**Professional Writing and Rhetoric**

**Comprehensive Exam Questions and Justifications**

English, Professional Writing

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For my comprehensive exam, I chose to focus on technical editing and digital literacy, along with readings that provide a foundation for technical communicators. From the start of undergrad, I knew I wanted to pursue editing, and I discovered a love for digital editing/web design during an internship at a small local paper. I have been enrolled in four semesters of graduate coursework, which have reinforced my interests. And while we do not have classes on digital literacy/design, my interest in that area remained as well. While I was able to take a course in technical editing, a course in digital literacy/design was not offered. My reading list enabled me to explore these interests beyond what I have learned in the classroom and previous experiences. The following questions comprise a variety of issues within technical communication, from defining the field to the evolution of technical editing.

**Question 1:**

How is flexibility both a problem and a solution for defining technical communication? Discuss factors that impact defining the field of technical communication, like humanism, positivism, the history of the field, and other related concepts.

*Rationale:*

Despite the field of technical communication’s running history of failed attempts to define itself, scholars continue to discuss new approaches, calling upon previous definitions to do so. Technical communication practitioners draw upon their experiences, niches within the field, and previous definitions to add their own input on how the field should define itself. The issue of a definition has become a point of conflict within the field. Miller, Rutter, and Dobrin provide a theoretical based approach to defining the field. The history of the field and its movement between different theories; such as the window-pane theory, humanism, positivism, and alternity; shows the constant evolution of the field. For example, one of the first textbooks, “A Guide to Technical Writing” by T. A. Rickard, was primarily meant for practitioning engineers, but it was the precursor for the textbooks used in college courses today. Much of a technical writer’s work involves research and working with others in the field, as well as working with those outside the field. Technical writers serve as mediums for conveying information to diverse audiences. Because of this role, the field has evolved from conveying the work of the scientific and engineering fields in the early 1900s. This development and diversification of the field led to early definitions quickly becoming insufficient, as well as difficulties in the task of redefining. Jo Allen provides a basis for a growth mindset towards not defining the field, pulling on the recurring issues with attempts at definitions, including a short discussion of the need for flexibility. Henning and Bemer take the idea of flexibility further, combining it with their opinion that a definition will provide power and legitimacy to the field.

Exploring the idea of flexibility in technical communication is beneficial for understanding not just the debate around defining the field, but also the role of the technical writer. We must be flexible in our writing, research, work with others, etc. In order to fully understand this flexibility, an understanding of the field’s history is necessary. Having the ability to discuss technical communications history and the importance of flexibility helps me explain my diverse field to others. To form a response to question one, texts within *Central Works in Technical Communication* will primarily be used. These texts will provide a basis for my discussion of the history of technical communication, but also a breakdown of different theories within the field. Then, my response will rely heavily upon Allen and Henning and Bemer’s discussions of flexibility and the power and legitimacy we gain from a flexible definition.

**Question 2:**

Provide an overview of the definition of digital literacy and its evolution. Include comparisons with related literacies, such as information literacy, media literacy, and multicultural literacy. Describe the role of these literacies in technical communication.

*Rationale:*

Technical communication has moved almost entirely from the print to the digital platform within the last thirty years. Computers and the internet started largely for the government’s benefit before becoming more accessible to the general public, but they remain tools for engaging in business and professional activities. Technical writing in the digital space can vary from blog posts to academic articles to memos. And with these diverse forms came the need for technological advancements in word processing and the development of new platforms. But this does not mean that writing in these digital spaces is the same as print writing. Hall discusses the differences and overlaps that digital writing encompasses, including backlighting, text size, multimedia, and formatting. In addition to these aspects came a need for the consideration of what it means to be literate in this new digital form. In technical writing, digital literacy encompasses not just the writing itself but also the relationship between the text, other forms of media, and social contexts. Bawden discusses these issues in-depth, positing that four core competencies are key to successfully navigating digital writing: internet searching, hypertext navigation, knowledge assembly, and content evaluation. As a technical writer, I do not solely need to be able to read and comprehend complex information, I also need to be able to complement digital forms and resources with one another, which requires digital literacy.

Digital literacy and its history, as well as its association with other literacies, is important because today’s society and job market require technical writers to have a savviness for working in digital spaces. In addition, understanding this history will aid in disproving the belief that digital writing has largely eradicated print writing, as Ashton, Bower, and Hollyman point out. In order to answer question 2, I will examine the evolution of digital writing and the associated literacies using *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*, *Digital Literacy for Technical Communication: 21st Century Theory and Practice*, and *The Business of Digital Publishing: An Introduction to the Digital Book and Journal Industries*. Additionally, I’ll be using articles by Rife and Rajesh, Singh, and Someswar to discuss the implications of these literacies for technical writers.

**Question 3:**

Technical and professional communication is often portrayed as being objective writing. Discuss the implications of this characterization. Argue whether or not research in TPC challenges or confirms this portrayal of objectivity.

*Rationale:*

This question asks me to consider if technical writing is objective. In analyzing this, I can discuss the application of ethics in technical communication, as well as the implications on a larger scale, such as for teaching TC. Both of these are important concerns: applying ethics leads to better understanding of audience and purpose in my writing, while the implications allow me to look at what applying these ethical views will mean for technical writing as a whole. There are typically two sides of TC, practitioning and teaching technical communicators, though the roles can and often do overlap. This question is important beyond just our writing it asks us to look at what role we are playing and how it impacts our readers and our students.

To answer this question, I would first start by discussing what types of roles technical communicators typically play in the workplace using Slack et al.’s article, “The Technical Communicator as Author,” focusing on their exploration of translation, transmission, and articulation. This article, as well as Thralls and Blyler’s on the social perspective, help me establish the different expectations for technical writers both within and outside the field, especially concerning objectivity. Additionally, Katz discusses issues with expediency, which could be a possible effect of too much focus on objectivity. Finally, this question asks me to go beyond what I have been taught about the field, such as using plain language to remain objective, and apply a more critical lens to examine how my own writing and experiences within the field can affect others. In order to develop my argument on objectivity and its portrayal in the field’s research, I will be using the previous sources as well as pulling upon definitions of technical communication discussed in articles by Henning and Bemer, Allen, and Miller.

**Question 4:**

How have feminist theory and other critical perspectives influenced research and ideologies in TPC?

*Rationale:*

Technical writers often write on a wide variety of subjects and work with other fields. For example, a writer may be asked by someone in engineering to help write an article. Understanding theories and critical perspectives is important in a field like technical communication that requires large amounts of research and collaboration because it gives writers a lens – or lenses – through which to examine topics they may not fully understand yet. Feminist theory, humanism, the social perspective, etc. influence how writers and researchers collaborating on a project might approach their topic. Beyond developing research skills and context, examining these perspectives is important in understanding where power comes from and how it is understood through the different lenses of these perspectives. There are linkages and cultural ideas in all forms of communication, especially in our writing, that these perspectives point out and apply. Furthermore, having a wide understanding of critical perspectives enables me to be more culturally and ethically aware in my writing and my communication with others. A critical perspective aims at empowerment and emancipation, as well as forming a collaborative relationship between researcher, writer, and participants.

Before discussing the influence of these theories on research and ideologies in TPC, I would start by first defining the theories and the correlations between them. Then I would discuss approaches to research in general. I would pull information from both Breuch et al.’s “Considering Ethical Issues in Technical Communication Research” and Thralls and Blyler’s “Cultural Studies: An Orientation for Research in Professional Communication” on the theories and their correlations before bringing in how the theories influence research and ideologies in the field. To form my argument on the impact of feminism and other critical perspectives, I will need to keep in mind that participatory research comes into play and that promoting social action is the goal instead of just a goal of a document. In order to discuss feminism’s impact on research and ideologies, I’ll largely be using Blyler’s “Taking a Political Turn” along with the previous articles. Additionally, Rutter and Miller discuss humanism while Slack et al. discuss the social perspective. This question leaves room for me to argue that the application of such theories makes technical writing and research political, as well as examine the benefits and downsides of if being political. Such an argument pushes me to examine how technical writers can take the role of advocates, depending on the perspective they are applying. To argue this final point, I’ll be using Jones’s “The Technical Communicator as Advocate” to explore the position that I might take.

**Question 5:**

Discuss how technical editing has evolved in the past twenty years. What are the challenges and opportunities related to those changes in technical editing?

*Rationale:*

Technical communication is a field that covers many career paths. This question enables me to explore not just writing but also editing, the area I am interested in pursuing a career in. Being a better editor will make me a better writer because it focuses on audience and teaches me how to edit my own writing. But in order to do this, I need to understand how editing has changed, so I know what to expect when I enter the field as a technical editor. In discussing this, I will be able to discuss expectations for technical editors, including common misconceptions like all editing is akin to copyediting. This misconception is one of the growing difficulties technical editors are still facing in the past 20 years despite technological growth. Understanding these expectations and misconceptions is key to examining how editors approach different types of employers, such as corporations, as well as what the editor’s job is. The editor’s role remains important despite the position, however, as editing has evolved with digital movement to make freelance editing more popular. With the evolution of editing and the technology we use as editors, the second part of the question allows me to take a stance on whether the opportunities outweigh the challenges.

To answer these questions, I will use Corbin and Brady’s articles to first discuss the history of technical editors, including how they differ from traditional editors. Brady’s articles also touch largely on corporate culture and expectations for working with them. The working relationship between editors and corporations is a large portion of what has shifted in the past twenty years, largely due to the increase in editors working outside these corporations as freelancers. To discuss issues like temporary work, project management, and assumptions about editing, as well as the benefits and challenges that come with these, I will be pulling upon articles by Brady, Mackiewicz and Riley, Corbin, and Weber. These sources will also be important in my discussion of the technological growth and how advancements are being used within the field. Additionally, I could bring in Slack et al.’s discussion of the different roles of technical communicators here as well and compare what different roles employers might expect technical editors to fill.