

Special Issue: Legal Writing in Technical and Professional Communication

Journal: *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*

Editors

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Two decades ago, Frederick Gale invited technical communication teachers to broaden the concept of the writing process to help students understand that legal writing is always shaped by the circumstances in which it occurs. Postmodernism's interpretive turn has reshaped legal scholarship and some doctrinal teaching by emphasizing law's cultural and political contexts. Britt, Longo, and Woolever [1] argued that legal writing instruction has not followed suit, continuing to treat rhetoric mainly as a practical tool. Like Gale [2], Britt, Longo, and Woolever [1] proposed that legal writing professors must broaden their approach. Hence, students learn to participate effectively in legal discourse and to critically analyze it. Legal literacy, Taylor [3] suggests, should be a core part of undergraduate professional writing courses to prepare them for a largely opaque legal system. Integrating legal writing supports the broader educational goal of preparing civically engaged citizens [4], [5], [6], [7] and educating students about issues of liability and responsibility in the world of work. Certainly, in the workplace, there are plenty of opportunities for technical communicators to consider regarding document design and legal liability [8]. These opportunities include, redesigning warning sections using standardized icons, signal words, and visual hierarchy; simplifying informed consent documents; using modular designs for terms of service and privacy policies; clarifying instructional documents for the workplace; designing accessibility compliance documents; improving readability of contractual documents and agreements; documenting patents and copyrights; using modular layouts with visual checklists, troubleshooting flowcharts in maintenance manuals for engineering systems; and designing risk assessment matrices, among others.

These calls are more important now than ever, and the technical and professional communication (TPC) curriculum must respond. Undergraduate students need legal literacy because law shapes nearly every aspect of personal, civic, and professional lives. From signing leases and employment contracts to navigating digital privacy, policing, financial agreements, Artificial Intelligence data collection, and political participation, students routinely encounter legal systems that can either protect or disadvantage them, depending on their understanding. Legal literacy equips students to recognize rights, avoid exploitation and liability, and engage confidently with institutions that often feel intimidating. It prepares them for a workforce increasingly governed by regulation and compliance, even outside traditional legal careers. Legal literacy empowers students to participate more fully and critically in a society where legal structures profoundly influence opportunity, equity, and democratic life [9], [10]. More recently, Agboka [8] argued that technical communication is deeply intertwined with legal risk. Poorly designed instructions, warnings, or documentation can expose both organizations and writers to lawsuits. He noted, writers may even be "the original tort-feasor... and thus always remain liable" (p. 397).

Although many scholars have discussed law’s relevance to technical communication, “relatively few pedagogical resources are available to prepare students for success in a litigious world or to guide instructors in teaching legal writing” [8, p. 393]. Existing work tends to focus on liability awareness rather than teaching legal literacy as a skill. Agboka further noted the “ghettoization” of legal content when it is added only as a unit in existing courses instead of full courses that allow students to explore how law and communication intersect more comprehensively. As a field, TPC needs such research and pedagogical resources more urgently in the current climate. Our students must understand the legal codes that govern their civic responsibilities as advocates for the marginalized, the persecuted, the precarious, and people pushed to the systemic edge. Although they may not have legal degrees, students with TPC training could be prepared to, for instance, recognize unclear instructions that could expose users and companies to liability; familiarize themselves with major regulations relevant to their field and how those regulations could affect documentation requirements; read complex legal feedback and translate it into user-centered language and design for non-experts; understand document design as legal protection; know how to collaborate with legal stakeholders in a workflow or user advocacy; and identify when a document may be legally safe but misleading (e.g., terms and conditions and identify the rhetorical nature of legal codes).

This special issue asks technical and professional communication scholars, teachers, and practitioners to rethink how legal literacy is defined, researched, taught, and enacted across our programs. These stakeholders need to explore how technical communicators can be better prepared for the legal and ethical responsibilities embedded in everyday workplace writing, and how curricula can move beyond isolated units toward integrated and full-course models that meaningfully engage students with statutory and case law. We must also examine how instructors, especially those without legal training, can be supported in teaching legal analysis, case-based reasoning, and legal genres, and how global, technological, and cross-cultural contexts reshape the teaching of legal discourse. At the same time, the field needs research that interrogates the rhetorical nature of legal communication, investigates emerging legal-tech environments, and develops robust methods for assessing students’ legal literacy. This special issue aims to help us build research and pedagogies that prepare students to navigate legal systems and to critically engage with the legal dimensions of technical communication in an increasingly regulated and litigious world. We invite proposals that address the following, and related, themes and questions.

POSSIBLE TOPICS AND QUESTIONS

1. Rethinking legal literacy in technical and professional communication

- How should technical communication programs define legal literacy for contemporary workplaces?
- What competencies do technical communicators need to navigate increasingly litigious professional environments?
- How can legal literacy be taught without turning technical communicators into pseudo-lawyers?

2. Law as rhetoric across cultures

- How does legal discourse function as a form of technical communication?
- What can TPC learn from legal rhetoric about audience, persuasion, and authority?

- How do legal genres (memos, briefs, demand letters) illuminate broader questions about genre theory in TPC?
- How do legal systems outside the U.S. shape the research and teaching of legal writing in international TPC programs?
- What challenges arise when researching and teaching legal literacy across different legal, cultural, and regulatory contexts?
- How can global case studies enrich students' understanding of law and communication intersections?

3. Pedagogical models and assessment

- What models effectively integrate legal writing into TPC curricula?
- How can instructors without legal training confidently teach legal writing and legal analysis?
- What role should case studies, statutory analysis, or IRAC-based reasoning play in TPC pedagogy?
- What methods best assess students' development of legal literacy?
- How can programs measure whether legal writing courses improve workplace readiness?

4. Liability, ethics, and the responsibilities of technical communicators

- How do technical communicators understand their ethical and legal responsibilities when producing high-stakes documentation?
- In what ways do warnings, instructions, and documentation shape liability outcomes in real-world cases?
- How can TPC programs prepare students to recognize the legal implications of everyday workplace writing?
- What evidence demonstrates that legal writing instruction reduces risk or improves communication quality in organizations?

5. Technology, research, and the changing landscape of legal communication

- How do digital research tools, databases, and AI reshape legal writing pedagogy?
- What new forms of legal communication (e.g., compliance dashboards, automated notices) should TPC scholars examine?
- How can TPC prepare students for emerging legal-tech environments?

6. Practicing engineering, professional, and scientific communication

- How does engineering safety and risk visual design influence user comprehension and compliance in high-risk environments?
- To what extent do ambiguities in engineering drawings and specifications contribute to project errors and liability claims?
- How do technical communicators mediate between legal precision and user comprehension in engineering documents?
- How do engineering, professional, and scientific organizations translate regulatory standards into usable documentation for workers and stakeholders?
- How does interface design (e.g., alerts, warnings, and error messages) influence user behavior in safety-critical technical and scientific systems?

Types of Projects

The types of research projects accepted for this special issue include, but are not limited to:

- Research articles
- Case studies
- Teaching cases

Submission Process

Please follow the *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* preparation guidelines and, by **June 1, 2026**, submit your 500-word proposal to us (agbozog@uncw.edu, dorpe001@umn.edu, and agbokag@uhd.edu). We also welcome questions and project ideas as you prepare your proposal.

Timeline

- Abstracts due: June 1, 2026
- Notification of authors: June 15, 2026
- Submission of complete drafts by invited authors: September 15, 2026
- Final and complete articles submitted: November 15, 2026
- Guest editors' editing of articles completed: December 1, 2026
- Publication: March 2027

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