

Present Tense

A Journal of Rhetoric in Society

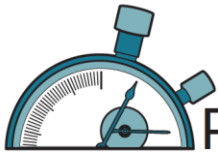
Technical Rhetorics: Making Specialized Persuasion Apparent to Public Audiences

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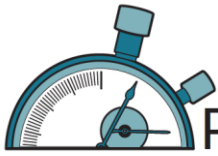
Erin A. Frost and Michelle F. Eble

As rhetoric and technical communication researchers and teachers, we're often faced with defining exactly what we mean when we use the term technical communication. Current perspectives on what the term technical communication encompasses are broadening well beyond documentation and user manuals that come with technological artifacts (Haas; Grabill and Simmons; Scott, Longo, and Wills; Slack, Miller, and Doak).¹ However, defining technical communication more broadly for ourselves or even others in our disciplines doesn't always change publics' (e.g., users/stakeholders/lay audiences) perceptions of this information and how it affects their lives and the decisions they make.

In this essay, we argue that "technical rhetorics" is a concept that has affordances for thinking about how to critically communicate with public audiences about specialized information. Invoking specialized information and persuasion in combination can help remind us—technical communication researchers, teachers, practitioners—that we have an obligation to emphasize the persuasive nature of the work that we do and study when interfacing with public audiences. Using this concept calls attention to texts that are implicitly persuasive *and* specialized, and it thus encourages public participation in meaning-making. We want technical communicators to take up this concept and use it to remind themselves how important it is to talk with public audiences—

and each other—about the persuasive nature of technical communication.

To be more specific, this concept highlights the persuasive nature of specialized information and content that influences public audiences to think, feel, or act a certain way. This concept complicates notions of objectivity and neutral views of technical communication. Technical communication is often obscure to the general public, and thus is interpreted as objective, neutral, and true (Savage; Slack, Miller, and Doak; Williams). The last several decades have seen a shift in disciplinary perspectives on technical communication's nature, with more and more people recognizing it as a subjective, rhetorical practice. In 2004, Savage wrote that the notion that technical communication is rhetorical is "not an idea in great favor with practitioners, nor even with all academics" (251). A decade later, our personal experiences at conferences and in reading field scholarship suggest that a shift continues to move the discipline towards a rhetorical understanding of our own work, but that shift is far from complete—and it is certainly more established in theory than in practice. Technical communication—and any discipline that communicates specialized content to public audiences (e.g., engineering, finance, law, medicine, information technology)—can use technical rhetorics as a concept to facilitate and parallel this shift while better representing the work we do.



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The first part of this essay defines technical rhetorics as a concept. The second part discusses how to use technical rhetorics as a concept that can help technical communicators to identify contexts where critical analysis stands to benefit stakeholders. Finally, we examine technical documents related to weight loss surgeries to illustrate how technical rhetorics can affect our thinking as a field and facilitate users' understanding of the persuasive nature of technical documents.

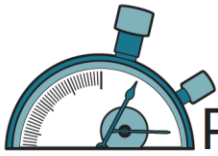
Defining Technical Rhetorics

In defining technical rhetorics, we begin with its origin story. Erin first began using the phrase technical rhetorics in concert with her apparent feminist,² approach to describing ultrasound-for-abortion laws (*Theorizing* 111-112). In reading this work, Michelle saw a need to discuss how and why using this concept more extensively could be valuable. This precipitated a series of conversations where we discussed and defined the idea and began to think of certain types (and sets) of documents as technical rhetorics. We've since come to think of technical rhetorics as "any rhetorical assemblage that attempts to persuade a specific audience with a specialized set of knowledge" ("An Apparent Feminist Approach" 191). Further, we consider this concept valuable because it allows space for context; this idea encompasses a set of artifacts, but its users can still acknowledge [rhetorical velocity](#) (Ridolfo and DeVoss) by remaining conscious of the conversations that both emerge from and re-situate those artifacts.

We understand the term *technical* to mean specialized; it typically connotes some level of prestige and intelligence. Further, the word technical draws on the nuanced rhetorical

concept of *techne* in that it suggests action or practical application of a set of knowledges and theories; in fact, we point out this association because *techne* is a complex concept. Haas—a scholar whose work in reflecting and disrupting disciplinary commonplaces we find transformative and exigent—refers to *techne* as an "art of knowing—a revealing, an opening up" (287). Atwill says *techne* "resists identification with a static, normative subject" (2), while Delagrange highlights its possibilities as a set of knowledges that "weds experience to the exigency of the moment" (36). Thus, our use of the term *technical* (as it draws on *techne*) is always contextual; it disrupts the commonly held notion that something technical or specialized also is neutral and objective. We encourage critical engagement with technical texts as well as the term itself.

We use Haas' definition to illustrate what we mean by *rhetorics*. Her definition accounts for traditional notions of rhetoric and aligns itself with the aforementioned shift in technical communication. Drawing on cultural rhetorics, critical race studies, and decolonial theory, Haas defines "rhetoric as the negotiation of cultural information—and its historical, social, economic, and political influences—to affect social action (persuade)" (287). Rhetoric is about persuasion and negotiation; it is about cultural and transcultural meaning-making. In addition, rhetorics are often already technical but unmarked as such; rhetorical artifacts often communicate specialized information. Thus, each of these two terms makes explicit a value that is often already embedded in the other: Marking rhetorics as technical reminds us of their specialized nature; marking technical artifacts as rhetorical reminds us of their persuasive nature. Thus, technical rhetorics are those rhetorics that communicate specialized



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information or knowledge in a persuasive way. This complicates the often-still-held public notion that technical communication is neutral information that is delivered to users. For example, students in our scientific writing courses most often arrive in class identifying scientific writing as objective, neutral, true; when presented with a text like the Informed Consent Documents (ICDs) discussed below, they stick to such claims until we make the persuasive nature of such documents apparent through carefully orchestrated course design (Combs, Frost, Eble). Thus, drawing on technical rhetorics helps us and students re-think our pretensions to the objectivity and neutrality of texts. Technical rhetorics as a concept, when applied to an appropriate (set of) text(s), creates exigence for technical communicators to make apparent the persuasive nature of technical rhetorical documents. This could help users of a set of identified texts develop a more complex understanding of how such artifacts influence their lives (see extended example in the [“Illustrating Technical Rhetorics”](#) section below).

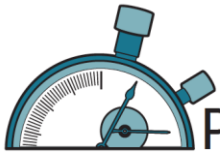
Identifying Technical Documents as Technical Rhetorics

Rhetoric and technical communication, as fields, have long been intertwined (Coletta; Haas; Ornatowski; Savage; Spilka). This article is an argument for a specific way—though not the only way—of making those connections explicit in our daily work and especially in our conversations with members of the public. Drawing on the concept of technical rhetorics allows us to rhetorically analyze technical documents that traditionally haven’t been critiqued because of assumptions that they are objective and neutral. Identifying documents as technical rhetorics creates space for rhetorical analysis where it was not previously possible.

Herein lies the value of the concept; it is not a new type of rhetorical analysis, it is an idea that makes various types of rhetorical analysis possible in spaces where they previously were not. Using technical rhetorics as a framing idea forefronts persuasion, thus opening the door to critical analysis.

In this article, we outline a way to help technical communicators call out persuasive elements in technical documents. We highlight the two-phase process of identifying technical rhetorics. We also illustrate some actions—actions made possible by the preparatory work of technical rhetorical framing—through the explicated example below. In the first phase, we show a way to identify a document or group of texts that signify as objective, or neutral, or inspire apathy. Second, we determine whether there is a social justice exigency, which requires us to consider stakeholders, their values, their goals, their beliefs and how the documents position or affect them.

Negotiating phase one requires us to identify the right kind of technical document, which is one where persuasive intent is not apparent. What signals us to know that we need to be using technical rhetorics as a framing concept? What types of documents call for this treatment? How do we know where to begin to make apparent the persuasiveness of texts in which objectivity or neutrality—or simply a lack of persuasive intent—is assumed? Laws/regulations, instruction manuals, procedures, employee handbooks, contracts, codes of behavior, policy texts, histories, and signage are all examples of texts and assemblages of texts that regulate our everyday lives. All these genres represent areas where critical rhetorical analysis could benefit stakeholders, if only the need for such analysis



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were made explicit—which is what we are advocating for.

Phase two is about determining how users/stakeholders are affected by the technical document in order to decide whether a social justice exigency exists. This requires considering who is a stakeholder as well as what the values and goals of stakeholders might include. For example, sex-specific public restroom signage persuades users that sex is a dimorphic system (Halberstam). Ultrasound-for-abortion laws persuade us that pregnant bodies should be regulated beyond the ways non-pregnant bodies already are (Frost, *Theorizing*). After using technical rhetorics as a driving concept to determine what kind of persuasion is happening and how it affects users, technical communicators are positioned to use their expertise to intervene as necessary.

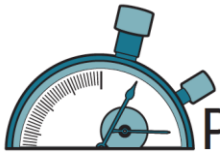
These two phases are made possible by doing intellectual work through the frame of technical rhetorics. These steps then make any remaining steps—such as rhetorical analysis, finding and making explicit persuasive elements, and taking action—possible. Thus, the following section explains, in detail, how we used the process described above to identify a set of technical rhetorics and determine that it has social justice exigency—all in order to get to a point where more detailed rhetorical analysis was possible. The following example illustrates how the concept of technical rhetorics allows us to discuss informed consent documents as texts that falsely signify as objective (phase one). Our phase two work responds to an ethical and social justice imperative to make explicit rhetors' intentions and how documents affect users in healthcare scenarios. It also contributes to feminist projects that critique the structures of rationality which are too often taken as neutral

or natural and to respond to them by making apparent their persuasiveness. Further, we go beyond phase two and begin to undertake the actions necessary to make apparent the persuasiveness in these specific documents through rhetorical analysis.

Illustrating Technical Rhetorics Through An Example: Weight Loss Surgery Informed Consent Documents

Given the recent designation of [obesity as a disease](#) and the [increasing number of people electing](#) to have weight loss surgery, the concept of technical rhetorics can help us create, understand, and act on an exigence about bodily health. Legally and ethically required [consent processes and documents](#) are important as part of decision-making processes regarding weight loss surgeries. Analyzing weight loss surgery informed consent documents (ICDs) as technical rhetorics emphasizes the documents' specialized and persuasive nature. This analysis also makes apparent how surgeons and surgery centers benefit from doing surgeries. By the time people read and sign these documents, they have already been persuaded on some level through conversations with doctors that weight loss surgery is the best way to deal with their obesity and/or related health risks and issues. These documents provide and sometimes reiterate information about the purpose of the weight loss surgery and articulate the potential risks and benefits. However, consent documents are not traditionally understood as persuasive. Thus, identifying them as technical rhetorics creates space to reevaluate the documents' purposes.

ICDs meet the requirements outlined above that call us to critically analyze them as technical rhetorics; they are often perceived as objective



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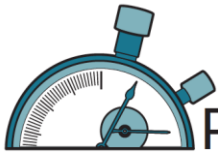
and have a social justice exigency. To explain, the increase in the number and type of people choosing weight loss surgery calls for analysis. According to the [American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery](#), the number of weight loss surgeries in the U.S. has increased by greater than **1,400%** from 1998-2008 (Whiteman). Further, the overwhelming majority of those who have such surgeries are women. According to Farinholt et al., of the almost 1,400 people who were evaluated for weight-loss surgery over a four-year period time, 82% were women. Whenever a particular category of people is unequally affected by something, a technical rhetorical approach can help to analyze possible reasons, effects, and interventions. The bodies in this example often belong to women, meaning our argument in this article aligns with feminist and social justice goals.

Regulatory guidelines require ICDs to include a number of components to satisfy legal and ethical requirements. Enough information must be provided so patients can make informed decisions and give consent to surgery while acknowledging potential risks. The purpose of weight loss surgery, what the patient will be asked to do, and the benefits and risks of surgery are combined with specialized descriptions of the surgery and recovery period. Patients sign these documents to communicate their consent to have the surgery done. Attending to ICDs as a set of technical rhetorics—including the [rhetorical velocity](#) of the consent process and the documents that persuade people and lead them to decisions—calls into question what is ethical in persuading people to have weight loss surgery and provides a space for these documents to be questioned.

These documents ([ICD #1](#) and [ICD #2](#)) clearly state one possible benefit to this surgery is

weight loss. To anyone who has struggled with being overweight, reading this is persuasive. To follow regulations, the documents must include risks and potential benefits, but one of the persuasive elements is that the risks and benefits are presented with little certainty. For example, many of the risks are often listed as uncommon, and death is listed as very uncommon. As a way to negotiate this uncertainty, appeals to past studies or evidence based on other people's experiences are provided to persuade the person they should consent to the surgery for the sake of their health (and to lose weight, thus adhering to social expectations). What is less discussed, glossed, or explained with highly specialized language in these documents is how weight loss surgeries drastically change the physical makeup of a person's digestive tract, and how the surgery has lasting effects on the livelihood and quality of life of those who consent to weight loss surgery. [While one of the example consents](#) analyzed does include an illustration of the surgery, this image and its explanation obscures the actual, embodied experience that the person will have after the surgery by explaining the surgical procedure using medical terms.

Both ICDs analyzed as part of this example highlight the criteria that must be met to qualify for weight loss surgery, which includes Body Mass Index (BMI) stipulations and trying and failing to lose weight through dietary and behavioral means. Anyone considering weight loss surgery will have met these criteria. In the risks section, both ICDs emphasize "inadequate weight loss" as a risk and potential complication. [One ICD](#) reminds participants that, "without continued follow-up, exercise and behavior modification, weight regain is very possible" and the [other ICD](#) asks participants to commit to



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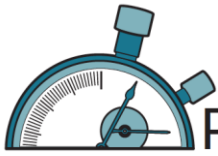
“lifestyle changes as educated, diet changes as educated, daily vitamins, postoperative follow-up as directed and all testing as ordered.” Thus, behavioral changes in health, diet, and activity are necessary post-surgery for the surgery to be labeled a success. These directives, common from many sources, are now situated as specialized instruction rather than as rhetorical. Our analysis emphasizes claims to expertise *and* their persuasive value. These claims that a patient qualifies for weight loss surgery because she has failed to lose weight, but must change these same behaviors for the surgery to be a success, introduces a subtle contradiction in the specialized language of the consent. Initiating a conversation and making this contradiction apparent is just one finding made possible by analyzing these documents as technical rhetorics.

Technical communicators can use this concept to make a concerted effort to spread knowledge about the persuasive nature of such documents and their effects on users/stakeholders. When people (e.g., physicians, patients, study coordinators, patient liaisons, nurses, families) understand that these documents are persuasive, they may ask critical questions regarding the risks, benefits, long-term outcomes, consequences, and embodied experiences of these surgeries.

A Call for Action

The process for identifying a set of texts as technical rhetorics that we’ve outlined in this article can help technical communicators recognize the persuasive elements inherent in these technical documents—and to be cognizant of the ways *we* speak and write as well. We developed this example because it deals with an urgent social justice concern in

medical contexts—where privilege is pervasive and interventions are sited on physical bodies—most often the bodies of those without similar access to privilege. Analyzing such constructions as technical rhetorics is a way of questioning privileged rhetors; it is a way of “[m]oving ourselves to speech and action...and of making certain injustices apparent despite the powerful institutions that support and maintain those injustices” (Frost, *Theorizing* 178). We call upon our readers to identify technical artifacts—as we have above—in order to analyze the resulting technical rhetorics they create. Revealing and disrupting claims to objectivity and neutrality makes patterns of persuasion apparent and allows for responses to these technical rhetorics. Further, we encourage readers to think broadly about possible responsive action. Developing specific cases, highlighting the persuasive nature of technical rhetorics, and discussing how to respond to such patterns creates opportunities to affect many different kinds of change. This work encourages participation in resisting, subverting, and intervening in such instances of specialized persuasion directed at public audiences.



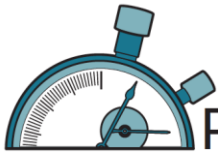
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Endnotes

1. These are just a few of the scholars who have done such work. We chose to cite these particular works because we felt they have been especially influential for the discipline. Slack, Miller, and Doak's chapter, for example, was reprinted in the widely read text *Central Works in Technical Communication*; Grabill and Simmons' article won the Nell Ann Pickett Award for Best Article in *Technical Communication Quarterly* and has been widely cited.
2. Apparent feminism is a theoretical response to understudied and unrecognized misogyny in technical rhetorics, including laws and customs that support and propagate oppression.

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