

Implicit Bias in “Objective” Course Content:  
questioning “neutrality” in online technical writing courses.

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# What is technical writing?

- “It is a form of communication that is very direct and doesn't leave anything up for interpretation.”
- “Detailed, analytical, and concise.”
- “Straight to the point.”
- “Dry but precise.”
- “A concise, clear, and accurate communication of ideas without bias.”

# What is technical writing?

- “Informs on an objective level, rather than subjective.”
- “Successful transfer of knowledge.”
- “Factual, objective pieces of writing.”
- “Straight to the point and informative.”
- “Based on fact rather than opinion.”

But actually ...

“The field of technical and professional communication (TPC) is increasingly critiqued for pretending and/or believing that communication is neutral and objective (Jones, 2016; Jones & Williams, 2018; Mckoy et al., 2020). As social-justice-driven scholars in the field point out, TPC is never neutral or objective and, in fact, is frequently used to maintain and build structures of oppression”

(Frost, Gonzales, Moeller, Patterson, & Shelton, 2021).

# Objectives

- Become familiar with the terms **social justice** and **implicit bias** in communication practices
- Understand how visual and written language produces bias
- Critically assess technical documents for social justice and implicit bias
- Evaluate readability and accessibility of technical documents for intended users
- Consider how technical documents create audiences and configure inclusivity or exclusivity

# Activities

- Small-group online discussions sharing witnessing and experiencing implicit bias
- Implicit Association Tests (IAPs) and discussion
- Discussions on resources and reading materials

## Resources and Reading Materials

- “Recognizing Microaggressions” chart (Sue, 2010, see handout)
- “Genre as Social Action” (Miller, 1984)
- “The Technical Communicator as Advocate” (Jones, 2016)
- “Reimagining the Boundaries of Health and Medical Discourse in Technical Communication” (Frost et al., 2021).
- [We all have implicit biases. So what can we do about it?](#) (Ted Talk, Dushaw Hockett, 2017)
- [How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Discussing Race](#) (Ted Talk, Jay Smooth, 2011)

# Guest Speaker

Dr. Paula Houston, Chief Equity Officer at the University of Washington School of Medicine.

## "Social Identities, Privilege, and Intersections"



Paula L. Houston, Chief Equity Officer at the University of Washington Office of Healthcare Equity and Associate Vice President for Medical Affairs, will be giving a virtual interactive presentation *Social Identities, Privilege and Intersection*. Her presentation will address implicit bias and inequity in technical, professional, and medical writing and communication, and she will provide strategies for identifying and challenging implicit bias in a variety of workplace documents and settings. Her interactive presentation (Zoom link below) will be followed by Q & A.

Dr. Houston has a B.S. from Syracuse University, a Master's degree in Health Administration from the University of Washington and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Seattle University.

Dr. Houston is an active community leader and serves on several non-profit boards and a City of Seattle Commission. Additionally, she is an eleven-time national and six-time world champion powerlifter and was inducted into the USA Powerlifting Hall of Fame in 2012.

Thursday, March 25, from 2:00-3:30 pm  
Join Zoom Meeting: <https://uwlax-edu.zoom.us/j/84886880735>



# Assignments

- Technical Writing, Genre, and Social Justice Mini-Assignment
- Genre Exploration Project



# Feedback from Students

“I appreciated learning about social justice topics. I learned more about how to ensure I am addressing my audience ethically and inclusively in writing.”

“This project showed me how significant the role of technical communicator is.”

“This helped me to develop a broader, more open perspective to approaching a community.”

“I recognized that I must consider the effects of my writing and how my writing might be received in different ways.”

“I realized the importance of looking at information and being aware of biases a writer may have as well to ensure that the information provided is as inclusive as possible.”

“This taught me that technical writers need to be chameleons. They need to step into the shoes of the audience in order to help them enact their goals. This includes understanding their needs, wants, and attitudes toward a subject.”

“I enjoyed this project and do believe it helped me think more deeply.”

## In Conclusion ...

- Students began to understand the ways that Technical Writing is implicit in producing bias
- Students began to develop ways to counter that implicit bias in their own writing
- Students finished the class with new ideas about what Technical Writing is, what it historically has been, and what it can be