Technical Communication Portfolio Review Guidelines

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Introduction

Your portfolio for the MA program in technical communication will consist of a variety of work completed in your classes (possibly including work done in an internship). The goal of the proposal is to showcase your technical communication skills and convince the graduate committee that you have absorbed material from your classes and are ready to succeed as a technical communicator. Consequently, the portfolio should ideally highlight different areas of technical communication (writing, design, light coding), though you are free to focus more on one area of specialty.

You cannot submit a portfolio to review until you have completed 18 graduate hours, including all of the program's required courses. To complete the portfolio review, you must submit 2 versions of the portfolio (one print and one web-based) to the graduate committee. Your portfolio must be accompanied by an essay explaining how your coursework influenced choices you made on each piece in your portfolio (explained in more detail below). All students must pass the portfolio review to complete the MA program.

NOTE: The portfolio was introduced to the 2016-17 academic catalog. Before that introduction, students were required to pass the comprehensive exam. All students who began the program before the 2016-17 academic year have the option of either taking the comprehensive exam or, with approval of the graduate director, switching to the portfolio review. All students who enrolled in 2016-17 or later must complete the portfolio review.

Portfolio Instructions

Your portfolio is a comprehensive collection of work you have done in the MA program. Consequently, you should begin putting together your portfolio in your very first semester. To aid you in this process, TECM 5185: Principles of Technical Communication (a required course) will discuss the portfolio and provide you with different genres of documents you may choose to include in the portfolio.

Your other classes will also include assignments you can include in your portfolio. However, it is important to remember that the portfolio is not a collection of *everything* you did in the program. Instead, we want to see your best work, and we leave it up to you to choose how you want to represent yourself. You can choose materials from any graduate course you completed as an MA student. However, please remember that we are evaluating the artifacts based on how they showcase your technical communication skills.

Your portfolio must include a minimum of 4 artifacts and a reflective essay. Put thought into the artifacts you choose because they are meant to showcase your growth as a technical communicator. If you choose smaller artifacts (e.g. a two page memo or a poster), you should probably include more than 4. If you choose larger artifacts (e.g. a long proposal), you can choose to go with 4 or add more if you have work of which you are proud.

While you choose what you submit, at least one artifact must be primarily textual and at least one artifact must focus primarily on design skills. You also have the option to include a digital-first artifact in your print portfolio. In that case, you should include printed screen shots of the interface of the artifact and printed pages of the artifact's underlying code.

Writing the reflective essay

The reflective essay is possibly the most important part of your portfolio. The essay should be between 2,000-3,000 words (not including the reference page) and should explain how you applied what you have learned in the program to the artifacts included in your portfolio. The essay must use in-text citations to cite specific sources you covered in your coursework and must include a reference page. You can use either MLA or APA style.

Think of the essay as a persuasive piece. You are arguing that—through your coursework—you have gained the knowledge to succeed as a working technical communicator. Furthermore, you are arguing that the artifacts included in the portfolio showcase your knowledge. To make that case, you must explain choices you made in crafting your artifacts using class materials. For example, you could explain how you used specific rhetorical techniques to write a persuasive report, how you used design techniques to create a print document, how you used a specific approach to information architecture to put together an XML document, how you used an expert's approach to content strategies to put together a communication plan, and so on. Remember, this essay is persuasive and creative, so it's up to you how you make your case that you have learned enough to earn a degree from our program. Read through the learning outcomes at the end of this document to make sure your essay shows how your portfolio demonstrates you have achieved those outcomes.

The essay must be well written and well organized. Feel free to use headings to describe each artifact, and make sure your reference page follows all the guidelines of your reference style. As a final note, the essay **should not be a chronological account of each course you took**. We do not want to read a list of what you learned in each class. Instead, you must synthesize what you learned into a coherent justification of the choices you made in each artifact. Do not feel the need to cite equally from each class.

Revising existing work

The artifacts in your portfolio will come from work you did in your courses. That does not mean, however, that you should include the exact same documents you submitted for your classes. The portfolio guidelines are stringent, and you **must** revise your documents before including them in your portfolio. In other words, incorporate the feedback you received from your professors, make changes based on topics you learned more about in later classes, edit the work more thoroughly than you did before, and don't hesitate to ask your professors for specific guidance on an artifact. For example, you may tell the professor you are planning on including an assignment in your portfolio and ask that professor to give you more detailed feedback.

Because the graduate committee wants to evaluate your work independently, we will not look over drafts of your portfolio. However, use the other resources you have available. We suggest you form editing groups with other students working on their portfolios so you can work together to perfect your documents. Also, use the writing lab and have the writing tutors look over your work.

As a final note, just because you received an A on an assignment does not mean it's ready for your portfolio. Portfolio pieces should be close to perfect.

Describing collaborative artifacts

We recognize that some of our courses emphasize group work. Consequently, you are allowed to submit collaborative pieces in your portfolio; however, only half of your portfolio pieces are allowed to be collaborative, and you are not required to submit any collaborative pieces. For the collaborative pieces, you must have contributed a significant amount to the piece, and you must include an accompanying "Statement of Collaboration." The statement should be a fairly short memo (no more than a page) that explains in detail what you contributed to the piece. Make sure to give credit to your group members and do not exaggerate what you contributed to the piece.

Putting together the print and web-based portfolios

You must submit a print version of your portfolio and a web-based version of your portfolio.

Print Portfolio

While you may eventually want to present a version of this portfolio to potential employers, the audience for this print portfolio is the graduate committee of the Department of Technical Communication. We want to see mastery of the major concepts of your degree both in the items you include in the portfolio and in the overall design, structure, and organization of the portfolio itself. Here are a few guidelines:

- The print document must have a table of contents (TOC). You do not need to include page numbers.
- The binding and presentation of the portfolio is up to you. Some students like 3 rings binders with tabs, others prefer spiral bound portfolios with no tabs; other students prefer something else. Think about your audience.
- The first item after the TOC must be your Reflective Essay.
- A Statement of Collaboration should precede any collaborative item.
- Items should present a representative sample of your work. You do not necessarily need to present long documents in full, but you should present enough for the document for the committee to assess the quality and mastery of the work.
- Each item should include a brief blurb that explains what the purpose of the document is, who the audience of the document is, and the software used to create the document.
- You may include digital pieces in your print portfolio by including screenshots of the site's interface and (when applicable) printouts of the underlying code.
- You cannot include your web-based portfolio as one of the artifacts in your print portfolio.

Web-based Portfolio

The web-based portfolio will include the same pieces as your print portfolio (except for the reflective essay), though you are also free to include additional pieces if you so choose.

- The home page should include a brief "About me" section explaining that this is your portfolio site. You should target this to employers, not the graduate committee. In other words, don't write something like "this portfolio is for completion of my MA degree."
- The web-based portfolio should include navigational tabs to each piece of your portfolio.

- If you include a website piece in your portfolio, you should include a description of the site and then a link to the site.
- Your web-based portfolio **will not** include the reflective essay because the online portfolio is targeted at potential employers. However, each artifact tab should include a description of the piece, which can be taken directly from your reflective essay. For example, if you wrote a proposal, include a short description of why you wrote the proposal, what the goal is, who the audience is, etc. The actual piece can be linked to as a PDF on your site.
- You choose how to create your web-based portfolio. If you don't have adequate coding/web design skills, you can use a template found on sites like Google Sites or Wix. If you have slightly more advanced skills, you can use templates found on Wordpress or Drupal. Finally, if you have appropriate skills, you can also create the site by hand. It's up to you. Do note that the committee will be more forgiving of minor errors in design and navigation if you design the site by hand.

Portfolio submission/resubmission

To submit your portfolio, you first must email the graduate director to let him/her know you plan to submit. This email must be sent within the first week of the fall or spring semester. You then must submit the portfolio by the assigned Fall/Spring due date, which will fall on the first Friday of October (fall semester) and the first Friday in February (spring semester). Portfolios are due by 4PM on those dates. You must submit the print portfolio to the main office, and you must email a link to the web-based portfolio to the graduate director.

You have to pass the portfolio review to complete the program. If you fail the portfolio review, you can request feedback from the graduate committee. You can then incorporate your feedback into your portfolio and resubmit the portfolio at the next due date. The portfolio will then be reviewed again. You are only allowed to resubmit your portfolio one time, so make sure to incorporate all feedback you receive from the graduate committee.

Portfolio learning outcomes

1. Students will show a strong understanding of the audience and the rhetorical situation in their portfolio pieces. Their documents will have clear goals responding to the instructions of the various assignments.
2. Students will exhibit an excellent grasp of different genres of technical communication. Their documents will showcase a variety of genres, including textual genres (proposals, memos, usability reports, etc.), and design genres (wireframes, brochures, etc.).
3. Students will be able to apply technical communication theory covered in their classes to the documents in their portfolio. Their reflective essay will show a deep understanding of the prominent theories in the field.
4. Students will be able to craft user-centered materials that holistically use elements of design, proper grammar, and rhetorical persuasion to accomplish a goal. Their documents will be excel in all three areas.
5. Students will have a portfolio that showcases their readiness to enter the profession of technical communication OR enter a PhD program in technical communication, rhetoric, or a related field.

Portfolio evaluation criteria

Your portfolio will be evaluated holistically, meaning that each piece will be evaluated using all criteria. In other words, a primarily textual artifact must also use proper design. A primarily design-focused artifact must still be free of textual errors. Here are some of the criteria we will use for the evaluation:

Rhetorical effectiveness

- Does the artifact take issues of audience and purpose into account? If the artifact is meant to be persuasive, does it use proper techniques of persuasion?
- Does the artifact have a clear goal that is accomplished through the text or the design? Is that goal clear to the reader?
- Is the artifact organized and written in a way that assists the reader? Does it make proper use of headings?

Design

- Does the artifact take into account the basic print design elements important for just about any document? Is the artifact free of widows, orphans……
- Does the artifact make proper use of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity?
- Does the artifact use white space properly?
- If the artifact is a web page, does it take into account proper web design theory and organizational principles?

Technical proficiency

- Is the artifact free of typos?
- Is the artifact free of grammatical mistakes?
- If the artifact includes code of some sort, is the code properly assembled and free of errors?
- If the code includes outside sources (e.g. templates), is the reused code properly attributed?

Portfolio design

- Are the print and web-based portfolios put together using all the instructions in the "Putting together the print and web-based portfolios" section of this document?
- Is the print portfolio printed on high quality paper and free of printing mistakes?
- Does the design of the web-based portfolio adhere to proper web design principles?