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# Hidden Ethics

## Locating the Spaces Where Ethics Live in Technical & Professional Communication

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Locating the Spaces Where Ethics Live  
in Technical & Professional  
Communication

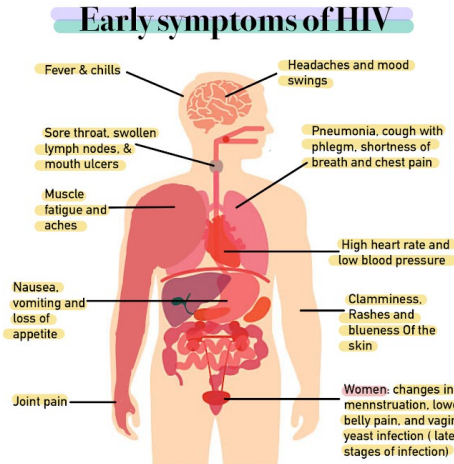
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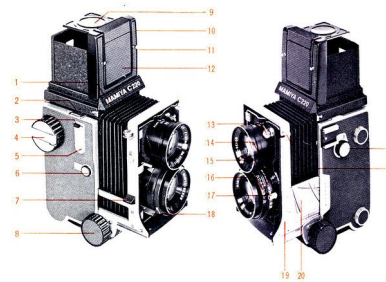
# Technical Communication & Information Design (TCID)

TCID courses at UCCS focus on teaching students how to **design relevant, useful, and accurate information** for **targeted audiences** that **enables** audiences to **complete specific tasks or take action** toward defined goals.

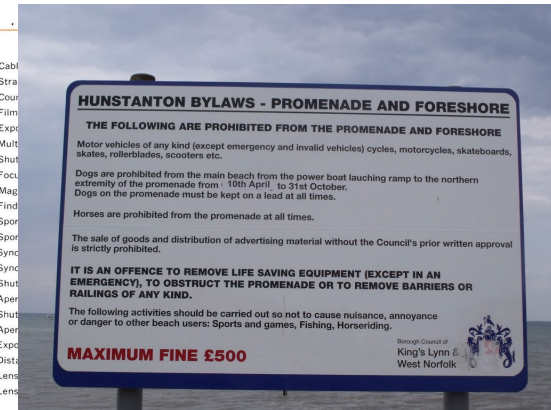
... using software, operating equipment, preventing accidents, conserving water, assessing a medical condition, improving performance, complying with a law...



## NOMENCLATURE



1. Cabl
2. Stra
3. Cour
4. Film
5. Exp
6. Mult
7. Shut
8. Focu
9. Mag
10. Find
11. Spor
12. Spor
13. Sync
14. Sync
15. Shut
16. Aper
17. Shut
18. Aper
19. Exp
20. Dist
21. Lens
22. Lens



# What is a technical writer concerned with?

In general, TCID courses may focus on **audience analysis, plain language & style, editing, visual rhetoric, information architecture, navigation, usability, and accessibility.**

These considerations arise throughout the writing and design process. And each choice is inherently tied to ethical implications, whether we are conscious of the implications or not.

# Ethics Defined

**Ethics** (from Merriam-Webster)

- the **principles of conduct** governing an individual or a group
- While *ethics* can refer broadly to moral principles, one often sees it applied to **questions of correct behavior within a relatively narrow area of activity** (e.g. professional, corporate, organizational, societal ethics)

The UCCS Ethics and Compliance Program includes standards, programs, research and education supporting the creation and maintenance of an ethical culture, standards of ethical conduct, and ethical decision-making practices. The Program describes UCCS' ethics and compliance organizational structure, reporting resources, education and training, risk identification, assessment and management, auditing and monitoring, enforcement approach, and commitment to respond to misconduct and to take preventative actions.

# IEEE Code of Ethics (notable excerpts)

The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers

1. to hold paramount, the **safety, health, and welfare of the public**, to strive to comply with ethical design and sustainable development practices, to protect the privacy of others, and to **disclose promptly factors that might endanger the public** or the environment;
5. to seek, accept, and offer honest criticism of technical work, to acknowledge and correct errors, **to be honest, and realistic in stating claims or estimates based on available data**, and to credit properly the contributions of others;
6. to support colleagues and coworkers in following this code of ethics, to strive to ensure the code is upheld, and to **not retaliate against individuals reporting a violation**

# Daniels Fund Ethics Initiative Principles

***Integrity:*** Act with honesty in all situations

***Trust:*** Build trust in all stakeholder relationships

***Accountability:*** Accept responsibility for all decisions

***Transparency:*** Maintain open and truthful communications

***Fairness:*** Engage in fair competition and create equitable and just relationships

***Respect:*** Honor the rights, freedoms, views, and property of others

***Rule of Law:*** Comply with the spirit and intent of laws and regulations

***Viability:*** Create long-term value for all relevant stakeholders

# Quick Review of Technical Comm Process

<https://padlet.com/gerald4/where-are-ethical-concerns-rooted-in-the-writing-process-zke8tsdl1en7c2rh>





*We agree that...*

Communication is power.  
Everything is an argument.  
It's always about people.

# Ethical Communication: The Challenger Case Study

The Space Shuttle Challenger was a shuttle orbiter operated by NASA.

Beginning in 1983, the Challenger was launched several times successfully, orbiting the Earth nearly 1,000 times. However, **design flaws in the rocket boosters used with the Challenger were documented** as early as 1977, again in 1979, again in 1983, and again in 1985, just months before it's final launch.

Roger Boisjoly, engineer with Morton Thiokol (manufacturer of the rocket boosters), documented **the o-ring failure** in a memo to his supervisor, along with **a warning**.

Engineers were strongly concerned with cold temperatures the night before the launch.

The tenth launch of the Challenger on January 28th, 1986, from Kennedy Space Center in Florida, resulted in destruction of the shuttle 73 seconds after liftoff, killing all 7 of the astronauts on board.

3:55-12:13 (approx 8 min) <https://youtu.be/4RIB-FiCc3A?si=XpUzH1t89kiEm6Ug&t=234>

# Document Review: Ethics Applied

Consider Boisjoly's memo, the writing process, and the Daniels Fund Ethics Principles. *Can you imagine what ethical concerns Roger balanced as he drafted the memo?*

- **In the ... phase of writing, Roger may have... . This connects with the ethical principle(s) of .... because/in that/due to .... .**
- **I wonder, when Roger was writing, if he... ? This kind of action or decision-making connects with the ethical principle(s) of... because/in that/due to ... .**
- **It's not clear if, when Roger was in the ... phrase of writing, he considered ... . This connects with the ethical principle(s) of .... because/in that/due to .... .**

# Challenger Case Study

How was risk communicated and subsequently interpreted? Engineers and managers had different priorities and viewpoints.

- Engineers had documented o-ring deterioration. While it was a redundant system, the fact that corrosion occurred in freezing temps could not be counted on as an interpretation of definite failure or success. Initially viewed as “anomalous,” the issue was later referred to as “acceptable risk.”
- For managers at Thiokol and NASA, a lack of certainty of failure, coupled with 24 prior successful launches in the shuttle program, only promised another successful launch.

STS 51-L Challenger Crew. <https://airandspace.si.edu/multimedia-gallery/web11741-2011hjpg>. Photograph, accessed 9/21/23.

The physical issue was o-ring failure; the complicating factors included **organizational barriers that prevented effective communication of critical safety information and stifled differences of opinion.**

# Roger Boisjoly: Whistleblower & Ethics Champion



While Morton Thiokol publicly assigned Roger to a redesign team, he was privately isolated from working on the project. When the Presidential Commission hearings were publicly released, Roger's honest testimony resulted in great damage to Morton Thiokol from the Commission, the press, and Congress. Boisjoly and his colleagues were blamed for the fallout. His contract *ended* in early 1987.

[https://youtu.be/DB8iYf\\_857U?si=q\\_VPq-8fE6RfyjuM&t=3215](https://youtu.be/DB8iYf_857U?si=q_VPq-8fE6RfyjuM&t=3215)

53:42–55:37 (approx 2 minutes), 1991 University of Minnesota

For his honesty and integrity both leading up to and directly following the shuttle disaster, Boisjoly received the **Award for Scientific Freedom and Responsibility** from the **American Association for the Advancement of Science** in **1988**. He spent many years in his later career speaking to engineering colleges about ethical decision-making and what it meant to be a whistleblower.

# TCID 3080

*TCID 3080 Advanced Professional & Technical Writing* is tailored to students from all disciplines and seeks to introduce them to analyzing conventions of technical writing as well as producing examples of professional and technical writing. (~150 students take this course each year.)

- Gain foundational understanding of audience analysis, plain language, visual rhetoric, and the Daniels Fund Ethical Principles
- Social Annotation on textbook chapter: Ethics in Tech Comm
- Social Annotation on **Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection & Community**  
<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

# Accountability: Accept responsibility for all decisions

**TEXT:** *What kinds of support material and sources are ethical to use? Are open web sources just as valid as academic sources for certain topics? Can email communications be used without permission? What if the writer discovers that a company falsified data about the effectiveness of its product? Should they reveal this in their report or should they take other courses of action? How much should a writer adapt to an audience without sacrificing their own views?*

**Student:** The questions presented in this paragraph are about accountability and transparency. As professional writers, we are routinely confronted with ethical dilemmas. In the scenario laid out by this paragraph, it would be unethical for any technical writer to not report falsified data. Not reporting these issues would only lead to larger problems for the organization later on. Furthermore, a writer shouldn't adapt their morality for an audience.

# Viability: Creating long-term value for all stakeholders

**TEXT:** *We are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation. It will take all of us—individuals and families, schools and workplaces, health care and public health systems, technology companies, governments, faith organizations, and communities—working together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it. It will require reimagining the structures, policies, and programs that shape a community to best support the development of healthy relationships.*

**Student:** The paragraph shows a call to appeal to the ethical principles of the reader. It uses viability by offering the reader a solution to his or her loneliness. The author shares that if we can come together as a community, the wounds of loneliness will be healed.



# Respect: Honor the rights, freedoms, views... of others

*TEXT: Additional at-risk groups may include individuals from ethnic and racial minority groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, rural residents, victims of domestic violence, and those who experience discrimination or marginalization.*

**Student:** By identifying these groups which are at risk in this situation, the passage emphasizes the importance of recognizing and respecting their unique perspectives, experiences, and rights. This aligns with the ethical consideration of respect and that is acknowledging and valuing the rights and views of others regardless of their backgrounds or circumstances.

## Closing notes...

Students are writing throughout their academic and professional careers.

Priming students to recognize the ethical choices embedded within the writing process will help them make more responsible choices in their communication.

Why does it matter?

**Because, communication is power. Everything is an argument.**

**And, it's always about people.**

**Thank you for attending this  
Daniels Fund Ethics Roundtable!**

***C. Baye Herald***

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- Roger Boisjoly image, acquired by NPR from the Associated Press. [https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2012/02/06/ap910901091\\_custom-86160ed8319f56f9e6b028740254b283b7dfd523-s900-c85.webp](https://media.npr.org/assets/img/2012/02/06/ap910901091_custom-86160ed8319f56f9e6b028740254b283b7dfd523-s900-c85.webp). Photograph, accessed 9/21/2023.