

Reflection Essay

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Spring 2026

Introduction

In June of 2023, I opened the email that would end my first job as a technical writer. I was being laid off. Of course, I was disappointed, but something stronger than my disappointment had been born—the realization that I loved technical writing.

As an English major, I had felt that the most practical career path for me was teaching. But the truth is, I didn't like it. When I left teaching in May of 2021, I had no idea what other avenues were open to me. Then, nearly a year later, a recruiter reached out to me about a contract position as a technical writer at Google, forever altering the trajectory of both my career and academic journeys.

Never before had I realized that there was a career in which I could use my skills as an English major, writer, and logical thinker with a penchant for clarity and simplification—especially not in a major tech company. To me, technical writing lies somewhere at the convergence of those skills. At the time, I viewed technical writing simply as streamlined writing with practical use, a definition I would later learn was only the surface of a much deeper rhetorical practice.

As the numbered days of my employment dwindled, and I applied for jobs in a frenzy, I realized that I didn't have the length of experience to be competitive, or the advanced credentials to compensate for that lack. Soon, my decision was made: I would rekindle my suppressed desire for a master's degree while deepening my knowledge in the many facets of technical communication.

As I stated in my MATC application "Statement of Purpose," my goal was to "build a career in ethical and beneficial technical, content, and UX writing...[for] the copy I produce to

be informed, inclusive, and helpful to those who read it...[and] to have a deep understanding of the theory behind why.” I have learned beyond what I could have anticipated in my seven semesters in this program, and I believe I now have a depth of understanding of the field that will allow me to build the career I dreamt of.

This program has challenged me to move beyond my own common sense and ground my products in research and sound scholarship, to work collaboratively with a group to produce something greater than individual efforts would allow, to manage my time to meet an intense workload and meet deadlines, and to expand my skillset beyond writing and editing to include things like document design, coding, usability testing.

The following pages trace this evolution, during which I have grown from a novice practitioner guided by intuition into a knowledgeable technical communicator grounded in rhetorical theory.

Coursework

In the months between my acceptance into the MATC program and my first day of class, I spent countless hours researching tips for success as a graduate student. However, nothing could have prepared me for the rigor, the amount of reading, or the level of output I was about to experience.

Over the course of seven semesters, I completed 10 courses, read a vast amount of scholarly literature, crafted over 20 major projects and papers, and many, many weekly assignments and discussion posts. The projects and papers, for which I learned new skills,

genres, and technologies, pushed me to the farthest stretches of my zone of proximal development. I must say, I'm proud of what I've achieved.

From week one, my pace was frenzied as I balanced my courses, full-time work, and raising a family. But as I lay out this map of my journey and reflect on what I took away from each course, I am filled with immense pride and gratitude—to the program for accepting me, to the professors for guidance (and patience), to my family for supporting me, and to myself for sticking with it through the many times it felt impossible.

The following section revisits each stage of my academic journey, detailing the artifacts I produced and the insights that will inform my practice as I move forward in my career.

Spring 2024

In the Spring 2024 semester, I enrolled in two courses: Document Design with Dr. Sarah Robblee and Technical Editing with Dr. Scott Mogull. I chose Technical Editing as a way to begin on familiar ground, since I had extensive experience editing both academically and professionally. Document Design, however, was a way to dip into unfamiliar areas of technical communication where I knew I would have to learn new skills in testing, design theory, and design tools.

Technical Editing - Dr. Scott Mogull

Technical Editing with Dr. Mogull expanded my strong foundation in editing practices (revision, substantive editing, copyediting, and proofreading) to include the particulars of editing in technical communication. The course comprised five class discussions, weekly skill development activities, and two papers.

For the first paper, we were asked to write on a technical editing topic or issue of our choosing. Because I was working as a Knowledge Manager for Meta, my paper was on “The Technical Editor’s Critical Role in Knowledge Management.” Researching and writing this paper helped me understand the indispensable role of technical editing in ensuring quality, usability, and retrievability of an organization’s knowledge assets. It also helped me begin to see the critical value of knowledge management and information architecture as disciplines inextricably linked to technical communication.

The second paper, a final exam reflection, asked us to reflect on the conceptual and practical aspects of technical editing. In my reflection, I expressed that the course had taught me that technical editing extends far beyond a simple mastery of language and usage conventions. To be an effective technical editor is to also be a collaborator, user researcher, and rhetorician who provides essential quality assurance. This reflection helped me understand that while technical documents may never be fine literature, there is a unique “magic” (Corbin 297) in the technical editor’s ability to edit away “mists and uncertainties” (Buehler 19), creating something that is not only usable and useful but also elegant in its precision.

Document Design - Dr. Sarah Robblee

Document Design with Dr. Robblee challenged me as a new graduate student on many fronts. This course is as well-designed and thoughtful as it is demanding. This course introduced me to basic proposal writing, design theories, and using the design tool, Figma. The course featured a rigorous, well-curated reading list that delved deep into design practices, history, theory, rhetoric, and ethics. Each week, we were asked to complete two discussion posts, apart from the one week during which we led student discussion with a presentation on an assigned topic.

Everything was designed to keep us on track with our major work, the Community Design Project. For this, we had to select a client, write a proposal, design three documents, select one document to conduct a usability test and write a usability report on, and create a final memo to our client including the designed documents. This semester-long project challenged me to learn two new genres (proposals and client memos), collaborate with an external organization, design documents and logos according to design principles using a new tool, and conduct a usability test, implementing the results to improve my design. All of these skills have been integral to my success in subsequent courses.

Summer 2024

In the Summer 2024 semester, I took just one course: Restoration and 18th Century Literature with Dr. James Reeves. After the intensity of my first semester in the program, this course was a welcome return to the familiar world of English literature.

Restoration and 18th Century Literature - Dr. James Reeves

In this intensive 5-week course, I was immersed in the 18th-century history of England, the British Empire, and post-Enlightenment secularism through varied modes of expression. We analyzed poetry and prose, including Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, while delving into complex theory such as Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.

Throughout this intensive reading, we were asked to keep a commonplace book. This allowed us to practice a historical form of information curation and knowledge retrieval, which was an interesting connection to my interest in modern knowledge management. The course culminated in a final essay exam.

While the subject matter was literary, the course served as an exploration of how post-Enlightenment secularism and the rise of the British Empire shifted the rhetorical landscape. These lessons in audience and cultural context remain relevant in global technical communication.

Beyond the academic content, this course fortified my confidence and intellectual stamina as a graduate student. I would rely heavily on this as I transitioned into the more theoretically demanding semesters to come.

Fall 2024

After the intensity of the spring semester, and with work demands increasing, I decided to take just one course in the Fall 2024 semester - Foundations of Technical Communication with Dr. Miriam Williams. As a required course that is only offered in the fall, it felt overdue.

Foundations of Technical Communication - Dr. Miriam Williams

The requirements for this course firmly grounded me in the academic side of technical communication. Our readings surveyed “keywords” in technical communication, which helped me move beyond a practitioner’s perspective toward a more holistic, scholarly framework of the discipline.

The major assignments were scaffolded to build deep expertise, beginning with a research proposal to introduce my research question: “Why is Information Architecture important in the field of Technical Communication?”

Having explored technical editing’s importance to knowledge management in Dr. Mogull’s course and the principles of information hierarchy in document design in Dr. Robblee’s

course, I wanted to investigate the relationship between communication artifacts and their organization as it pertains to retrievability and usability.

My research culminated in a literature review which demonstrated that information architecture is not merely a complementary path to technical communication but a foundational discipline integral to the success of technical documentation. This solidified my conviction that, as technical communicators, we must also be information architects. We are responsible for connecting end-users with the complex data systems that house the information they need.

Spring 2025

After a lighter course load in the fall, I felt ready to once again tackle two courses. For this semester, I chose International Communication with Dr. Pinfan Zhu and Usability Studies with Dr. Sarah Robblee, both of which were incredibly demanding and illuminating.

International Communication - Dr. Pinfan Zhu

In this course, we were asked to expand our concept of the field of technical communication to global communities with varied languages, cultures, and customs. I learned that communicating to international audiences requires us to abandon our ideas of communication principles that apply only to audiences within our own language and culture. This means that translation is not enough—our communications must be localized culturalized for our target audiences. This was especially pertinent to me as someone who had worked for two different global companies whose documentation was created for use by audiences around the world.

Our five major assignments focused on the practical application of localization best practices. I found that the exercise of analyzing and critiquing a website published in another language and translated into English helped me to fully understand the missteps that can be made when localization principles aren't adhered to. I also rather enjoyed writing up recommendations for Uruguay's official website in my final paper, "The American Lens: A Comprehensive Critique of the Cultural and Linguistic Customization of Uruguay's Official Website." My recommendations were grounded in relevant theories, such as Mona Baker's translation principles, Geert Hofstede's theory of universal cultural dimensions, and practical insights from experts in the fields of technical communication and international web design.

Usability Studies - Dr. Sarah Robblee

With full admiration for Dr. Robblee's thoughtful curriculum design, I chose to take her Usability Studies course to dig deeper into user research. Having already completed one usability test the previous year, I felt equal to the task of a more rigorous study. Once again, the reading list was substantial and well thought out, and the discussion posts fostered asynchronous connection between my classmates.

The final project, a usability test on the Amazon website's UI elements, navigation, and filtering, marked my first group project of the program. This first experience with group collaboration in the program laid the groundwork for the more complex stakeholder management I would encounter in my final semester. In its execution, my organization, collaboration, and delegation skills grew significantly as I balanced my workplace experience with academic requirements. By conducting three usability tests grounded in theory, I came to recognize the participatory nature of our discipline. I learned that there are no blanket rules of technical communication; we must know our audiences and adapt to meet their needs. This realization was

a shared lesson between both courses this semester, reinforcing that the user must always be the central focus of our work.

Summer 2025

I had considered taking the summer off, but in consideration of my future self (the one writing this), I decided it would be better to be able to take only one class in the spring so I could focus on my internship and portfolio. Current me thanks my past self.

Grant and Proposal Writing - Dr. Aimee Roundtree

Although I initially enrolled in this course to maintain my academic timeline, it proved to be one of the most practical additions to my skillset. I am so glad I took it. Dr. Roundtree's optional weekly virtual meetings provided a much-needed sense of community after several semesters of asynchronous study.

Going into this class, I didn't fully understand what grant or proposal writing was. Through this course, I moved beyond a surface-level understanding of the genre, learning that proposal writing is a versatile tool for securing funding, pitching internal projects, and obtaining organizational buy-in.

For my main project, I developed a grant proposal for Knowbility's annual conference, AccessU. In this assignment, I learned to navigate the complexities of persuasive rhetoric—balancing the needs of a non-profit with the specific requirements of potential funders. While I didn't know it at the time, establishing this early familiarity with Knowbility and AccessU would prove to be a vital asset during my final collaborative internship semester. I'm

grateful for the foundation in this genre, as I see that the ability to write a high-quality proposal is a beneficial skill in any professional path I choose.

Fall 2025

For my penultimate semester, I took Studies in Rhetorical Theory with Dr. Eric Leake and Coding for Technical Communicators with Jas James. These courses pushed me into areas of study in which I had a lot of opportunity for growth. I knew of rhetoric only as persuasion, and I knew nothing of coding beyond a little basic HTML. By the end of the semester, I had competence in both areas (though a future in coding is unlikely).

Studies in Rhetorical Theory - Dr. Eric Leake

While this was a required course, it ended up being one of my favorites. It was wonderful to engage with other graduate students across disciplines in a hybrid environment. In working toward my final project, a seminar paper, I was once again allowed to use my proposal writing and research skills. I conducted extensive multimodal, cross-disciplinary research, documented my findings in an annotated bibliography, and synthesized my findings in my paper, “The Rhetoric of Eating Corpses: Vegan Discourse and the Subversion of Animal Product Euphemisms.” All of my research was underpinned by the theoretical framework of Lloyd Bitzer’s “Rhetorical Situation,” Kenneth Burke’s “Terministic Screens,” George Lakoff’s “Conceptual Metaphor,” and David Casagrande’s “Abstractification.” By applying Burke’s “Terministic Screens” and Lakoff’s “Conceptual Metaphor,” I was able to demonstrate how euphemisms like “pork” or “beef” function as selective filters that reflect a desirable commodity while deflecting the reality of a sentient animal.

While this paper doesn't directly connect with technical communication, I am including it in my portfolio because I am proud of my work. It displays my understanding of key concepts in rhetorical theory, offers a detailed analysis, employs rhetorical tactics in communicating the topic, and lastly, allows me to expose how ethics can be warped through rhetorical manipulation. This last point is especially critical for technical communicators to bear in mind as we make decisions, so that we communicate in all media ethically.

Coding for Technical Communicators - Jas James

Coming to technical communication from an English background, this course pushed me out of my comfort zone more than any other. We were scaffolded from basic Markdown, through HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and Bootstrap, culminating in a React-based web application project. As the semester went on, the increasing complexity of functioning code often led to broken scripts and debugging sessions. Despite this, the course succeeded in equipping me with the technical literacy and essential coding skills required for modern documentation.

Although my ambitious attempt to build a fully interactive React portfolio faced technical hurdles, the experience was invaluable. I gained a solid foundation in the logic of front-end development, enabling me to collaborate effectively and architect documentation within docs-as-code workflows like GitHub. I left this course not as a developer, but as a technical communicator who can speak the language of engineering.

Spring 2026

While this semester has been the most challenging of the MATC program, it has also been the most preparatory for my transition into the workplace. In *Editing the Professional Publication*, I had the opportunity to apply my cumulative knowledge to a professional

consulting project. More than any other course, this has prepared me for the realities of working in industry.

Editing the Professional Publication - Dr. Miriam Williams

Under Dr. Williams' guidance and supervision, my team partnered with the non-profit organization Knowbility. We were tasked with addressing their primary challenge: "How might we learn from our current state to inform our ongoing strategy for growth for the AccessU conference?" This project has a rigorous exercise in cross-functional collaboration, stakeholder management, and scholarship-supported data analysis. I was fortunate to collaborate with two dedicated colleagues, and together we leaned into our individual strengths, divided labor accordingly, and met tight deadlines.

Beyond the technical execution, this experience taught me how to transform a broad organizational problem into a targeted research initiative, generating solutions that are both actionable and theoretically sound.

Working on this project with my team has provided me with deeper insights into professional dynamics than even my previous experience in the workplace.

Conclusion

There were moments during my time in the MATC program when I struggled. Sometimes those moments turned into days. Sometimes that struggle made me want to quit. But now that my time in the program is ending, I feel a certain sadness that this chapter is closing. I've learned from some of the best academics in our field and from some of the most talented teachers I've ever encountered. It has been a tremendous experience.

In my application's Statement of Purpose, I said that I wanted to "build a career in ethical and beneficial technical, content, and UX writing." I wanted what "I produce to be informed, inclusive, and helpful to those who read it." I wanted to gain "a deep understanding of the theory behind why." I believe I have achieved what I set out to do.

In the catalyzing moment of my layoff in 2023, I had a revelation: I discovered that I loved the rigor of technical communication, yet I recognized that my first foray into the field was guided more by intuition than by methodology. I needed to hone my craft and ground my practice in scholarship, and the MATC program has helped me do that.

As I look toward my graduation in May 2026, I do so with a perspective reshaped by my time in this program. My work here has allowed me to understand that technical communication is not just a job but a critical responsibility to the end-user. I am ready to return to the industry as a practitioner-scholar who can architect information that is as ethically sound as it is technically precise. I leave this program with profound gratitude and excitement for what is to come.

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