

Communication Skills Fall 2008 (CS2CS3/SE3IO3)

A Detailed Outline

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Introduction

Communication skills may be the most important course that you take as an undergraduate student. It takes written and oral skills to translate your degree into a job: the preparation of a *curriculum vitae* (CV or résumé), a letter of introduction, and the job interview over the phone and in person. Once you have a job you will be writing memos and reports and voicing your views at meetings. You will advance to managerial positions based on your communication skills; yes, you must be proficient and competent in your *métier*, but you will be overlooked if you are unable to express yourself well.

The aim of this course is to help you get started in obtaining those skills. Just as in any trade, it takes time and effort to write and speak well. It is crucial to read—to observe how people, who do it well, are able to translate thoughts into words, whether written or spoken. You also need to practice writing and speaking. In this course you will write five short essays, of two pages each, and give two presentations, of twenty minutes each. You will submit your essays and give your presentations in the tutorials. The tutors will grade your work. In the lectures you will be given reading material and advice, especially on writing.

Writing Guides

The books mentioned in the next two sections are handy references for writing and reading, but it is not necessary to purchase them for this course. All the required material will be presented in the lectures.

[Zin06] It contains two chapters which are particularly useful for us: “Science and Technology” [Zin06, § 15, pg. 147] and “Business Writing: Writing in Your Job” [Zin06, § 16, pg. 165].

[JW72] is a timeless classic, inexpensive and easily available. It is more a reference of elementary rules of usage and composition than a textbook.

[Ber71] is a handy reference for avoiding common mistakes in writing.

[Chi93] is the ultimate guide to writing. It contains information about every aspect of the trade: from punctuation, to preparing a bibliography and an index.

[Jos02] is a fairly academic introduction to the theory behind the liberal arts of logic, grammar, and rhetoric.

Reading Guides

One cannot write well without reading well. Reading good writers, especially literary canons, is the best way to furnish one’s intellect with the necessary tools to write and speak eloquently. The

following books are, in my opinion, excellent guides to reading (note that this is material for your future development; these guides are not part of the course *per se*). An excellent guide to English and American literature is Kantor’s [Kan06]—very accessible, funny, and aimed at college students. Another book, more advanced, yet sometimes too lavish with erudition, is Bloom’s [Blo00]. It is a great guide to reading, but perhaps not for beginners.

Finally, consider the classic by Adler and Doren’s [AvD72]. This last book is different from the first two in that it is not a guide to literature; it is rather a manual of techniques for reading (for example, how to do *elementary reading*, *inspectional reading*, or *analytical reading*—of particular importance to us is the chapter on “How to read science and mathematics” [AvD72, §17, pg. 255]).

Essays

Here are the subjects¹:

1. **What I did during the last summer**
due week of September 22 at the beginning of your tutorial
In marking the TAs will emphasize: simplicity, that your essay is clutter-free, and style.
2. **Write a letter to the Dean on how to improve your program**
due week of October 6 at the beginning of your tutorial
In marking the TAs will emphasize: the audience, words, and usage.
3. **Pick a country and tell what to visit there**
due week of October 20 at the beginning of your tutorial
In marking the TAs will emphasize: unity and the lead-&-ending.
4. **Explain what is UNIX to your grandmother**
due week of November 3 at the beginning of your tutorial
This is an exercise in “Science and Technology” writing.
5. **Write a letter of introduction to a company where you seek a job**
due week of November 17 at the beginning of your tutorial
This is an exercise in “Business Writing”.

Presentations

Each student will give two presentations. The first presentation will be on a general topic (e.g., the biography of a Turing Award winner), and the second presentation will be more technical (e.g., a quick introduction to \LaTeX). The presentations will be given in tutorials, 10 minutes each. Thus, there is time for four presentations per tutorial, plus 20 minutes for comments, discussion, and set-up. Students are expected to attend all tutorials, including when it is not their turn to speak. There is a 10% grade for tutorial attendance (the TAs will keep track of attendance; you can miss two tutorials, and after that each missed tutorial will deduct 1% of your attendance grade, up to 10%).

The topic of your presentation is to a certain extent up to you, with the proviso that the first presentation must be for a general audience and non-technical, and the second for a general

¹Paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, “In art everything matters but the subject matter.” The topic of your little essay is the least important part of the exercise; you are to make an effort to write well, concentrating on material emphasized during the given week—see the comments below each title.

audience as well, but technical (and, of course, both in the field of computer science/software engineering). Here are some ideas for a non-technical presentation: the biography of a Turing award winner, history of computing (some aspect of it, e.g., the first microchip, the Enigma machine², the beginnings of functional programming), the job market for programmers, etc. For the second, technical presentation, you must explain how some particular piece of computing technology works—with a general audience in mind. So you can pick an operating system, a data-base, a programming language, etc.

You will need to do a little bit of research to keep the audience interested for 20 minutes. You want the audience to be paying attention, to learn something, and to leave them with at least one new idea. The TAs will be grading your presentation.

There is no need to commit to a topic in advance. No multi-media is allowed (no projectors, laptops, etc.); this must be an opportunity for you to hone your public speaking skills, and not hide behind technology. Furthermore, there is no time for set up equipment, as each speaker has 10 minutes. $\frac{1}{2}\%$ will be deducted for each minute that you come short of your 10 minutes; also, no overtime will be allowed (there are too many presentations per tutorial).

The nuts and bolts

Choosing a good text editor is very important. I have used many over the years, but eventually I decided to use `vim`³ exclusively (a good guide is [LR98]); the reason is that I really like its powerful pattern-matching-and-replacement features (`emacs`⁴ has equal capabilities). Both programs are free. Ultimately, this is a personal decision, and there are many to choose from. However, it is absolutely crucial to learn \LaTeX ; this is the *lingua franca* of scientists and engineers. It allows you to produce high quality documents that contain mathematical symbols and equations. It is a great investment to learn \LaTeX , and while there are a lot of good tutorials on line⁵, there is a very nice short introduction by Lamport—see [Lam94].

References

- [AvD72] Mortimer J. Adler and Charles van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. Simon and Schuster, 1972.
- [Ber71] Thomas Elliott Berry. *The most common mistakes in english usage*. McGraw-Hill, 1971.
- [Blo00] Harold Bloom. *How to Read and Why*. Scribner, 2000.
- [Chi93] *The Chicago Manual of Style*. The University of Chicago Press, 15 edition, 1993.
- [Jos02] Sister Miriam Joseph. *The Trivium*. Paul Dry Books, 2002.
- [JW72] William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Longman, 1972.
- [Kan06] Elizabeth Kantor. *English and American Literature*. Regnery Publishing, 2006.
- [Lam94] Leslie Lamport. *\LaTeX* . Addison-Wesley, 1994.

²en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enigma_machine

³www.vim.org

⁴www.gnu.org/software/emacs/

⁵For example, en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Latex

- [LR98] Linda Lamb and Arnold Robbins. *Learning the VI editor*. O'Reilly, 6 edition, 1998.
- [Zin06] William Zinsser. *On writing well*. Collins, 2006.