Introduction

Expanding the History and Purpose of Technical Communication

> Because the messenger's mouth was too heavy, and he could not repeat it, the lord of Kulab patted some clay and put the words on it as on a tablet. Before that day, there had been no putting words on clay . . .
>
> —Halton and Svard, *Women's Writing of Ancient Mesopotamia*

You're sitting in a classroom listening to your instructor talk about the history of technical and professional writing. They seem to think this will make you, a sophomore taking a required course, more invested in what you'll be learning. Wow. People were actually writing instructions and memos before we had computers and the internet, so tech writing must be super old. Like, it started in the 1950s.

Where does the history of technical and professional communication (TPC) begin? With the Egyptians, or the ancient Greeks? During the Renaissance? With the Industrial Revolution? Logically, we should begin our count from the invention of the first form of writing, Cuneiform, which began in Mesopotamia in the final centuries before 3000 BCE and ended with the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great of Persia in 539 BCE—2,500 years. "From 500 BCE to the present is the same distance in time" (Kriwaczek 2012, 244), yet Cuneiform and two dominant languages—Sumerian and Akkadian—were maintained throughout, though Sumerian ceased to be spoken. And the other dominant language, Assyrian, splintered into different dialects. The last recorded Assyrian emperor, Ashurbanipal (685–627 BCE), bragged about his ability to read

"the cunning tablets of Sumer, and the dark Akkadian language which is difficult rightly to use; I took my pleasure in reading stone inscribed before the flood" (Kriwaczek 2012, 11).

Before the Greeks, King Solomon, Moses, Abraham, even Noah and his flood, people were settling in villages and imagining cities (Kriwaczek 2012) and using Cuneiform to do so. Cuneiform remained in use for 2,500 years, yet neither discipline has investigated the influence it and the languages it recorded have had on the past, present, and future of TPC.

The piece of writing from this period that most people have likely heard of is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Certainly, this is a story worth reading because it reveals so much about the beliefs, practices, and opinions of the people it represents, yet it is a poor choice to represent the writing of the age. Gilgamesh is a work of literature, and the Mesopotamian literary canon contains other great works of literature. However, most of the documents that have been recovered and translated were not works of literature. Instead, they were the writing of average people conducting mundane business:

> Tell the Lady Zinu: Iddin-Sin sends the following message:
>
> May the gods Samas, Marduk, and Ilabrat keep you forever in good health for my sake.
>
> From year to year, the cloth of the (young) gentlemen here become better, but you let my clothes get worse from year to year. Indeed, you persisted (?) in making my clothes poorer and more scanty. At a time when in our house wool is used up like bread, you have made me poor clothes. The son of Adad-iddinam, whose father is only an assistant of my father, (has) two new sets of clothes [break] while you fuss even about a single set of clothes for me. In spite of the fact that you bore me and his mother only adopted him, his mother loves him, while you, you do not love me! (Oppenheim 1967, 84–85)

At this time, people viewed writing not as a means of preserving information but as a way of communicating across distance, as this son is communicating with his mother. Because of the mundane, digressive nature of so many of the documents that have been found, they have been easy to ignore. After all, what can we learn from a receipt for six sheep or the letter of a whining son to his mother? In the case of the letter, we can learn that letter writing was taught to scribes. The letters from different

periods follow different formulas, but the very formulaic nature of the letters demonstrates that the art of letter writing was a skill that was taught and learned. By examining recipes for perfume, we can see that many of the principles of instructional writing that we teach today were in use in the second millennium BCE. By examining the disputations that scribal students were required to copy, we can see that the art of persuasion was a recognized skill long before Homer, the sophists, or the Greeks existed. By examining legal documents, we can understand how writing almost immediately became a tool of oppression that denied many people social justice. But do these questions justify a book-length study? Yes.

Why Do We Need This Book?

Many excellent histories of the practice and development of TPC have been written since the formation of the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing in 1973 (Tebeaux 2009). However, many phases of our discipline's rich contribution to the evolution of writing and its impact on society have not been fully explored, nor has the fact that the invention and teaching of rhetorical practices normally attributed to the Greeks can be credited to the scribes of ancient Mesopotamia, who applied them not to the act of public speaking but to the writing of transactional documents.

In this book, I seek to enlarge our understanding not only of professional communication but of the development of written communication as a whole. Those of you reading this book already know that the first form of writing was Cuneiform, but an analysis of recovered texts demonstrates a depth of rhetorical complexity not previously acknowledged. Though writing at this time was almost exclusively used for technical purposes, the writers still intentionally used persuasive techniques to increase the effectiveness of their message, and the members of this society understood the power of the written word and its ability to either grant or deny them justice.

When the tool of writing was new, those who could wield it also wielded power. Those who could not suffered the consequences. Imagine you are the only living child of a parent who has died. As such, you are your parent's *zakir shumi*. In this role, you must speak your parent's name in a ritual on the darkest night of each month. And if you don't? Your parent will haunt you, or worse, their spirit will be annihilated.

Imagine the weight of the obligation of going to your parent's grave each month for the rest of your life to chant the name that is the

only thing that prevents your parent's soul from being lost to the void. Imagine your crops have failed and your family is starving. Imagine that soldiers from another city are threatening your home. You are faced with a choice. Move away and start over. Stay and meet your filial obligation and risk the lives of those you love. Imagine if the written word could save you—or doom you.

In Ur, around 2900 BCE, people began to carve the names of the dead onto funerary objects that were buried with them. "Because the phonetic signs reproduced the sounds of their name, writing had the awesome power of perpetual utterance—this is particularly credible when one realizes that at this time, reading was always done aloud" (Schmandt-Besserat 2007). Suddenly, your presence was no longer required because written words could become your voice for eternity. That is power. Imagine you were a young woman whose lover had been taken into custody by the king: "The agents of the king have seized him (my young man) in the town of Appasum, and he is being detained in the house of Nurum-lisi. But this man wears neither the fetters (of a slave) nor the hairdo of a slave. I am sending herewith Adad-sarrum to you, do send that young man back to me" (Oppenheim 1967, 82). Because the young woman had access to the service of a scribe, she could seek justice. Imagine what would have happened to the young man if she had not had such access. Imagine what might have happened to other young men who *did* wear the fetters and hairdo of a slave.

And words have even more power now because the number of people those words can reach is almost limitless. It is time to understand the ancient origins of writing and the profound and continuing effect the invention of writing had and continues to have on the world. It is time to remember, by looking back, that the words we write today have the power to define who and what we were in the past. To explore this topic, I will use the practice of cultural rhetoric in combination with other methods such as structural analysis, which I will describe next.

Methodology

As Malea Powell, Daisy Levy, Andrea Riley-Mukavetz, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Maria Novotny, and Jennifer Fisch-Ferguson explain, the practice of cultural rhetoric doesn't require scholars to maintain the fiction that "gaps"

in our history are waiting to be filled. Instead, they "believe it's important to keep all traditions/stories/histories in play as equally legitimate origins and progenitors of many simultaneous rhetorical traditions" (2014, 13). To understand our history, we must listen to the stories it has to tell, and how those stories overlap, repeat, and resonate, creating what LuMing Mao describes as hybrid rhetorics. Mao sees Chinese American rhetoric as a hybrid formed of both the tradition of European American rhetoric and Chinese rhetoric. "That is to say, that while there is no shared essence between these two traditions, there is a great deal of proximity-induced interaction, realignment, and unsettled association" (2006, 19). Further, he argues that Chinese American should be conceived of "as a process of becoming" (Mao, 19). The stories of ancient Mesopotamia were written more than 2,500 years ago. To hear them, to understand them, we must use our critical imagination.

Royster and Kirsch describe "critical imagination as an inquiry tool, a mechanism for seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, re-thinking what is there and is not there and speculating about what could be there instead" (2012, 2). Critical imagination is essential to any research that relies on the "rescue, recovery, and (re)inscription" (2012, 2) of information because it provides not a substitute for but a counterpoint to "more traditional habits of critique" (2012, 2)—habits not always useful when interpreting less easily documented forms of information such as experiences, viewpoints, and perceptions. For example, an analysis of the content of a student tablet might provide insight into the grammatical structure of the language, work that has been done by Assyriologists, but such an analysis of the ancient riddle below will not provide opportunities for imagining *why* this riddle was written:

> A house with a foundation like heaven,
> A house which like a . . . vessel has
> Been covered with linen,
> A house which like a goose stands on
> A (firm) base,
> One with eyes not opened has entered
> It,
> One with open eyes has come out of
> It.
> Its solution: the school. (Sjoberg 1975, 159)

Was this text written as a school exercise? If so, why were students being asked to write riddles, a rhetorically sophisticated form of communication. Was it meant to advertise the importance of the scribal education? Was this riddle an encomium to scribal education? Or perhaps the teacher who assigned this exercise was embracing his trickster mind (Geller et al., 2007, ch. 2) or anticipating advice that Augustine would give several thousands of years later to view play as "vital to the work of the gods," as a "divine form of subversion" (Babcock 1984, 10). Only by overlaying critical imagination onto more traditional methods can we ask such questions.

Critical imagination paves the way for strategic contemplation (Royster and Kirsch 2012, ch. 2). Strategic contemplation creates a space in which researchers listen to the hidden voices of those they study—to imagine a process of asking and answering. And again, we must stretch both our imaginations and our contemplations across the globe and through space and time. The use of critical imagination and strategic contemplation effectively combine with the practice of cultural rhetoric, which is ". . . an embodied practice. . . . Scholars must be willing to build meaningful theoretical frames from inside the particular culture in which they are situating their work. To do so means understanding a specific culture's systems, beliefs, relationships to the past, practices of meaning-making, and practices of carrying culture forward to future generations" (Bratta and Powell 2016). But can these ancient tablets, what Leo Oppenheim called "bones," tell a story? "Can documents of any kind lead a priori to reliable information about a dead civilization—especially when the texts are not intended for us? Can they guide us through the intrinsic otherness of the cultural setting that created them, and can they reveal to us a functioning 'cosmos'?" (Oppenheim 1967, 56).

Mao would answer in the affirmative because the mere fact that we were not active members of the culture that produced the Cuneiform documents I study doesn't mean we can't still understand them. About his own work, Mao says that "By characterizing [the] emergent hybrid rhetoric [that he studies] as *Chinese American*," he is not suggesting "that only Chinese Americans use and experience this rhetoric" (19). As with any rhetoric, he acknowledges that it can be used by anyone as long as Chinese and European American rhetorical traditions are being brought together and as long as relations of power continue to make their presence felt in the process (19). So, while we are not ancient Mesopotamians, we can understand the hybridization of orality and literacy, both in an ancient context and a modern one, if we remember to consider the cultural con-

text and the relations of power and social justice in which the process of hybridization occurs. Because Mao's stipulation is so important to my project, I chose a methodology that would allow me to "build meaningful theoretical frames from inside the particular culture in which [I am] situating [my] work" (Bratta and Powell 2016). However, because I cannot read Cuneiform, to do my work I must use translated documents.

The Trouble with Translations

Working with historical documents, particularly translations, comes with its own challenges. As J. J. Connor (1993) argued, scholars must become familiar with all the published scholarship about their texts, locate them within scholarly editions, identify the texts' genres, and consider their historical context. First, technical communicators should remember that while a text might be new to them, it is not necessarily new to scholars in fields other than their own. The texts that I am analyzing have been discussed by Assyriologists who study the Cuneiform culture of the ancient Middle East. These publications laid the groundwork for my understanding of both the content and historical context of the documents and their writers. These same scholars also provided the translations on which I based my analyses, and the choice of a translation can also be problematic. According to Bellos, you can give one hundred well-known translators the same page of text, "and the chances of any two versions being identical are close to zero" (2011, 8) because translations are always approximate. Connor (1993) offers a solution to this problem: use a critical edition if possible, but when a critical edition is not available, use the best scholarly text available. I have relied heavily on the materials provided by Oxford University Press's *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. These translations are valuable because older translations are edited as new discoveries are made, and the history of each translation and the translator is made available. Though none of the other translations I used was published

Figure I.1. eme-bal, Language turner. *Source*: Bellos 2011, 29.

in a critical edition, each was translated by an expert and published in a scholarly book or journal. This does not eliminate the potential for varying or incorrect translations, but the damage that would be done by not analyzing the rich trove of texts recovered outweighs concerns regarding the translations themselves.

It is also important to place the writing of a specific period within a historical context because when analyzing historical sources we must understand the time, beliefs, and the intellectual traditions of both the writer and the period in which he/she wrote (Connor and Connor 1992).

The Historical Context of Writing in Ancient Mesopotamia

Cuneiform was invented in direct response to the growing culture's need for a system of bookkeeping. In fact, the first genres of writing in ancient Mesopotamia were scribal exercises, lexical lists, and accounting documents. As the culture became more stratified and complex, the texts being produced also evolved, and new genres emerged including literature, letters, technical manuals, and legal documents—again the majority of the documents recovered and translated were examples of TPC.

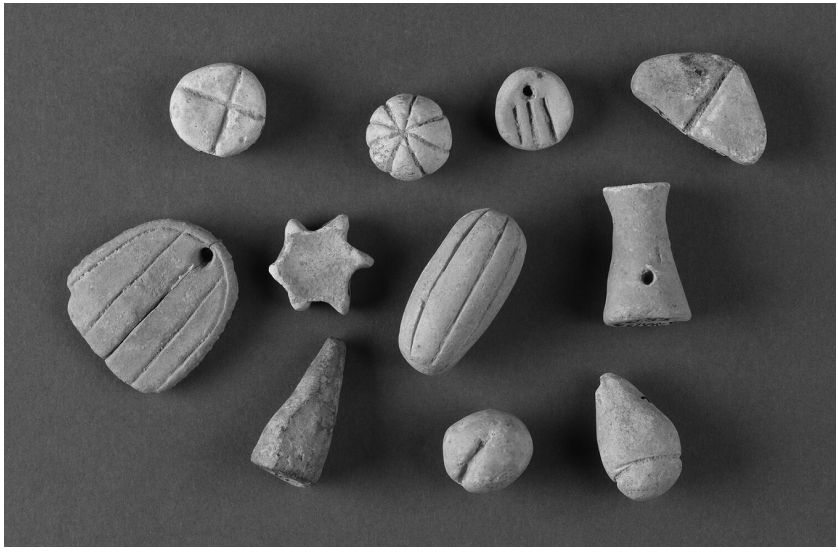

Figure I.2. Disk tokens. *Source*: Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités orientales.

Initially, ancient Mesopotamians used clay tokens of specific shapes to represent numbers of goods. These tokens provided a method of quantifying a sale or trade of a commodity such as sheep, wool, or olive oil. In some instances, the tokens were engraved with symbols that represented the thing being counted. Eventually, scribes took these first symbols and combined them with new symbols to create the system of writing that replaced the tokens—Cuneiform (Schmandt-Besserat 1996). Cuneiform, however, was not a language. It was a method of recording the spoken language, Sumerian. Later it was used to record other major Mesopotamian languages (see table I.1).

Table I.1. Timeline of Major Mesopotamian Languages and Periods

4000 BCE Predynastic period	3200 BCE Early Dynastic Period	2000–1000 BCE Old Babylonian/ Old Assyrian Period 1000–1500 BC Middle Babylonian/ Middle Assyrian Period	1000–70 BCE Neo-Babylonian/ Neo-Assyrian Period	0 AD Late Babylonian Period
Urbanization/ use of clay tokens to count.	Sumerian is spoken language. Cuneiform is invented to record Sumerian. From 2500–2000 Old Akkadian is also spoken.	Middle Assyrian (a dialect of Akkadian) is the primary dialect spoken and begins to replace Sumerian. Enheduana writes first works of literature in Sumerian. Majority of recovered Akkadian documents are letters, legal documents, and business receipts.	Sumerian is written language of scholars. Akkadian is lingua franca. *Epic of Gilgamesh* is written.	Last known Cuneiform text is written.

Source: Created by the author.

The Uruk tablets, the oldest found (written around 3500 BC), include more than two thousand symbols; however, this number was gradually consolidated to about six hundred. Initially pictographic in nature, the symbols became more abstract, and some acquired phonetic values. Because of the complexity of the system, scribal schools quickly sprang up, which is why only three genres of writing (scribal exercises, lists, and accounting documents) initially existed (Halton and Svard 2018, 10). It was almost seven hundred years after writing was invented that the other genres developed. Sumerian, the only language spoken in the fourth millennium, faded from use in the third millennium and was used only for scholarly writing. Akkadian and then Assyrian (regional dialectics of Sumerian) became the languages of business and commerce. Most of the texts recovered from Assyria and Akkad from 2000 to 1000 BC are letters, business receipts, royal inscriptions, and legal texts. The table on page 9 outlines the different periods and languages:

Chapter Outline

I begin the book by discussing the development of the cylinder seal, a carved tube that the owner could roll over a piece of wet clay to "seal" a transaction. Cylinder seals were a technological breakthrough that enabled someone to write their "signature." Possession of a seal, or lack thereof, along with the quality of the seal itself, had repercussions for the Mesopotamians who made and used them. Today, someone might be judged by the color of their skin, or the quality of their clothing. In ancient Mesopotamia, people were judged by the quality of their seals and were even excluded from business opportunities if they didn't own one.

Several hundred years after the invention of writing, only three genres existed: scribal exercises and lexical lists, which were used for teaching, and accounting tablets, which had a professional purpose. However, seven hundred years later other genres such as religious writing, technical manuals, and letters began to appear (Halton and Svard 2018). This was a logical result Powell (2012) suggested because the writing system of any group of users develops specifically to satisfy the "needs they place upon it" (14). Consequently, it is not surprising that the two most used genres, the technical manual and the administrative letter, were forms of instructional writing.

Contrary to current scholarship in professional communication, which places the first women professional writers in the period of 1641–1700 AD, the first professional documents were written by women in 2400 BCE—eight centuries earlier. Enheduana—the first woman writer and the first nonanonymous author ever identified—wrote many of the period's great poems, including *A Hymn to Inanna*. Her work calls into question our discipline's belief that persuasive writing began with Homer and was conceptualized largely by men. This fact has the potential to completely revise the history of both professional and persuasive writing along with women's role in that history.

The teachers of the *edubba* left very little textual evidence of their teaching methods or philosophies. However, archaeologists have recovered many tablets from what they believe to be schools. By using these student texts, we can work backward from the textual evidence to reconstruct the educational process that produced them. The purpose of the edubba was to create a well-rounded writer who could work in many fields, "that is, [the edubba] was first established for the purpose of training the scribes required to satisfy the economic and administrative demands of the land, primarily those of the temple and palace" (Kramer 1981, 4).

Richard Enos argued that "rhetoric did not originate at a single moment in history. Rather, it was an evolving, developing consciousness about the relationship between thought and expression. This sensitivity about speaking, and (later) writing, happened in a variety of ways, at different times, and in several different areas of Greece" (Enos 1993, ix). This same sensitivity developed in ancient Mesopotamia thousands of years before Greek civilization existed. Although we can find evidence of rhetorical awareness in many genres of Cuneiform texts, it is most evident in the disputation literature. These dialogues between archetypal figures such as Hoe and Plow, or Fish and Bird demonstrate that what we later identify as principles of sophistic rhetoric—mythos, logos, and nomos—are present in the disputations.

In ancient Mesopotamia, people's ability to conduct business, give instruction, get a loan, avoid punishment, and own property was not based just on their gender, age, education, or social standing, but on their access to the written word. Even a slave girl could demand social justice if she could hire a scribe to write a letter for her: "What I have told you now has happened to me: For seven months this (unborn) child was in my body, but for a month now the child has been dead, and nobody wants

to take care of me. May it please my master (to do something) lest I die" (Oppenheim 1967, 85). Social justice calls for collective action. Clearly, we cannot act upon a collective structure that existed thousands of years ago. However, we can take what we learn from the culture's mistakes and use it to help us identify and avoid similar errors in the future.

The line between myth, magic, and medicine was greatly blurred in ancient Mesopotamia. But that does not mean that medicine wasn't practiced. The earliest incantations come from Sumer—many of these were used to cure sickness. While these incantations remained in flux for many centuries, by the first millennium these incantations had been "canonized" for use by the mashmashu—a type of priest who was a royal official and the "principal recourse for exorcisms or for cures of illness" (Goff 1956, 5). However, rather than treating disease, these rituals were often used to punish and oppress.

Conclusion

The research in this book is not meant to be definitive. I have only scraped the surface (sorry, I couldn't resist a tablet-related pun) of the practice of technical and professional communication in ancient Mesopotamia. Many discoveries are waiting to be made, and many texts deserve to be analyzed. I do hope, however, this book will pique your curiosity and challenge some of your assumptions. We live in a world of communication technology, and it is easy to fall into the mindset that today's technology is the most "technical" ever. But we need to remember that our technology was built from the bones of the communication technologies that came first. Clay tablet, computer tablet: are they really that different in terms of their purpose and their impact? I don't think so.