with job opportunities; in addition, they provide valuable feedback to the department on the quality of the programs.

More than 150 companies have hired interns and graduates of the BS and MS programs. The TCO department keeps in touch with employers and facilitates contacts with students. Keeping up to date with research and theory while maintaining close ties with industry, the TCO department provides exemplary education and resources for its students.

Every student in the BS degree program is expected to work full time for at least one semester in some area of technical communication. This work experience allows them to apply classroom knowledge and to extend their capabilities for making immediate contributions to business and industry. Students are universally rated by their employers as having extremely high levels of communication skills, work ethic, knowledge of technology, and teamwork.

Technical Communication is Grounded in Engineering

Though many technical communication programs are located in schools of arts & humanities, Mercer's TCO Department is located within the School of Engineering. Just as engineers take science and mathematics and apply them to solving real-world problems, so technical communicators take principles of communication and apply them to solving real-world information problems.

Being located within engineering provides many benefits to students:

1. Strong foundational knowledge of mathematics, sciences, and engineering
2. Focus on real-world problems and solutions for class projects
3. Rigorous analysis and problem-solving strategies
4. Mastery of a wide array of technologies
5. Experience serving on teams with engineers and computer specialists

Technical Communication Future Options

Not only is TCO an effective program for careers in technical communication, but it also prepares graduates for advanced study in many fields. Currently, a large percentage of graduates who have been out more than 5 years have enrolled in graduate programs:

- MBA
- Law
- Human Computer Interface
- Management Information Systems
- Instructional Technology
- Technical Communication Management

Because of the breadth of the field, students have the freedom to specialize at the master's or doctoral levels. Highly motivated and well prepared, TCO graduate excel in graduate programs.

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