

# Chapter 11—Proposals and Feasibility Studies

DATE: May 2, 2004  
TO: Ross Urquhart, Glengarry Institute of Science and Technology  
FROM: Donna Jones  
SUBJECT: **Proposal to Implement the Course “Introduction to Technical Communication”**

In response to the Coordinator’s recent informal request for feedback about the Technical Writer Program, I recommend that the Glengarry Institute of Science and Technology (GIST) establish a new course called “Introduction to Technical Communication.”

As a recent graduate, I am in good position to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of GIST’s Technical Writer Program. I feel the proposed course will correct problems that are limiting the effectiveness of the current program, and will give the students a better foundation to seek employment after graduation.

## The Problem

I have identified a problem between the stated goals of the Technical Writer Program and how the program is currently structured to meet those goals. In particular, the problem has three related parts:

- A disconnection between many program courses that results in the repetition of certain topics and neglect of others
- An emphasis on finding a job at the end of the program that is not matched by formal instruction in this area
- A disconnection between the final eight-week Work Project and its two umbrella courses (Technical Writing I and II).

The objectives of the Work Project’s two umbrella courses do not reflect the objectives of the actual Work Project at the end of term. For example, Technical Writing II asks the students to create a weekly work schedule for the Work Project two months in advance. This year, most of the students could not get the information they needed from their industry supervisors to schedule their projects in detail. Moreover, the focus on senior-level documentation projects in Technical Writing I and II does little good for those students who have self-directed Work Projects.

## The Solution

The Technical Writer Program needs shift the academic focus away from Technical Writing I and II, and implement a new course called “Introduction to Technical Communication.” Through its objectives and content, this new course will unify the program by giving it clear structure and focus. In particular, the course will accomplish three main goals:

- orient students to the field of technical communication
- prepare students for the Work Project
- prepare students for a job after graduation

Technical Writing I and II, which are treated as the program's fundamental courses, are limited in their capacity to unify the program because they address the question, "how does one communicate as a technical writer?" In contrast, Introduction to Technical Communication will address the larger question, "What is technical communication?" In doing so the new course will

- orient students to the field of technical communication in an organized way, by exploring the wide variety of activities and issues it involves
- prepare students for their job search after graduating
- unify the program by integrating concepts taught in other courses

The scope of this proposal is not broad enough to present a detailed outline of the new course. However, I will propose some general content that will address the limitations of the current curriculum. In particular, "Introduction to Technical Communication" will (1) introduce students to the wide variety of activities and issues in the field of technical communication; (2) involve experienced technical communicators as guest speakers; and (3) instruct students in job-search and career-preparation skills. Table 1 outlines some recommended topics and activities for this course.

<b>TABLE 1: Introduction to Technical Communication — Course Content Recommendations (First Term)</b>	
<b>Topics to Consider</b>	<b>Activities to Consider</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History of Technical Communication</li> <li>• Ethics in Technical Communication</li> <li>• What Technical Writers Do</li> <li>• Where Technical Writers Work</li> <li>• Technical Writing for the Web</li> <li>• Technical Writing for Special Audiences</li> <li>• Technical Writers as Trainers</li> <li>• Research Strategies</li> <li>• Single Source Documentation</li> <li>• Working with Visuals</li> <li>• Technical Writing Tools</li> <li>• MS Word Workshop</li> <li>• Surviving in the Workplace</li> <li>• Freelance Writing</li> <li>• Networking and Selling Yourself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assigned readings</li> <li>• Independent research — books, trade journals, Web sites, writers</li> <li>• Lab activities</li> <li>• Field trips</li> <li>• Written assignments</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> <li>• Guest speakers (3 to 5)</li> </ul>

As Table I indicates, the objective of the new course in the first term is to familiarize the students with basic concepts and tools they need to succeed as technical writers. With this approach students can get a “big picture” of the type of skills they need, and of the job possibilities that might interest them. The objective of the new course in the second term is to encourage students to identify and explore their particular interests in the field of technical communication. Table 2 outlines some recommended topics and activities.

<b>TABLE 2: Introduction to Technical Communication — Course Content Recommendations (Second Term)</b>	
<b>Topics to Consider</b>	<b>Activities to Consider</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class tutorials presented by students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As directed by the students</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work Project Preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find an industry placement related to career interests, independently or with the Coordinator</li> <li>• Project preparation documents</li> <li>• Information plan</li> <li>• Progress report template</li> </ul>

The independent tutorials let students work either independently or with the Program Coordinator to set up a work placement suited to their interests. Consequently, this teaching approach then eliminates the problem of a redundant curriculum, and gives the students an effective learning experience that prepares them for the work placement in the summer.

In order for the new course to be a truly unifying force, the students must offer the Coordinator regular feedback about what they are learning in their other courses. The Coordinator may then address any concerns about overlaps or gaps with the other instructors, and adapt the content of the Introduction to Technical Communication course in response.

## Conclusion

If implemented successfully, the Introduction to Technical Communication course can do the following:

- give the Technical Writer Program greater structure and act as its organizing principle
- make the program easier for the Coordinator to oversee
- increase instructor effectiveness
- improve student learning and performance
- reduce instructor and student frustration

- increase students' confidence in the program, their skills, and their readiness for work

In subsequent years, the new course may also raise the profile of the Technical Writer Program even higher and increase enrolment. Since implementing the new course involves restructuring, not expanding the program, no new costs will be incurred.

I recommend that the faculty and administration capitalize on the enthusiasm of the new Technical Writer Program Coordinator, and implement the Introduction to Technical Communication course as soon as possible.

## **Sample 11-2**

### Informal Memo Proposal