

## Words that people understand by Ann Friou

**C**hances are you've experienced a situation like this. It's the night before Christmas, and you're trying to assemble a bicycle or another gift for your child. The instructions are unclear, the plaything doesn't work properly, and time and temper are getting short. "Why can't they make these instructions easier to follow?" you ask yourself, ready to give someone a piece of your mind.

That's exactly what Libby Allison does, in her professional capacity as director of Texas State's master of arts degree program in technical communication. A strong proponent of technical writing, she says, "If I find a set of instructions that aren't clear, I call the company and say, 'You need a good technical communicator.'"

Allison describes technical communication as the marriage between technology and writing, and a technical communicator as the writer who translates technical information for the audience who needs it. Since 1999, Texas State has graduated 56 technical communicators and is training dozens more. Because the Round Rock-Austin-San Antonio corridor is the second largest high-tech arena in the country (after San Jose, Calif.), graduates are in demand by high-tech companies, as well as government agencies, health care organizations, pharmaceutical companies, publishing companies, insurance companies, arts organizations, and more, to produce the technical communication that groups such as regulatory and funding agencies, employees, clients, patrons and patients use every day.

In the 10 years since it began, the M.A. program in technical communication has gained a reputation for its academic strength. "Even though many of our graduates go on to jobs in private industry and nonprofits, others pursue academic careers," Allison says. "People sometimes think of technical communication as just for practitioners, when in fact it has a long academic tradition with its own theory, theorists and research. Our program is a humanities-based, interdisciplinary curriculum that provides courses in the theory of rhetoric and composition, as well as the use of technology as a tool for communicating." The program's four faculty – Libby Allison, Deborah Morton, Miriam Williams and Pinfan Zhu – bring a wide range of professional experience and academic research pursuits to the program (see accompanying stories on faculty interests and research).

The technical communication curriculum (see "Courses in technical communication") offers an array of writing and technology practice and activities – instructions, rules and regulations, reports, proposals, memos, letters, sales literature, journal

articles, manuals, standard operating procedures, medical protocols, internal documentation, plans, forms, e-mail, Web sites, digital media – and the list goes on. Courses also include the new social media such a podcasting, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and the like.

Technical communicators produce paper and online documents, Web sites and new media communication to carry out a task, to solve a problem or to help specific audiences understand a subject with which they might not be familiar. To be effective, the words and graphics in these documents must be clear, concise, honest, accurate, comprehensive in their information, and professional in appearance. When technical communication is ineffective, the consequences can be serious. For example, a vague funding proposal will be unlikely to win a grant award; an overly complex Web site will confuse readers and inhibit product sales; and faulty documentation of test results will keep a new drug off the market.

One of the program's main strengths is the semester-long service-learning course, in which students build useful job skills while providing a service to government, business and nonprofit organizations. Working with prestigious organizations such as National Instruments and Harcourt Trade Publishers, students perform a wide range of writing, editing, designing and publishing activities that include documenting computer hardware and software, designing Web sites, producing multimedia educational training materials, writing policies and regulatory rules, writing grant applications, and publishing brochures, newsletters and magazines. The materials they produce are used by the organizations themselves, and the students can list the experience on a resume (see "Learning while serving").

The program is also at the forefront of distance education, now offering more than half of its courses as "online hybrid classes," primarily in conjunction with the Round Rock Higher Education Center. Students meet in a classroom with the professor once or twice during a semester. The rest of the course, including assignments and critiques of work, is given online.

"Distance education is a natural fit for technical communication," says Allison.

"Many people go into technical communication jobs, working with people around the country and around the world and never meeting them face to face. We have students who live as far away as Waco and Laredo who can reasonably take our classes because we've expanded to this new way of learning."

Some 75 percent of students in the technical communication program are full-time working professionals who are seeking advanced training in technical communication to go into project management positions or who want to begin new careers as technical communicators.

"Just about any job or academic career that a person goes into today uses technical communication," Allison says. "Generally, most people who write nonfiction materials fall into the realm of technical communication. I tell applicants that, no matter what you do, this degree will serve you well."

More information about the M.A. in technical communication is available from the Department of English, <http://matc.english.txstate.edu/>, e-mail: [matc@txstate.edu](mailto:matc@txstate.edu), phone 512.245.3733.

## Courses in technical communication

The M.A. in technical communication curriculum covers the theory of rhetoric and composition, applied writing and technology. Course topics include:

- Computers and Writing
- Digital and Print Document Design
- Digital Literacies (the new social media)
- Digital Media and the Web
- Digital Print and Document Design
- Editing the Professional Publication
- Ethics in Technical Communication
- International Technical Communication
- Language Problems in a Multicultural Environment
- Literature and Technology
- Narrative in Technical Communication
- Principles of Technical Communication
- Proposal Writing
- Software Documentation
- Studies in Language and Linguistics
- Technical Editing
- Visual Rhetoric
- Writing Across Cultures
- Writing for the Government

## Learning while serving

Students earn college credit and gain real-world experience in technical communication while providing a service. Examples of projects for government, business and non-profit organizations include:

- Software documentation and publication editing for National Instruments
- Company operations publication for a division of Harcourt Trade Publishers
- Faculty Advising Handbook for St. Edward's University
- Web site for The Prague Institute for Global Urban Development
- Educational guide and brochure for the University Ministry of St. Mary's University
- White paper for the high-tech company Advanced Micro Devices
- New employee handbook for the Technology Services Office of the Texas Department of Insurance
- Employee safety manual for the Texas Engineering Extension Service
- Fundraising and public relations packet for Groundwork Music Project
- Editor's handbook for the *Victorian Periodicals Review*, a national journal edited by Texas State faculty
- User's guide for open-source software at Infoglide Software Co.
- Counseling resource directory for parents, teachers and staff of Pflugerville Middle School
- Revised Web site for Austin Affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation
- Revised rules and procedures manual and the Web site for the Austin Access Cable Station
- Revised client services manual for Goodwill Industries in Austin
- Faculty manual for the Academy of Oriental Medicine in Austin
- Improved "help" function of an online learning environment at Texas State

# Cross-cultural language

## Pinfan Zhu

### Assistant professor

B.A. in literature, Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China; M.A. in applied linguistics, Kunming University of Science and Technology, China; Ph.D. in technical communication and rhetoric, Texas Tech University

Areas of specialization/interest: Translation, cross-cultural communication, international technical communication

Pinfan Zhu is interested in the problems of translating information from one culture to another so that it is readable. His research has implications for organizations that use the Internet to disseminate information or sell products globally, as well as

the month first, then the day and finally the year, but the British write the day first, then the month and finally the year. In documents for international readers, 6/2/09 should be written as June 2, 2009, to avoid confusion with Feb. 6, 2009.

- In Chinese, the address starts with the largest place (the country) and ends in the smallest place (the house or business). The American way of writing an address is just the opposite, beginning with the smallest place and ending with the largest place.
- Non-native speakers of a language feel

regarded as dreadful monsters in English culture. And while Americans regard dogs as loyal and friendly, the Chinese regard them as ferocious, menial and dirty.

- Using colors to describe a thing or concept can be problematic, too. For example, to express jealousy, English-speaking people use green-eyed while Chinese use red-eyed. The English gray hair is the Chinese white hair. Some Chinese translators use red tea (hong cha) to express black tea in English, which may confuse English readers. Yellow book in Chinese means pornographic book, whereas in English it means phone directory.
- Readers are more comfortable with material written in familiar rhetorical patterns that express their attitudes and beliefs. For example, Chinese culture generally respects governmental authority and professional expertise, as well as group harmony, a sense of community, we-relationship and shared interest. Whereas native English speakers prefer a linear, or direct, rhetorical pattern (in which the topic and point are stated first, followed by supporting evidence and details), speakers of Chinese prefer a spiral, or indirect, rhetorical pattern. In the following text, the reader can infer that the writer wants to criticize the inefficiency of the Chinese Department of Agriculture without causing the department to lose face. He uses his dreams of what he hopes will come true to suggest that the department try to realize good things. It is also more common in Chinese writing than in Western writing for the writer to use anecdotes, allegories and rhetorical questions to express a point:

I am not a policymaker, but I have a dream of tractors singing in the fields and trucks roaring effortlessly on roads. I am not an agricultural technical program planner, but I have a dream of seeing farmers studying science and technology, and working comfortably with machinery.



to readers who seek information and products on the Internet.

“For communication to be effective, organizations must target their writing to the language and culture of a specific audience,” Zhu says. Technical writers working with cross-cultural audiences must know the cultural implications of words, images, colors, communication styles and more to prevent confusion and make information useful.

Following are some examples of language problems that technical writers must cope with in writing for the Web:

- Dates are written differently in various cultures. Americans, for example, write

more comfortable reading it in short sentences. Including a glossary of the technical terms used in a document helps translators as well as international readers to comprehend the material.

- A word may have opposite meanings in different cultures. For example, individualism has a positive connotation in America, implying independence in thought, self-expression, and economic and creative pursuit. In China, however, it implies selfishness, showing off and the undermining of group harmony.
- Technical writers must be careful in their use of figurative idioms. Whereas dragons are regarded as auspicious animals in Chinese culture, they are

submission. By phrasing his letter in this manner, the editor hopes the contributor won't be too disappointed and that he will be encouraged to submit other articles in the future:

We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper, it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that, in the next thousand years, we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition and beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity.

## Online language

### Deborah Balzhiser Morton Assistant professor

B.S. English and journalism, Western Illinois University; M.A. in writing and Ph.D., Illinois State University

Areas of specialization/interest: Computer-mediated communication, help development, rhetoric and pedagogy

Two of Deborah Morton's favorite classes to teach are Digital Literacies and Computers and Writing. The provocative classes invite students to explore technical communication issues such as:

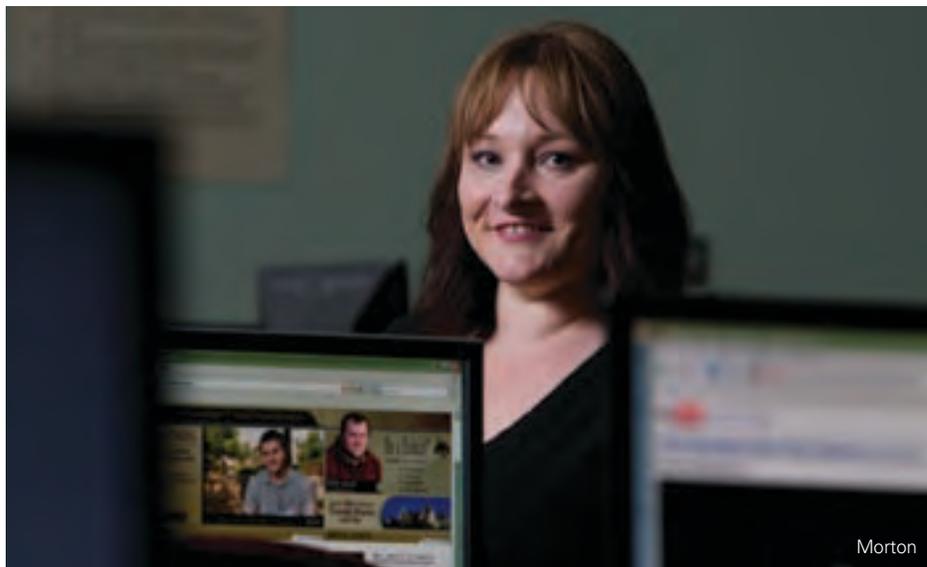
- How Amazon.com's online model for selling books affects the management of physical bookstores. "The keyword search function on Amazon makes it easy for customers to find and purchase books online. One of my students has written about the pressure that physical bookstores are under to implement an Amazon-style function for finding books," Morton explains.
- How access to publication on the Internet is turning us into a "society of amateurs." "It bothered one of my students that anyone can publish anything on the Internet – restaurant reviews, so-called 'investigative journalism' – and appear to be an authority," Morton says. "The student pointed out that, when anyone can publish anything at all, we sacrifice a standard of expertise."
- How the lack of money can limit access to technology and the proliferation

of good ideas. After meeting with the editor of *Kairos*, a peer-reviewed online journal on technical communication, two of Morton's students felt discouraged by the obstacles they perceived to publishing in *Kairos*.

"The journal requires that material be submitted using technologies – design software and technological knowhow – that students may not have access to," Morton says. "The students responded to the editor by making a video, which they published on YouTube, asking the question: 'What if lack of money and technical knowhow keeps scholars with good ideas from publishing in *Kairos*? Won't *Kairos* have further marginalized the academic voices it seeks to make heard?' At first, the editors of *Kairos* were taken aback, but then, because of our students' response, they created a section in the journal for this sort of feedback, saying that our students had started the kind of

One way she's gotten students to think about their use of media is to assign them to write a paper about another person in the class, based only on what they see in the person's online profile on Facebook. "The students, most of whom use Facebook every day, are horrified at first by this assignment because they suddenly realize they're going to be judged by what they've said about themselves on Facebook. Their profiles and messages are there to be judged by their family and friends, yet it has never occurred to them to think about how they may be seen by other people.

"The lesson also helps the students to improve their research, analysis and writing skills. They have to look at another student's photos on a Facebook profile and make a claim based on the photos. Then, we talk about how neither the photos nor what the person has written about himself or herself on Facebook tells the



conversation they wanted to encourage in their journal."

- How students' online practices – their use of social networking media such as Facebook, Twitter, Google and text messaging – affect their lives and the larger culture. "Most students already know how to use these media when they enter the classroom, because they've been using them for a long time. So, the class challenges them to think about their uses of the media and to choose the correct medium for each task they want to accomplish," Morton says.

whole story. So, in the end, the students have learned that they can't tell me about that person based on the Facebook profile alone, and they've learned something about writing: to analyze methodologically and systematically, to compile data, and to come to a conclusion," she says.

Morton has turned the assignment into a research project co-authored with undergraduate and graduate students. It will be published in a professional journal online.

# The language of discrimination

**Miriam Williams**  
Assistant professor

B.S. in economics, University of Houston; M.A. in public administration, University of Houston; M.A. with a major in technical communication, Texas State University; Ph.D. in technical communication and rhetoric, Texas Tech University

**Areas of specialization/interest:** Policy writing, intercultural technical communication, and ethics in technical communication

At the conclusion of the American Civil War, the federal government created the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands (usually referred to as the Freedmen's Bureau) to aid distressed refugees and freed slaves. A large part of the bureau's function was to help emancipated slaves adjust to the conditions of their freedom by setting up work opportunities and supervising labor contracts.



In 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau issued a circular, similar to today's policy memorandums, providing bureau field staff with regulations for the fair treatment of freed slaves in labor negotiations and contracts. In 1866, however, the 11th Texas Legislature established its own regulations, the Texas Black Codes, which legalized contract-endorsed servitude in a covert attempt to indenture freed blacks. (The Texas Black Codes were superseded by congressional Reconstruction in 1867.)

As part of her research in technical communication, Miriam Williams is interested in the government discourse that creates public trust or distrust of government officials and policies. She has traced and analyzed "a language of distrust" in the Texas Black Codes and demonstrated that, even though the codes often duplicate language used in the Freedmen's Bureau circular, certain word changes and additions promote punitive, binding and involuntary contracts between white "masters" and "mistresses" and black subordinates. While the Texas Black Codes appear to ignore race and to regulate blacks and whites equally, certain language frustrates the federal government's attempt to provide legal equality for blacks and create trust in the black community.

According to Williams' research:

Language in the Texas Black Codes frequently contradicts language in Freedmen's Bureau regulations and creates deception. For instance, in a section regu-

lating who can be contracted for plantation labor, the Texas code suggests that minors should be included as laborers. Although this section closely follows the language used by the Freedmen's Bureau, the word "minors" was added by the Texas Legislature. The classification of black minors as laborers made them vulnerable to unfair labor contracts and apprenticeships, which were full of punitive clauses.

Several sections of the Texas Black Codes include language that allowed fines and/or physical punishment to be assessed disproportionately and harmfully. For example, apprentices who were minors were susceptible to corporal punishment, and they could have their wages reduced as punishment for "negligent work, failure to obey employers, swearing in the presence of the employer or employer's family, leaving home without permission, and fighting."

The codes also set out terms for laborers not to work on the Sabbath "except to take necessary care of stock and other property on the plantation, or to do necessary cooking or household duties, unless by special contract for work of necessity." As Williams points out, this section is deceptive in suggesting that laborers do not have to work on Sundays while proceeding to list numerous duties that employers can request of laborers on this day.

Another section states, "If any apprentice shall run away from, or leave the employ of his master or mistress without permission, said master or mistress may pursue and recapture said apprentice, and bring him before any justice of the peace of the county . . . in event of a refusal on the part of said apprentice to return, then the justice shall commit said apprentice to the county jail." Williams explains that, while sections of the Texas Black Codes that were directly addressed to black laborers and apprentices are undoubtedly influenced by laws enacted and enforced during slavery, the only punishment directed at white employers was monetary fines, not physical punishment or incarceration.

There is evidence that some white men, namely Freedmen's Bureau Agent James P. Butler, also suffered the threat of fines and physical punishment by county sheriffs, court officials and civil officers who were responsible for enforcing the Black Codes. In Huntsville, Texas, the county sheriff pointed a gun at Butler and told him that "in one minute he was to be a dead man." In writing his report to the Freedmen's Bureau, Butler said, "I consider it hardly worth repeating, is [sic] the removal of the present set of civil officers." Williams comments, "If James P. Butler, a white federal official, suffered such abuses by the local authorities, it is not likely that freed blacks could trust these same Texas officials as credible arbitrators of state laws."

Williams reports another incident in which Butler voids a labor contract that a white employer forced freed people to sign. Thus, Butler and other agents of the Freedmen's Bureau were helpful in protecting the rights of freed blacks, making good faith efforts on their behalf, ensuring that their labor contracts were voluntary and not as discriminatory as the Texas Black Codes, and offering help in lieu of punishment.

Williams shows in her study that relationships of trust are built on language and tone that facilitates mutual respect and good faith, the opportunity to participate in and influence the political process, and negotiations that are conducted between more or less free and equal adults. She concludes that the disenfranchisement of freed blacks by the Texas Black Codes was in violation of federal law and an intentional breakdown in communication and governance initiated by the 11th Legislature.

In a forthcoming book, Williams expands this study to include a contemporary study of State of Texas regulations written in the plain language style and an examination of African-American responses to the plain style. She concludes that the plain language style of regulatory writing is one step toward negotiating trust between government agencies and historically distrustful audiences.



## The language of storms

**Libby Allison**  
Associate professor

Director of the M.A. program in technical communication

B.A., University of South Florida; M.A., University of Florida; Ph.D., University of South Florida  
Allison developed courses in Technical Writing and Journalism at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi and has been a professional journalist.

**Areas of specialization/interest:** Technical writing, rhetoric and composition

Libby Allison developed her interest in storm disasters as a 20-year Florida resident who saw the devastating effects of

Hurricane Andrew. Her current research focuses on changes in the language of National Weather Service advisories.

Typically, weather advisories categorize hurricanes depending on their intensity from one to five, with five as potentially the most destructive. The advisories describe the duration of an approaching storm, the amount of rainfall and the height of the seas it will produce, the wind speed and direction, the air temperature fluctuations, the barometric pressure. But in 1999, the National Weather Service concluded that it needed to develop language – strong, clear impact statements – that would be more effective in letting citizens know what would actually happen in weather-related events.

In her textbook *Writing for the Government* (co-authored with Miriam Williams), Allison discusses the impact of such language used in a historic advisory warning citizens about Hurricane Katrina.

In 2005, Allison writes, National Weather Service meteorologist Robert Ricks watched Hurricane Katrina approach New Orleans and knew that typical weather bulletin language was inadequate to warn citizens of the impending disaster. He made history when he issued an Urgent Weather Message using strong and vivid language, designed only recently by the National Weather Service, to describe the destruction Katrina would cause (excerpt at left). The message, now among the items in the Hurricane Katrina Collection at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, is credited with saving many lives. ★

URGENT - WEATHER MESSAGE  
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
NEW ORLEANS LA  
1011 AM CDT SUN AUG 28 2005

HURRICANE KATRINA...A MOST POWERFUL HURRICANE WITH UNPRECEDENTED STRENGTH...RIVALING THE INTENSITY OF HURRICANE CAMILLE OF 1969.

MOST OF THE AREA WILL BE UNINHABITABLE FOR WEEKS...PERHAPS LONGER. AT LEAST ONE HALF OF WELL CONSTRUCTED HOMES WILL HAVE ROOF AND WALL FAILURE. ALL GABLED ROOFS WILL FAIL... THE MAJORITY OF INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS WILL BECOME NON FUNCTIONAL. PARTIAL TO COMPLETE WALL AND ROOF FAILURE IS EXPECTED. ALL WOOD FRAMED LOW RISING APARTMENT BUILDINGS WILL BE DESTROYED. CONCRETE BLOCK LOW RISE APARTMENTS WILL SUSTAIN MAJOR DAMAGE...HIGH RISE

OFFICE AND APARTMENT BUILDINGS WILL SWAY DANGEROUSLY...A FEW TO THE POINT OF TOTAL COLLAPSE. ALL WINDOWS WILL BLOW OUT.

AIRBORNE DEBRIS WILL BE WIDESPREAD...AND MAY INCLUDE HEAVY ITEMS SUCH AS HOUSEHOLD APPLIANCES AND EVEN LIGHT VEHICLES. SPORT UTILITY VEHICLES AND LIGHT TRUCKS WILL BE MOVED...PERSONS... PETS...AND LIVESTOCK EXPOSED TO THE WINDS WILL FACE CERTAIN DEATH IF STRUCK.

POWER OUTAGES WILL LAST FOR WEEKS...WATER SHORTAGES WILL MAKE HUMAN SUFFERING INCREDIBLE BY MODERN STANDARDS.

(Excerpt from "Inland Hurricane Warning." Source: National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration)