

Rhetoric and Professional Communication

Sample Doctoral Comprehensive Exam Questions

Note: This document offers samples of comprehensive exam questions that may be used or adapted to meet the needs of individual students. In consultation with their advisors, however, students should feel free to write original questions [see Comprehensive Exam Requirements for a list of evaluation criteria].

Sample Comps Questions – Rhetoric

[1] In this past decade, the concept of a singular History of Rhetoric has come under scrutiny from both within and beyond disciplinary borders. In this exam, identify and represent the disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship that multiplies the history of rhetoric, explaining how it has impacted the shape of the field.

[2] Rhetoric draws on and intersects with critical theory from a number of disciplinary homes. In this exam, make an argument for the importance of a specific theory to rhetoric by [1] reviewing the major tenets of the theory (as it exists independently from rhetoric) and [2] articulating its value for rhetoric (both as it has been taken up by rhetoric and how you suggest it could be).
**Examples of theories: decolonial, disability, feminist, eco, queer, posthuman, etc.

[3] In this exam, track the rhetorical circulation of a specific concept (of your choosing) within rhetoric and composition (or technical communication), paying particular attention to when and where it sticks and how it moves. Speculate on the rhetorical effects of the patterns you identify.
**Examples of concepts: agency, bodies, ethos, movement, technology, etc.

[4] Plato positioned his own philosophy against sophistic rhetoric and philosophy. Scholars over the past few decades have begun a project of reassessment of sophistic thought, often with an eye to relating this to existing theoretical trends in anti-foundationalist thinking (like post-structuralism). Map the itinerary of sophistic thought in relationship to Western metaphysics. What were Plato's concerns with the sophists, and how do those concerns inform or stand in tension with contemporary understandings of rhetoric? What are some of the key arguments for recovering sophistic? What challenges do these pose to the current relationship between rhetoric and philosophy, rhetoric and politics, rhetoric and subjectivity? What comes after sophistic now?

Sample Comps Questions – Composition

[1] Critical theory is often articulated in terms of specific “turns”—the linguistic turn, the historiographic turn, the affective turn, the material turn, etc. In this exam, draw on the trope of the turn to represent an important shift in disciplinary thinking within composition studies. Rather than summarize before-and-after thinking, use the exam to represent the context, complexity, and politics of a specific disciplinary moment, and make an argument for the significance of the turn to the contemporary field.

[2] Long-established as an important site for research and pedagogical innovation in Composition Studies, assessment is also a political lightning rod in contemporary public discourses of education. In this exam, articulate a history of assessment in Composition Studies

which accounts for its waxing and waning in the field, paying particular attention to how the politics of the field may contribute to its shifting importance.

[3] Throughout the past 40 years, the field of composition has embraced and critiqued a variety of pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing. In this exam, propose a list of what you argue to be the central pedagogical developments in composition, reviewing their key tenets and justifying their importance to the field. In addition, articulate what you see as key areas of tension and agreement in these pedagogies and discuss what you see as the benefits and pitfalls of each.

[4] Scholars and pedagogues working within and beyond Composition Studies proper articulate complex relationships between the politics of education, language, literacy, and writing instruction. In this exam, identify and synthesize scholarship surrounding what you understand to be a key issue at stake in the study and performance of these relationships in secondary writing-instruction.

[5] Over the course of the past 2,500 years, written culture has progressively displaced oral culture throughout much of the world. The advent of the digital age would seem to represent a new and important change in the medium of thought. In what ways has the spread of literacy in the postmodern era reconfigured epistemology? How has the advent of digital media altered it in different ways? In other words, how has writing (and digital writing in particular) changed what we know, how we know it, and the ways in which we claim to know it? How has digital media furthered or altered the effects of writing on thinking? Further, what, if any, implications do these technological changes hold for larger theoretical questions about subjectivity, culture, pedagogy, etc?

Sample Comps Questions – Professional Communication Core

[1] In context of a global market that draws together policies and practices from a range of geopolitical contexts, technical communication finds itself entangled in complicated ethical issues that extend from appropriate research methods to workers rights and safety. In this exam, draw together recent scholarship in transnational technical communication and identify patterns in how ethics are discussed. From the patterns you identify, track one specific ethical issue that you argue is central to the work of technical communication theory and practice in a global economy.

[2] In *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, Adam Banks complicates our understanding of the ‘digital divide’ as merely a question of access. His work participates alongside scholarship in rhetoric and technical communication that interrupts technology as a neutral signifier and implicates in larger issues of power and legitimacy. In this exam, synthesize such scholarship in order to make an argument for how it contributes to our disciplinary understanding and practice of technical communication.

[3] Technical and Professional Communication has as its foundation theories of rhetoric, cognitive psychology, culture and linguistics (to name only a few). These areas of study have been informing the practice of technical and professional communication since it became recognized as a discipline. Considering the history of Technical and Professional

Communication and about the current state of the profession, discuss relevant theories that have influenced the historical practice of technical and professional communication. Next, discuss what theories are driving current developments, approaches and strategies in technical and professional communication outside of academia.

[4] Pick one sub-discipline or activity within Technical and Professional Communication (such as grant writing, web design and development, collaborative writing, or software documentation) and survey and analyze the technology tools used to carry out the work in that sub-discipline or activity. The survey and analysis should include the theoretical underpinnings of these tools (if any), current and past academic and professional analyses of their use, and best practices for their application. The exam should conclude by looking toward the future of the sub-discipline or activity: what direction is it heading? Specifically, what technology tools are emerging that may affect the practice and pedagogy in this area?

[5] Developing and dispersing information with and through digital media profoundly impacts our lives and our work. Changes in how we communicate, interact, convey messages, and so on occur at a rapid pace, and researchers in professional communication examine these changes and anticipate others. Identify several important findings from research in the past decade in the field of professional communication, placing these results in the context of important work already existing in the field. Then identify a gap in the research that warrants attention, providing rationale for your selection.

[6] James Porter (2004) writes that the traditional fields of technical and business writing are interested in the “*professional who writes*” while the field of “professional writing” is interested in the “*career writer*, the professional whose job responsibility is mainly the design, testing, and development of documents” (p. 292), though of course he sees it as so much more. What rhetorical contributions does the “career writer” with these job responsibilities need to provide? Consider why our program—Rhetoric and Professional Communication—is named and functioning as it is in light of needs of professional communicators (human factors specialists, usability experts, writers) and the organizations in which they work. Draw from relevant disciplinary literature to explore the extent to which this is a good pairing of fields, and why.