Teaching Technical Editing: Teacher Perspectives on Pedagogical Challenges and Implications for Teacher Training

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Abstract This article presents a case study of the evolution and pedagogical challenges of teaching an upper-level undergraduate *Technical Editing and Style* course at a research-intensive university in the Southeastern United States. Drawing on interviews with six instructors across ranks—from graduate students to instructors to tenured faculty—we explore how the course has changed over time in terms of textbooks, industry alignment, and technology integration. Our findings reveal that while the course structure has remained largely consistent since its creation, instructors have adapted materials and assignments to reflect shifts in editing practices in various ways and often note the course as being one of the most rewarding to teach, citing its impact on students' professional development and rhetorical awareness. We then identify five key pedagogical challenges and advocate for greater support and resources for instructors, especially as editing pedagogy must now address the implications of AI and evolving workplace demands. This study contributes to broader conversations about the future of Editing and Publishing (E&P) programs and underscores the enduring value of technical editing instruction in a rapidly changing communication landscape.

Keywords technical editing, editing and publishing, technical communication pedagogy

As editing and publishing (E&P) programs continue to grow, programs are increasingly faced with concerns about how to prepare students with editing skills. Holly Baker, Jacob Rawlins, and Aubrey Pierson's review of E&P programs found that only 10% of the courses focused on editing skills, which they note as a "shortcoming" for E&P programs (2024, p. 75). In another study, Susan Lang and Laura Palmer observed that "technical

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editing receives relatively little attention in the academic world of technical communication, and, as such, the course has remained relatively static" (2017, p. 297). Together, these findings underscore a critical issue: while editing courses are key to E&P programs, they lack disciplinary attention and research. At a time when the emergence of generative AI raises concerns for the future of editing in the publishing industry, we believe there is need to turn more focused attention to the status of editing courses in E&P programs and technical and professional communication (TPC). Conducting research on editing courses could help these courses stay aligned with the evolving nature of the field and could help E&P and TPC program administrators make more informed decisions about curricular design and how such courses fit into the broader goals of degrees and certificates.

As teachers of technical editing and as administrators of writing and communication programs ourselves, we are acutely aware of how difficult it is to teach (and staff) technical editing courses. The current challenge, as we see it, is not just *what* to teach in technical editing courses today, but *how* to prepare and train educators to teach these courses effectively, and to keep pace with shifting professional and technological developments. To gain a better understanding of how we might better prepare teachers for technical editing courses, we started with two research questions:

> 1) What challenges have instructors previously encountered when teaching technical editing courses?
>
> 2) How have technical editing courses evolved in response to technological changes and industry best practices?

While we had our own experiences to draw from to answer these questions, we wanted to understand how other teachers of technical editing perceived these issues as well.

Since the character of individual E&P programs and editing courses often depends on many institutional factors and idiosyncrasies (Baker, Rawlins, & Pierson, 2024), we chose to focus our preliminary study on a qualitative analysis of one technical editing course. The course we selected was *Technical Editing and Style*, an upper-level undergraduate course that has been taught for several decades in our English Department with a Technical and Scientific Communication undergraduate major (formerly called Professional and Technical Writing) at an R1 university in the Southeastern US. Though we are not officially an E&P program, our program highlights editing and publishing as a concentration in our curriculum, and we see the technical editing course as crucial for preparing students to pursue careers in editing and publishing.

To understand the nuances in the pedagogical approaches to this course over the last two decades, we conducted interviews with teachers of multiple ranks who have taught this course. Since we have both taught this course, we also chose to include our own interviews as part of our data set because there have been relatively few instructors of its course over the last twenty-five years, and our perspectives are key to understanding the pedagogical history and evolution. We selected only people who had been listed as the instructor of record for the course; out of the six invited to be interviewed, four accepted our invitation. Therefore, the dataset for this study comprises interviews with four former instructors of the course, as well as the interviews we conducted with one another. In all the interviews, we asked questions about course design, pedagogical challenges (including technology and industry trends), teacher training, and course impact and significance (refer to Appendix A for list of interview questions). Our goals in the interviews were to understand how other teachers perceived the goals of the course, the degree to which teachers aligned course content with industry expectations, and the distinct challenges that teachers faced in teaching the course.

Our initial hypothesis centered on course evolution, assuming that changes in course curriculum over time would bring to light insights about the challenges in how technical editing has been taught. However, our interviews revealed a different story: rather than uncovering significant curricular evolution that informed how the course was taught, we found that teachers perceived pedagogical challenges differently according to their individual training and professional backgrounds. This finding shifted our focus to pedagogical training and the need to support new or novice teachers assigned to editing courses—an issue that directly impacts how the course functions within a broader programmatic framework.

Our study thus highlights the critical need to train and support instructors who teach technical editing. As editing workflows increasingly incorporate digital platforms and new technologies, teachers must be equipped not only with foundational editorial expertise but also with the ability to critically engage with emerging developments. Staying informed about these trends enables teachers to model and teach relevant skills that reflect current industry practices. For example, while AI tools present both opportunities and challenges, they illustrate the types of innovations that require thoughtful pedagogical integration. Technical editing courses thus become dynamic spaces where teachers guide students in developing both traditional editing skills and evolving technological literacies. Although our study does not focus specifically on AI, we recognize its growing influence as one compelling reason to invest in robust pedagogical training for teachers.

What we offer in this study is insight into distinct pedagogical challenges of teaching editing courses, which may help emerging E&P programs consider how to develop shared curricula and train teachers for such courses. In what follows, we review relevant literature about pedagogical challenges in technical editing, present findings from our interviews and discuss the pedagogical challenges and opportunities. Ultimately, we advocate for greater institutional support and training for technical editing instructors, especially as the field evolves in response to technological change and industry needs. While our data set is small, we believe our findings point to broader implications for the development of editing courses in TPC and E&P programs.

Literature Review

Since our goals are to understand pedagogical challenges and how technology advancement or industry needs inform the evolution of editing courses, we focused our literature review on three areas of scholarship that tend to address these challenges: development of editing curriculum, technological changes and industry best practices, and technical editing pedagogy. These three areas of scholarship gave us insight into the complex dynamics of teaching technical editing and the skills required to do it well.

Development of Editing Curriculum

In the first category of research, there are studies focused on how technical editing courses fit, or should fit, into a broader TPC curriculum. Some scholars attempt to identify the current state of TPC and E&P programs with the goal of finding a unified path forward (Hayhoe, 2007; Flanagan & Albers, 2019); indeed, this study is a call to that investigation. Some scholars seek to identify a core curriculum across E&P programs in colleges in the United States (Baker, Rawlins, & Pierson, 2024), while others assess the overlapping topics and trends within TPC and E&P fields in search of disciplinary and national alignment (Melonçon, 2019; Carradini, 2020). While these studies offer valuable nuances about TPC and E&P programs, they make a similar argument: E&P as a field within and/or among TPC is in need of intentional development and has been for several decades. As far back as 2001, Marjorie Davis recommended that the field must develop standards for "academic programs" and for "those who practice [technical communication]" (2001, pg. 143). Together, these works center not on course instruction but on the structure, content, and alignment of TPC and E&P programs, advocating for a curriculum that treats editing not as a static skill but as a dynamic, rhetorical practice essential to preparing students for the complexities of contemporary communication work.

Technological Changes and Industry Best Practices

The second category of research examines how technical writing and editing courses align with industry best practices, including the incorporation of technology. In one study, a team of scholars from George Mason University proposed an accountability-driven model for program development that highlights the importance of reciprocal partnerships between universities and industry stakeholders. They developed an Advisory Board of Industry to establish better alignment across academia and industry, incorporating stakeholder feedback into the curriculum to better prepare students for the field (Lawrence, et al., 2023). Other studies in this area have also solicited industry professionals to determine why technical editing courses "aren't meeting the needs of industry," with many researchers suggesting revisions to current TPC and E&P courses that could help bridge the academic/industry divide (Lang & Palmer, 2017, pg. 297; Lanier, 2018; Gubala, Larson, & Melonçon, 2020). Lang and Palmer (2017) argue that traditional editing courses often fail to prepare students for the multimodal and technologically diverse demands of contemporary editing roles. Their course redesign, informed by job postings and practitioner input, incorporated editing for audio, video, and web content, underscoring the need for industry-relevant competencies.

Similarly, Lanier (2018) surveyed technical communication professionals to identify emerging workplace trends, revealing a growing emphasis on multimedia production, agile workflows, and mobile-friendly documentation—skills that are increasingly expected of technical editors. Carolyn Gubala, Kara Larson, and Lisa Melonçon's study demonstrates that professionals outside of writing-centric roles still perceive writing errors as detrimental to workplace credibility, suggesting that technical editing instruction must emphasize precision and professionalism to meet broad organizational standards (2020). While these studies address the academia/industry divide in different ways, a shared takeaway emerges: Integrating real-world industry practices into technical writing and editing courses enhances student preparedness and professional credibility.

Technical Editing Pedagogy

The final category of research we reviewed focuses on the distinct pedagogy of technical editing, either via course design or general pedagogical principles. This area of research reflects a spectrum of approaches ranging from broad theoretical frameworks to grounded, individual course design. In one study, Michelle Corbin, Pat Moell, and Mike Boyd conceptualize technical editing as a form of quality assurance, emphasizing comprehensive, usability, and copyediting as distinct but interrelated practices that mirror

software testing processes (2002). Their work is expansive and systems-focused, although there is no direct engagement with classroom implementation.

In contrast, Michael Charlton offers a detailed account of a single course, ETC 408/508, shaped by institutional needs and student populations (2013). His reflection on course design—particularly the challenges of cross-listing and balancing workplace and academic writing—provides a rich, situated perspective that foregrounds editing as a rhetorical and pedagogical act. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned for Charlton was that the course "simply served too many constituencies and perceived gaps in the curriculum" (p. 109). However, there were other lessons learned that highlight the benefit and need for a technical editing course. Namely, Charlton found that the required peer review sessions "grew both more supportive and more analytical" over the semester, aiding in an effective collaborative writing environment (p. 110). In the end, he emphasizes that "editing should be approached as a complex and multi-levelled process" and that "students need practice thinking of themselves as potential editors and reviewers" (p. 104).

Carolyn Rude bridges these two perspectives by articulating general pedagogical principles derived from decades of teaching, advocating for a progressive structure that moves from copyediting to comprehensive editing (2010). She argues that "the editing course, more than writing courses, foregrounds the process of information development and use and makes explicit the way texts work" (Rude, 2010, p. 64). Her study, while grounded in her own teaching experience, extrapolates broadly applicable curricular strategies and emphasizes editing as a performance-based, problem-solving discipline.

Together, these studies suggest that while technical editing pedagogy can be theorized at the program level or practiced at the individual course level, programs that engage multiple instructors over time—such as ours—offer a valuable middle ground for informing research and curricular development in this evolving field. This middle ground is especially important given the lack of research on how instructors teach technical editing. Interviewing teachers who have taught editing courses across different institutional contexts and over time could provide critical insights into how pedagogical principles are adapted, challenged, or reinforced in practice. These conversations could inform the development of resources and training for new teachers, helping them move beyond textbook-driven models toward more reflective, responsive, and rhetorically grounded teaching practices. These pedagogical insights can also guide how we bring industry best practices into the classroom, ensuring that instruction remains aligned with current and emerging technologies and workflows. In doing so, we can better bridge the gap between theory and practice in technical editing pedagogy and in E&P programs more broadly.

Context for Technical Editing and Style

The editing course we examined is *Technical Editing and Style*, a 3000-level course that is popular in our technical and scientific communication (TSC) major in the English department. Our program has a long history of preparing graduates to enter careers in editing, and this course is a key part of that preparation. The English department typically runs two sections of the course per semester, capped at 22 students each. The course is almost always overenrolled with a waitlist. The following is the description of the course in our academic catalogue, which was originally proposed in 2001, when our undergraduate major (then a concentration) was first being established:

> *Technical Editing and Style* explores the art of editing from the initial writing task to the final delivery of the document. In addition to learning document management, students study and practice the roles, responsibilities, and tasks that editors perform. The course also covers the rules that govern the fundamentals of style (correctness, clarity, and propriety) and the principles needed to match the tone and formality to the aim, audience, and occasion of the work.

In addition to our TSC majors, the course is also increasingly being taken by students who major in literature and creative writing, since many of them seek careers in editing and publishing and wish to expand their skillset beyond literary and creative writing. A notable development in the last five years is that our department has created an undergraduate course and internships related to publishing creative writing, and we have recently established a graduate-level publishing certificate for MFA students. Because we have students in creative writing who are now learning about editing and publishing, we find many of them also seek out the *Technical Editing and Style* course in the TSC major to expand their skillset and demonstrate versatility when applying to jobs after graduation.

Research Methods

To better understand the evolution of the course and pedagogical challenges teachers faced when teaching *Technical Editing and Style*, we designed a qualitative study that involved interviews with instructors of record who had previously taught the course. After receiving IRB approval (HRPP Protocol # 25-550), we recruited interview participants via email. Our recruitment email stated:

> We're investigating the curriculum goals of technical editing courses and how teachers navigate the pedagogical constraints and affordances in their technical editing courses. … To understand the nuances of the various pedagogical

> approaches to this course, we invite you to participate in an interview about how you approached teaching the course (lecture topics, course text, course goals, assignments, etc.).

Since this study is based on the study of just one class, the sample size for potential participants was quite small: We identified only eight instructors who have taught the course in the department over the last twenty-five years, including ourselves. In response to our email solicitation, we received replies from four instructors who agreed to be interviewed. There were two former instructors who we did not hear from—one never replied to our email, and one we were unable to find updated contact information for (no longer in the department). In addition to the four who replied and agreed to be interviewed, we interviewed each other. We chose to include our own interviews as part of our data set because there have been relatively few instructors of the course over the last twenty-five years, so our perspectives are key to understanding the pedagogical history and evolution course.

As researchers who are also insiders to the study topic, we took methodological inspiration from some of the key principles of autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography (CAE). Autoethnography is a qualitative approach to research that "draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Autoethnography comes from studies of ethnography as a way to include the researcher's experiences and insights more directly into the research; it is especially useful when researchers have direct experience that can inform the study. As its name suggests, CAE is a qualitative approach to research "in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, pp. 23–24). While this method is not commonly used in our field, it is common in the social sciences and studies of education. It also has some precedent in guiding studies of TPC, specifically in contexts related to teaching and mentorship (Thamet al., 2020). We say that we "take inspiration" from these methods because unlike most traditional autoethnographies that use vignettes, diaries, or personal writings to develop a narrative, we did not write narratives of our own teaching experiences as a way to generate our data, but we interviewed one another about our individual experiences as a way to facilitate self-reflection and then and used those self-reflections as part of our data set.

Our data set for this project thus included the transcript from our co-interview with each other, as well as the transcripts from our interviews with the four other participants (both researchers attended all of the interview sessions). Throughout our analysis, we make sure to differentiate our own views and excerpts from our interviews (identified in the text as Carolyn and Kelly) from the interviews of other participants, whose identities remain anonymous.

Interview Protocol

Our method of interviewing was semi-structured, meaning that we followed an interview guide and set of questions, but we also allowed topics to flow freely according to the interviewee's interests; we also allowed follow-up questions as relevant. Since we wanted to understand how the course has been taught (and how it has evolved), as well as the challenges teachers faced, we asked a range of questions related to the following: goals for the course, textbooks and materials used, major assignments, how teachers incorporated contemporary issues (industry, new technology, etc.), and how they were trained to teach the course (for a full list of interview questions, refer to Appendix A). Our interviews were conducted on Zoom and recorded so that we could analyze the transcripts; each interview lasted 45 minutes to one hour and began with confirming participant's consent to be recorded and included in our study. Instructors interviewed included graduate students (1 current and 1 former), full-time lecturers (1), and tenure-track faculty (3). Below is a brief description of each interviewee, noting their professional background with technical editing, but no other identifying information.

- Interviewee 1 had industry experience as a technical editor.
- Interviewee 2 did not have industry experience as a technical editor.
- Interviewee 3 had industry experience as a technical editor.
- Interviewee 4 did not have industry experience as a technical editor.

- Carolyn did not have industry experience as a technical editor.
- Kelly had industry experience as a technical editor.

We decided to include our own interviews in the data set because we both have situated knowledge and insider perspective on the teaching of technical editing that can contribute to this study. In our interviews, we followed the semi-structured interview protocol because it preserved the conversational affordances of interview protocols, specifically the advantage of prompting one another to specify, elaborate, and explain answers in more detail than we may have otherwise done completely on our own.

Coding and Analysis

Once interviews were complete, we downloaded the transcripts from our recorded Zoom sessions and uploaded them to a Microsoft OneDrive folder shared only by the researchers. After cleaning up the individual transcripts (deleting errors, extra white space, and standardizing format), we combined them to create one long transcript (segmented into individual interviews), which totaled 345 pages. We then took turns coding using an "inductive approach" (Haas, Takayoshi, & Carr, 2012; Koerber et al., 2021). By inductive approach we mean that our codes emerged through reading the transcripts and identifying examples where participants described challenges associated with teaching the course. Our categories were "emergent" (Haas, Takayoshi, & Carr, p. 54), meaning that we did not use a pre-existing coding scheme from another study. We used "topical chains" as our primary unit of analysis (Geisler & Swarts, 2019, p. 79). This meant that we segmented and analyzed the data according to the topics or themes as stated by the interviewee. In most instances, the topic aligned with the theme of the question asked in the interview, but there were often topic shifts in the process of the interview, and interviewees introduced new topics throughout. Our list of codes along with definitions for each are shown below in Table 1.

We coded the transcripts independently and at different times but met to discuss examples and refine our categories. In the first round of coding, one researcher focused on coding any mention of issues with technology or industry. The other researcher focused on coding any other issues that interviewees represented as a problem or challenge when teaching the course. Our choice to focus on different topic areas was related to the different interests we brought to the project as separate researchers, but it was also pragmatic: There were a lot of pages to review and code, and delegating themes allowed us better individual focus. Though we chose to focus on different sections and topics, we reviewed one another's codes and representative examples. We sought intercoder agreement by relying on "intensive group discussion" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 35) to come to a consensus. In the second round of coding, we refined our grouping of problems and challenges into types and ended up with six categories: Teaching Materials, Industry, Technology, Training/Teacher Background, Technical content, and Rhetorical sensibility.

Table 1 Codes and Definitions for Analysis.

CODE	DEFINITION
Teaching Materials	Teaching materials, such as textbooks, readings, assignments, and sample documents.
Industry	Industry, industry standards, jobs and internships, and examples from industry communication.
Technology	Digital technology, such as digital editing tools, word processing software, or generative AI.
Training/ Teacher Background	The training or professional background that teachers had prior to teaching the course (pedagogy training, professional experience, etc.).
Technical Knowledge	Technical content such as knowledge of grammar, mechanics, English usage, linguistics, or specialized knowledge of the editing and publishing process.
Rhetorical Sensibility	Editorial skills that go beyond technical content to the audience, context, and situation for editorial decisions.

In what follows, we summarize findings related to our primary research question: What pedagogical challenges have instructors encountered when teaching technical editing courses?

Findings

At the outset of this study, we hypothesized that changes to the course—in terms of curriculum—would depend on how teachers responded to technological advancements and changes in industry. However, our interviews revealed a different story. Rather than uncovering significant curricular evolution that informed how the course was taught, we found that the differences in teaching were largely shaped by the instructors' individual training and professional backgrounds. Many of the pedagogical challenges that teachers faced were quite similar, but how they approached those challenges was somewhat different depending on their background. In what follows, we describe the challenges we identified in more detail and then discuss why they are important considerations for other TPC programs or E&P programs that must prepare teachers for technical editing courses.

Teaching Materials

One challenge we found in our interview data related to identifying or creating appropriate teaching materials for technical editing courses. The code "teaching materials" included mention of textbooks, readings, assignments, and sample documents. Everyone we interviewed emphasized that having a lot of real-world examples was crucial to helping

students understand the stakes and nuances of technical editing. As Carolyn explained in her interview:

> I think you have to have an ability to also not just find examples but be able to help students connect to the real-world consequences of a lot of those things. And so I think, without making it seem like every example has to be like, you know, earth shattering or whatever. But just that you have enough that students begin to kind of connect or see consequences.

But in some cases, real-world examples were not easily found for the specific lesson or style issue, so there was a lot of work involved in creating examples with just the right level of difficulty. As one interviewee expressed: "I've never created more examples in my life for a class" (Kelly). Interviewee 1, who was responsible for teaching the first iterations of the course, had to rely on various articles since "there were no textbooks … for practitioners" to use to teach technical editing at the time. This interviewee identified the need for a technical editing textbook and oriented her scholarship to fill this gap; however, before that text became a reality, she had to piecemeal the literature used in the course from various articles and industry publications.

Another challenge noted by interviewees involved finding examples for technical editing that were up to date. For Interviewee 1, who taught the course for many years, it became harder to have examples that the students could not easily find the answers to online, stating that "now, my assignments are all over the internet." In this way, the course keeps teachers engaged and challenges them to continually revise and generate new examples.

In terms of course textbooks, we found that early teachers of the course relied almost exclusively on *Technical Editing* by Carolyn Rude and Angela Eaton as their main course textbook. But while *Technical Editing* was a staple in the field for several decades, the content stopped being updated (the last edition was updated in 2010), leaving more recent teachers of *Technical Editing and Style* to turn to a number of other texts, such as *The Copyeditor's Handbook* by Amy Einsohn and Marilyn Schwartz (2019). In addition, teachers noted the addition of the *Subversive Copy Editor* by Carol Fisher Saller (2016) and *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams and Joseph Bizup (2021).

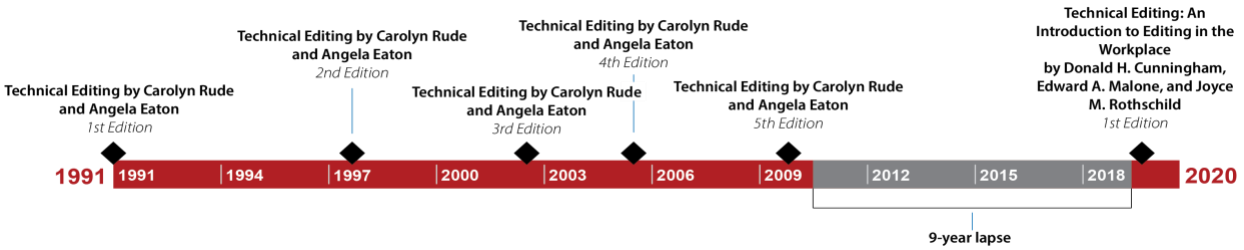

Figure 1 Publishing Timeline of Technical Editing Textbooks by Rude and Eaton and Cunningham, Malone, and Rothschild.

One interviewee (Carolyn) had started to use a newer textbook on the market, *Technical Editing: An Introduction to Editing in the Workplace* by Donald H. Cunningham, Edward A. Malone, and Joyce M. Rothschild, published in 2019. It was during the 9-year publication gap between the two editing textbooks, highlighted in Figure 1 above, that teachers of *Technical Editing and Style* began supplementing Rude and Eaton's textbook with Einsohn's, Fisher Saller's, and Williams and Bizup's texts. Piecing these three texts together afforded teachers texts that supported the progressive build structure in *Technical Editing* while also allowing them to incorporate additional content about editing as relationship-building (Fisher Saller), more lessons on mechanics and copyediting (Einsohn), and exercises on style and clarity (Williams and Bizup). Some combination of these three latter texts (in addition to Rude and Eaton's *Technical Editing*) is still being used in the course today. Multiple interviewees noted that these texts were passed down to them from another instructor, so they were more so inherited than they were individually selected by each interviewee. Indeed, we found that most instructors started by using whichever textbooks were used by a previous instructor.

Industry

While every interviewee cited industry as an important aspect to inform course content, we found that those with past industry experience tended to draw more on their experiences in those roles to inform how they taught the course. One interviewee who previously worked as a technical editor, stated that she "tried to bring industry in as much as possible … like technical reports" from government agencies based on her years in industry (Kelly). Similarly, Interviewee 1, who taught early iterations of the course, also relied on her experience as an editor to inform how she taught it. Based on her experience and connections in industry, she knew that her *Technical Editing and Style* students did not need an academic orientation to editing because "that's not what the computer industry [at the time] needed." This faculty member also wanted her scholarly publications on

technical editing to "reflect the practice of editing in the workplace" as opposed to "an academic orientation," such as editing a journal article.

Out of the six interviewees, three had past industry experience as editors, and those three also incorporated more industry-related content into their courses than the three interviewees without industry experience. That is not to say that those without industry experience did not incorporate professional content into their curriculum; they just didn't do it to the same degree. Industry-related content was cited as a component for all six interviewees, from major assignments to in-class exercises. For instance, all interviewed teachers incorporated some kind of job-ad analysis content into their course to give the students "a sense of things" and how they might use their time in college to build the skillset required of technical communication professionals (Carolyn). The main difference was in terms of teaching materials: those with industry experience relied a bit more on their experience to inform the course content—everything from assignments to examples—whereas those without industry experience relied slightly more on editing textbooks to inform their course content.

Several interviews expressed the importance of staying up to date on industry trends and needs when planning and teaching the course. As Interviewee 3 explained:

> What I found was a lot of the stuff that people have been doing [in technical editing courses] I found very dated in comparison to what I was actually doing [in] freelance editing… there was a lot of emphasis [in the classroom] still on like hand marking. Nobody does that anymore.

Her point was that it was important for teachers of technical editing to stay connected to what was happening in the professional world and to introduce new ways of teaching and working in the classroom to provide students with the tools appropriate for the current industry trends and standards.

Industry experience also seemed to inform how teachers of *Technical Editing and Style* brought technology into the classroom. While the kind of technology evolved over time, those with more industry experience privileged technology and its features, such as Word Track Changes and Word templates, in the classroom slightly more than teachers without industry experience.

Technology

A common theme among most interviewees, though, was an assumption that students understood technology more than they did. In fact, after struggling with students'

technological literacy in several sections of the course, one teacher "finally realized [she] had to set aside whole days" where she just went around "trying to help [students] figure out" how to use features in Word (Carolyn). Interviewee 3 reported that she had to teach students how to save a document with a new file name. One interviewee came prepared to teach the students how to use Track Changes in Word based on her previous experiences:

> I relied heavily on Word Track Changes, and I knew that students struggled. I had come into the class knowing that students had struggled with them [Track Changes] because I tried to use Track Changes in the other courses I had taught, and students just … say they knew it, and then … they don't. (Kelly)

Four of the six interviewees incorporated Word workshops into their lessons, while the other two—who had taught before Word became the standard in technical editing—used Word processing programs without editing or tracking capabilities, relying instead on manual mark-ups for all exercises and assignments. For one interviewee, Word was not just a component of her class; it was at the center of most in-class exercises and assignments (Kelly). She reserved several classes to teach students how to become proficient in various Word features, such as formatting basics and Track Changes. For this interviewee, she based these Word workshops on her past editing experience in industry, where Word was the preferred program for writing, editing, and formatting—all three of which are key skill sets for many technical communication professions. To several interviewees, the more comfortable the students were with these kinds of features in technology, the more advantage they had in the field of technical communication.

One technology that the most recent teachers of *Technical Editing and Style* agreed was important to consider in future iterations of the course is generative AI. These programs, such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Copilot, are being heavily marketed as common tools for writing and editing. Interviewee 4, who taught the course as recently as Spring 2024, did not incorporate generative AI into her course, but acknowledged that "if I would teach this class again, I would definitely want to have a section or unit on AI."

Two interviewees, both of whom had past and current editing experience, see generative AI as a necessary component of future iterations of the course, with one acknowledging:

> AI wasn't a thing when I taught [the course] … If I taught this again right now, I would have a heavy AI component, because I think that that's where this field is headed, and I think that it would behoove students to kind of get control over … the pitfalls, the benefits, the pros and cons of using AI. But you still have to edit, you know, AI-generated content … Any future class in this area would have to feature AI. (Kelly)

Interviewee 3, who currently works as an editor, framed the AI-assisted editing topic a bit more dire. While, at the time of the interview, she found generative AI useful to help "streamline your tasks in general, not necessarily doing the work for you," she also voiced concern about where editing fields are headed in light of generative AI: "I think it's [AI] particularly important now, because frankly, AI is like … what I'm doing now I am not going to be doing … in three to five years. There's no way … like AI is going to be able to do just as well and cheaper." Indeed, she expressed concern about the future of technical editing, stating that "to the extent that editing continues to exist as a profession, it's going to be on the developmental side and not on the copyediting side." This interviewee also commented on the emerging nature of generative AI, suggesting that teachers will likely need to learn about it in tandem with their students. To address this, she recommended being transparent about the simultaneous learning curve by using generative AI as an experiment in the classroom:

> If I were teaching, I think it would be a lot of, at this point, experimentation, right, and asking the students to try things out, you know, and I could imagine being like, no, really do it yourself first. See what you come up with. Now, put it in AI, see what it comes up with. Let's look at the what's better.

All interviewees acknowledged the potential challenge of generative AI to the field of editing, but none had incorporated lessons related to generative AI in their curriculum.

Training/Teaching Background

When asked to describe the characteristics or qualities that make teachers effective at teaching technical editing courses, interviewees identified a combination of disposition, teaching philosophy, and professional experience as key qualities for effective technical editing instruction. Despite this, many interviewees noted a lack of experience and preparation for teaching an editing course.

There was a general agreement that people teaching this course need to be detail-oriented and at least strive to understand the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of the English language: "I think you have to find value in the mechanics of language. If you don't find value in that, not just in language, but the mechanics of language. If you don't find value in that… I just don't think you would be effective at teaching this class" (Kelly). And while this detail-oriented focus may be more innate to the teacher, most everyone we interviewed, regardless of whether they found value in the mechanics of language, felt that they did not have the appropriate amount of prior training or preparation for teaching a course like technical editing. For example, Interviewee 1, who even went on to publish work on

technical editing, explained that her PhD training was in English literature, not technical writing or editing. In addition, no one we interviewed had experience taking an editing course as a student either. As Interviewee 4 expressed: "I never really was totally trained … like, I had a grammar course in my undergraduate … secondary Ed English major. But I never really felt like grammar was something that you had in upper-level, graduate-level courses, you just had a course dedicated to writing."

Others emphasized the importance of more explicit scaffolding and teacher training: "What we could do to better prepare some teachers is to give them more of a framework to be working from" (Carolyn). By "framework," this interviewee seemed to be referencing a general curriculum design and course map. Other interviewees—specifically Interviewee 4 and Kelly, who had been graduate students when teaching the course—felt that a practicum geared more specifically for technical communication would be useful as a primer before teaching this course (teaching practicums in our program exist only for first-year writing courses).

A lack of prior training or model for teaching an editing course was expressed as a significant challenge. However, we found that this challenge was perceived somewhat differently, depending on other aspects of a teacher's background. For example, half of those we interviewed had prior professional experience as editors. For these instructors, they had a variety of examples to draw from when teaching technical editing based on their experience. The challenge was sometimes figuring out how to mimic aspects of being a "real" technical editor while also keeping tasks manageable or scaffolded appropriately for students. On the other hand, for those who did not have prior technical editing experience, it was more of an uphill battle trying to assemble teaching materials for the first time. Most admit to relying heavily on the syllabus and any teaching materials provided by whoever had taught the course in the department previously (at least initially).

Technical Content

Technical editing courses often require teaching students the technicalities of mechanics and grammar, in addition to the more general processes of publishing. We found differences between our interviewees in terms of how much they valued teaching grammar and mechanics for basic copyediting, though. For example, most teachers gave students some type of quiz or test on grammar. One interviewee explained that she always gave a test on grammar and students needed to score at least 85 percent to pass (they could retake it if they did not). Most interviewees admitted that while they would not hold these standards in other English classes or writing courses, a technical editing class was

different. Plus, some found that students enjoyed the mechanical nature of basic copyediting and the routinized processes that accompany it. Interviewee 3 explained: "sometimes I find that [students] like guidelines. They like check sheets, you know, to make sure so anything that sort of felt like very tangible like that was very useful for them." Interviewee 2 pointed out that while grammar can make people uneasy, it can be fun to teach students how to edit for style: "Faculty and students, alike, might dread some of the nitty, gritty grammar stuff, [but] it is somehow, I think, fun for most people to pick apart badly done things." That same interviewee went on to stress how teaching grammar was useful for developing a more precise analytic vocabulary for giving feedback to students on their writing. She explained:

> I felt like it was a really a benefit to me [to learn to teach the course] because I then became a better teacher of writing in other contexts … you know, like you might mark something awkward because it had faulty predication. But then, when you know it's faulty predication, you can say this subject and this verb don't make sense together.

However, Interviewee 3 strongly disagreed about the importance of spending a significant amount of time lecturing about grammar: "I'm sorry. Like nobody wants to listen to you talk about commas for 20 minutes. I just don't … So you have to find creative ways to make [editing work] come alive. And so, we did a lot of hands-on stuff."

The emphasis on grammar and mechanics can serve as a foundation, but the goal of a technical editing course is to move students beyond surface-level corrections toward deeper editorial thinking. Indeed, while interviewees all expressed the importance of comprehensive editing as key to the course—and what distinguishes the course from other copyediting courses—the challenge of that is one that centers on a different aspect of technical content: introducing students to a whole new vocabulary and way of conceptualizing editing. One instructor, who used the textbook *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, explained: "students always tell me it was hard and weird for them. Part of even how [the textbook is] formatted [and] part of it is learning all the new vocabulary" (Carolyn). Interviewee 1 described how she would introduce the students to new questions to shift them away from the stereotypical view of editors as people who just correct typos. The challenge, as she explained it, was to help them to see a broader rhetorical situation. She explained:

> You know, we talk about looking outside the box as opposed to just accepting the documents there, and we'll fix it. But let's go a step beyond that and think of this document in context. And think of the work that it has to do, and … doesn't do. And

> what better ways might there be? What might we need to add? What might we need to take out in terms of content? What might we need to do in terms of the way it's displayed on the page. Because I think the students … like so many editors that don't have a class or a formal instruction, they just look at what's there and try to fix it, as opposed to looking at what might be there. So that was challenging. To me, that was the purpose of the course.

Interviewee 1, like others, felt that attention to mechanics and grammar issues was very low-priority, and a greater emphasis should be placed on broader communication skills and establishing positive working relationships with writers. As Interviewee 3 explained: "We did a lot of editing of each other's work. Right. What does it feel like? To be edited, how do you deal with the interpersonal aspects of it, right? Because it's not just about the language, it's about the human interaction." Her emphasis on the key role that "human interaction" plays in editing was echoed by other interviewees and evident in the course materials, which focused more on project management and how to edit in collaboration with many others in the publishing process. She described how she presented it to students: "Here's this huge project. How do we break this down in terms of milestones in terms of roles?"

While grammar and mechanics offer a useful entry point, the deeper challenge in technical editing courses, at least according to our interview data, lies in helping students engage with complex technical content—learning to interpret, question, and reshape it within broader rhetorical and collaborative contexts. This shift requires not only new vocabulary but also a new way of thinking about what editing can accomplish.

Rhetorical Sensibility

The final pedagogical challenge that was perhaps the hardest to contend with because it gets to the heart of technical editing classes was the question of how to cultivate a rhetorical sensibility as a technical editor. By rhetorical sensibility we mean a sense of how to make editorial decisions guided by attention to audience, purpose, and context. As one interviewee stated, "Half the battle was just creating a habit of awareness" (Kelly). Technical editing courses often go beyond the mechanics of language to helping students develop rhetorical awareness. Interviewee 1 expressed this sensibility in terms of what students ultimately gain from the course: "I think that when the students came back and said, 'Editing was valuable to me,' it wasn't because they were editors, it was because that class gave them a way to look at a document." Her point was that not all students become technical editors in their future careers, but the course helps them to develop this

rhetorical awareness and an understanding of a wholistic process of creating documents that do work in the world.

Discussion

In reviewing our data, we were surprised to find that not much seems to have changed in the overall curriculum over the last 24 years since the course has been regularly offered in our institution. For the most part, the overall course design (moving from practice in basic copyediting tasks and building to comprehensive editing projects), class activities, types of topics/issues, and editing assignments seem relatively the same over time. The only noticeable change we noted was a shift in the major textbooks around 2016 as parts of Rude and Eaton's *Technical Editing* textbook were starting to become outdated, and no new editions were being printed. Even then, instructors often relied on parts of that textbook and the overall framework it offers to guide the course.

The apparent "stagnation" in the curriculum perhaps echoes what Susan Lang and Laura Palmer identified about editing courses back in 2017. We see a few possible reasons for this in our specific case study: First, despite changes in technology, there is the fact that not much has really changed about the basic work of technical editing or the foundational skills that students need to cultivate to do technical editing (attention to detail, rhetorical sensibility, awareness of grammatical rules and style guides, etc.). Another reason is perhaps that the course structure originally set by Rude's textbook (moving from basic to comprehensive editing) seems to "work well" for helping students who are new to editing feel like they are making incremental progress. (We note that "worked well" was the perception of teachers in the interviews though, and we do not necessarily have other data to make this claim).

In our own experience—and echoed in most of the other interviews—this scaffolded approach seemed to "work well" because it began with what seemed more familiar to students and then progressively built to topics and issues less familiar to them (e.g., editing for visual design, legal and ethical issues in editing, etc.). If instructors have a "if it's not broke, don't fix it" kind of mentality, then it can be difficult to initiate curricular change. For example, the Cunningham, Malone, and Rothschild textbook starts with comprehensive editing and transitions to mechanics (the opposite of how our interviewees organized their courses), so adopting this textbook could require a considerable course redesign, which interviewees seemed hesitant to do. A third possibility, also supported by our interviews, is that most people starting to teach the course have a steep learning curve. There is a tendency to rely on how the course has been taught previously with only minor

adjustments, especially when the teacher is an instructor or graduate student. Perhaps the only exception here was the instructor who had extensive background as a freelance editor and chose to depart a bit more from the standard curriculum in terms of removing and transforming the editing assignments into team projects. (Note: other instructors emphasized a lot of in-class group work, but there was only one instructor who used team projects for major graded assignments.)

When it came to industry-related content in the course, we found—perhaps unsurprisingly—that teacher background had the biggest impact: Those with professional experience in industry seemed to have a somewhat easier time because they had a wealth of prior examples to draw from. That said, all instructors emphasized the value of assignments that focused on technical material as found in industry (e.g., not creative writing or student essays, as found in other types of editing courses). Additionally, we found that while having industry experience or prior editing experience seems like a major asset for courses like this, it is not really a requirement. Many have taught the course very successfully without this background and have helped their students secure internships and jobs in technical editing. This is important because there is a perception by other faculty that to teach such a course like this means you need to have had prior professional editing experience, which often limits the pool of faculty who self-select or agree to teach the course.

In terms of technology, the emergence of AI and its implications for technical editing was acknowledged by almost all interviewees. Using generative AI in a technical editing classroom poses a few pedagogical concerns, two of which are worth mentioning here. First, generative AI is fairly new, requiring teachers to learn it alongside their students. The second pedagogical concern has to do with helping students understand why AI, at least right now, cannot replace a quality human editor and is perhaps best used as a writing/editing tool rather than the sole producer of the text itself. In her article, "Has AI replaced editors?", Valerie Monckton highlights the pitfalls of relying too heavily on generative AI and other editing software (2025). She takes an excerpt from a grammar book and runs the passage through ChatGPT and Grammarly and receives two very different results. Monckton finds Grammarly's recommendations "insufficient, though one could argue that it didn't do as poorly here as it did in another test [conducted previously]" (2025, para. 6). Conversely, the ChatGPT revision "over-edited the passage, making unnecessary word substitutions that stamp out the author's voice" (para. 7). Moreover, it is unclear if ChatGPT's changes were actually correct, since "punctuation is a matter of style … in other words, the correctness of these changes depends on both what the communicator

intended to say and who they were speaking to" (para. 7). Monckton then displays a text mark-up that shows all of the ways that ChatGPT's edits changed the style of the original text, many of which fundamentally change the text's clarity, meaning, and voice. The errors range from changing articles to complete removal of phrases to introducing punctuation errors. Had the text been edited by a skilled human editor, few, if any, of the incorrect or ineffective edits would have been made.

A technical editing course teaches students a human-centered approach to editing that is unlike AI—students don't approach the text as a binary choice based on strict rules of English grammar. Instead, "the editing course, more than writing courses, foregrounds the process of information development and use and makes explicit the ways texts work" (Rude, 2010, p. 64). An editing course teaches students familiarity with language, writing, and clear communication. It offers them space to recognize opportunities for enhanced clarity, taking personal voice and style into account in addition to the more mechanical side of writing. It also facilitates an awareness—of voice, of opportunities in writing, of relationships between author/writer/editor, and so on—that any effective editor should possess. All students in a technical editing course today should have a holistic understanding of the role of an editor, and that includes understanding how generative AI fits into that landscape.

Finally, we found that lack of prior teaching experience was perhaps the greatest challenge. Issues related to finding suitable textbooks or examples (that were not outdated or where answers were easy to find on the internet), balancing technical aspects of editing with general process of publishing, editing beyond basic copyediting, and helping students develop a rhetorical sensibility, all seem to be shared across interviewees and will likely continue to be issues in courses like this. Of course, many of these pedagogical challenges are challenges in all writing courses; however, these challenges can feel magnified in a more specialized course like technical editing where there are fewer resources. Because there is not as much institutional infrastructure or teaching support for the course (e.g., no practicum course for graduate students or instructors), there is a need for greater awareness and resources for teaching it to welcome and train new teachers.

Our findings suggest that while effective technical editing instruction benefits from a combination of personal disposition, pedagogical approach, and professional experience, there remains a significant gap in formal preparation for teaching such courses. The lack of targeted training, standardized curricula, and practicum opportunities contributes to instructors' reliance on inherited materials and personal experience. Addressing these gaps through structured support and clearer frameworks could enhance instructional

consistency and better prepare educators for the unique demands of teaching technical editing.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand the pedagogical evolution and challenges that teachers faced when teaching the *Technical Editing and Style* course at an R1 institution in the Southeastern United States. While some may question the need for courses in editing at a time when generative AI seems to be replacing the need for basic copyediting, we believe that the hype around generative AI (and the problems it also creates) may make courses in technical editing more important than ever. It is for this reason that we advocate greater attention to supporting and training teachers, especially graduate student instructors, and the development of resources for teaching technical editing today.

Limitations

We recognize that the conclusions we can draw from this preliminary study are quite limited due to our small sample size. Our sample was drawn from only a handful of instructors from one university. We are also missing an interview with the first teacher of the course and one of the most recent instructors for the course. Given the small sample size, their perspectives could possibly shift a lot of what we argue here.

Future Research

Based on our findings, we are left with new questions that future studies could consider.

- **Institutional Comparison**: How do these findings (regarding pedagogical challenges, teacher experience with industry, and pedagogical training) compare with technical editing courses at other institutions today? Conducting interviews with instructors at other institutions would be useful for understanding this comparison. We also believe that surveys or a comprehensive review of editing courses across institutions would be beneficial for programs seeking to revise and update their curricula.
- **Student Experience**: Given how much teachers emphasized the significance of this course for students and preparing them for careers in editing, we would be interested to know what students think: What do students feel they gain from taking technical editing courses? How have they used what they learned in their future careers? We imagine that surveys of former students, paired with follow-up interviews, would be an ideal way to study the student experience.

- **Technology**: Lastly, given that teachers found that students may not be as adept as teachers might assume with technology, specifically software like Microsoft Word and Google Docs, we would be interested to know in a follow-up study if and how teachers of the course have been using this technology and how they are incorporating practice, critique, or use of generative AI.

Recommendations for Program Administrators

Some specific ways that TPC and E&P programs can support teachers of technical editing—especially new teachers—may include the following:

- Offer a teaching practicum or community of practice (CoP) for editing courses to offer regular guidance and touch points throughout the semester. In addition, such support could include an information session for teachers interested in learning to teach editing.
- Create a mentoring program for onboarding new teachers. Our study found that teachers informally sought mentorship from previous teachers of the course as a primary resource.
- Develop more accessible teaching materials—especially examples of technical texts—for editing assignments.
- Compensate people who are willing to lead practicums, participate in mentorship, or share their expertise through teaching materials in an effort to build a shared curriculum.

Technical editing courses offer wonderful opportunities and challenges for E&P and TPC programs. These courses teach students deep familiarity with grammar and style conventions, clear communication principles, an awareness of audience, visual design, and more nuanced understanding of the relationships between writers and editor in a publishing process. In our department, we find that students gain a lot from these courses—multiple interviewees emphasized how many of their students went on to successful careers where they used what they learned in technical editing in meaningful ways. Many of our alumni stayed in touch with their technical editing teachers and updated them on all the ways that the course helped them to become better writers, editors, and collaborators, which they attributed to their training in a technical editing course. As Kelly explains: “It was the most challenging course I’ve taught. It was also the most rewarding course I taught.” We found that while it was often difficult to recruit people to teach this course, those who have taught it understand its value. While the pedagogical challenges of

teaching technical editing may be great, we believe the rewards for our students are greater.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for teachers

- When did you teach *Technical Editing and Style*?
- What was your title when you taught *Technical Editing and Style*? (grad student, TT faculty, NTT faculty, etc.)
- What textbooks did you use?
- What were the course goals?
- What did you find most challenging about teaching the course?
- How, if at all, did the course change when you were teaching it?
- What training, if any, were you given when you started teaching the course?
- What were a few of your lecture topics?
- What were your main assignments in the course?
- Did you incorporate any current industry best practices or other industry aspects into your pedagogy (e.g., using job ads to inform lectures, exercises, assignments)?
- Did you incorporate current technology/trends in your course (e.g., Word's Track Changes, AI, Grammarly, etc.)? If so, how?
- What do you think makes a teacher effective at teaching this course?
- What value do you see in requiring students to take an editing course as part of their major?
- What do you think we could do to better prepare teachers to teach this course?

Interview questions for administrators (for those who have also directed programs)

- How did you envision the course aligning with the curriculum/How did those goals align with the vision for the undergraduate major at that time?
- When you developed this course, what did you see as the exigence for the course?
- What do you look for when deciding who to assign to teach this course?

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