

English 675, Designing Technical Documents (spring, 2006)

Spring, 2006: MWF 1:00--1:50 p.m. PUM 405 and the English Department computer lab (PUM 408).

Instructor: Leigh Henson, Ph.D., Professor of English:

<http://www.missouristate.edu/english/faculty/henson.htm>.

Contact information: Office, Pummill 4A. Office phone, 836-5399. Email: dlhenson@missouristate.edu (use the phone or paper to follow up and verify email messages). Other messages: Department office, 836-5107.

Office hours: MWF 10:00-10:45 a.m., MWF 2:00 to 3:00 p.m., and by appointment.

Overview

Computer technology has dramatically quickened the pace of document development and shifted more and more creative and technical responsibility to professional/technical writers. Today's technical writers face the increasing complexity of researching, planning, designing, writing, creating and editing graphics, editing verbal text, and even publishing. To perform these tasks, members of this profession must also develop skill with computer hardware and software. With responsibility for both verbal and graphical text, writers need to understand how visual elements can serve communicative purposes in various formats and how to combine verbal and graphical text effectively.

Specifically, this course teaches how rhetorical principles enable us to design strategies that integrate verbal and visual elements to aid usefulness and readability. We will attempt to study principles and practices that apply to both print and online formats. In doing so, we will be concerned with how print and online formats adapt rhetorical and design principles with similar and different results.

To make this course as meaningful as possible for diverse students, we will broadly define technical documents as any materials that convey specialized information to help readers make decisions, solve problems, or perform tasks. Course projects will allow students to work with document types of particular interest.

This course emphasizes a rhetorical approach to document development that assimilates verbal and visual elements ranging from document type definition, page layout, and typography, to the use of such graphic devices as tables, charts, and graphs (data graphics). **Our rhetorical approach stresses the need for visual elements to serve instrumental purposes of informing, instructing, or persuading and to strengthen verbal text rather than to impress, entertain, or merely express. In technical communication, visual elements are not used for artistic purpose *per se*, but support instrumental purposes by adding visual appeal and facilitating readability.**

Texts

Required

Kostelnick, Charles, and David D. Roberts. *Designing Visual Language: Strategies for Professional Communicators*. NY: Allyn and Bacon, 1998.

Reference

Parker, Roger C., and Patrick Berry. *Looking Good in Print*, 4th ed. Scottsdale, AZ: The Coriolis Group, Inc., 1998.

Schriver, Karen A. *Dynamics in Document Design*. NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997.

Technical Communication Quarterly 5.1 (Winter, 1996). (special issue on document design)

Other Materials Used in Class

Other readings from the course bibliography

Learner Objectives

Design Knowledge and Skill

1. To develop a rhetorical approach in the critique, revision, and creation of documents using technical information
2. To consider process and product perspectives in designing documents using technical information
3. To recognize a range of document types using technical information
4. To understand the role of conventions/boilerplate (common features of a certain document type) in design
5. To determine an appropriate document type, format definition, page layout, typography, and other visual elements such as data graphics
6. To consider the role of communicative context, including business objectives, constraints, and "corporate culture"
7. To apply effective strategies of audience analysis (including usability studies) in design decisions
8. To consider the issues of organizational politics and of ethical dilemmas in design decisions
9. To define the rhetorical purpose of a particular document
10. To combine verbal text and visual elements to achieve clarity in purpose, content, organization, and style
11. To create appropriate data graphics and use them to support rhetorical purpose and verbal text

Technological Knowledge and Skill

1. To expand and refine skill in using computer technology for design, e.g., Word, FrameMaker, MS Publisher, Photoshop (minor graphics editing), and FrontPage; 2. to use Microsoft Excel to create data graphics; 3. to use a scanner and CD-Writer as needed; 4. to consider the ways in which computer technology helps or hinders the design process and product; and 5. to use computer technology for research.

Research Knowledge and Skill

1. To become familiar with the professional literature of designing technical documents
2. To evaluate and apply published information toward the preceding objectives for design and technology

3. To consider the use of original research (e.g., interviews, surveys, observations, document analysis) as a basis for design decisions (data-based design)

Projects

All projects are required--must be completed--for a student to qualify for a passing grade in this course.

1. 100 points—Using Word, FrameMaker, or other program to create a 1-page job application letter, 2-page resume, and cover memo (1 1/2--2 pages formatted like this course policy). The letter and resume will be prepared in response to an actual job advertisement (printed or online), which should be one that would truly interest you if you were graduating and pursuing a career in technical communication. A copy of the job ad will be turned in as part of the project. The cover memo (1 1/2--2 pages with single spacing within paragraphs, double spacing between paragraphs) will describe and explain the content, organization, page design/layout, and typography of the resume.
2. 150 points—A formal, 4- to 5-page critical review of a book on some aspect of document/information design, including the design (verbal and visual components) of the book itself. (A bibliography of books on design will be provided.) This review is to be formatted like this course policy statement. The review will have an appendix featuring a scanned page of the book with callouts to identify features of page design/layout, typography, and other graphics features.
3. 150 points—A 3-fold promotional brochure (8 1/2 x 14 sheet) for the book reviewed in project 2. A 2- to 3-page formal cover memo explaining the process and features (and reasons for them) of the design.
4. 450 points—A combined creative and research-based project. This project requires locating a real-world client with a need for a document to be designed and developed at least through a prototype version. This document should be something more substantial than a one-page flier, for example, a manual (or part of one), multiple-page brochure, newsletter, or Web site (at least homepage and a few other pages).

The design of the document should be based on research of appropriate theory and practice. Research should include information from both academic and trade publications. Use is required of the *ATTW Annual Bibliography*. Note: to search the *ATTW Annual Bibliography*, you will have to use printed issues of *Technical Communication Quarterly*, because no electronic database covers all of the primary journals: *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication (IEEE)*, *Journal of Business and Technical Communication (JBTC)*, *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication (JTWC)*, *Technical Communication (TC)*, and *Technical Communication Quarterly (TCQ)*. The research should include collection and evaluation of at least two examples of the document type chosen. A rating sheet will be provided for use in evaluating these examples. Also, use online resources, including listservs such as the following: <http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/techwhirllist/index.html>.

A formal paper of 5 to 6 pages (formatted exactly like the course policy) explaining the design features is required. This paper must have textual and end citations for at least eight academic and/or trade publication sources besides the course textbook. Findings of the evaluations of the examples will be reported in the paper with a data graphic and discussion.

5. 350 points—Web site project. Three options: (1) A professional Web site with portfolio with at least three sample documents (and documentation of their creation). Publication on a server is recommended but not required. Cover memo (2 to 3 pages) to explain the design process and product. (2) A source-based feasibility study (5 to 6 pages) of doing some kind of Web work for a non-profit organization,

including example of at least one preliminary Web page (original or makeover). (3) Some other substantial Web work project approved in advance. Cover memo (2 to 3 pages).

6. 100 points—Final exam: a critique of a document to be announced. Students are expected to judge all design elements and to support their judgments using principles and practices covered in the course.

Procedures

The course reflects how computer technology and downsizing compel individuals to perform multiple tasks: planning, researching, designing, writing, editing, and perhaps publishing. Thus, the course stresses individual rather than group work. Regardless, individuals need to consult with the teacher and peers to achieve the best results. Some class time will be devoted to peer review, individual instruction, and to computer lab work, in which students often benefit from helping one another.

Standards

All projects are required--must be completed--for a student to qualify for a passing grade in this course. Deadlines are important in business, industry, government, and English 675. Projects are expected at the beginning of class on their due dates unless otherwise announced. Eight percentage points will be deducted for the first late day and four percentage points off for every other late day (not counting weekends or holidays). A paper submitted after the deadline on the same day as the deadline receives one-day-late penalty (minus 8 percentage points). This measure is intended to emphasize the importance of deadlines.

Grading

All projects should be prepared with computer technology and should apply design principles insofar as possible. Do not use gender-specific language. Grading follows this scale: 100-90=A, 89-80=B, 79-70=C, 69-60=D, 59 and below=F.

Evaluation will be strict but fair. Criteria used for grading papers will correspond to criteria used to judge writing on the job. Formal writing is one of the fundamental skills of a technical communicator. A writer's main goal is to be effective in a well-conceived communicative purpose through correctness, clarity, coherence, and conciseness in all design aspects from content and page layout through punctuation.

Correctness: This concept means accuracy and appropriateness in content and conformity to directions, requirements, design principles, and appropriate language (which often means "formal" English). Avoid errors in sentence construction (typically for example, fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, dangling/misplaced modifiers, and problems with lack of parallelism and errors of grammar (especially subject/verb agreement and pronoun usage), and mechanics (spelling, capitalization, and punctuation). Writing errors such as these weaken clarity and credibility. Readers judge professional expertise by the quality of writing.

Clarity: Be direct. Pay close attention to the reading audience and adapt communicative purpose, content, organization, and language usage to the readers. Eliminate irrelevancy, poor sense, faulty logic, contradiction, vagueness, absolute generalizations, as well as undeveloped, unsupported ideas. Define terms, and use vocabulary familiar to the reading audience.

Coherence: Use logic and audience adaptation for overall organization and paragraph structure. Enhance coherence through the use of transitional words and phrases. Achieve good paragraphing sense by using topic sentences. Avoid stringy paragraphs.

Conciseness: Use economy of language. Wordiness decreases clarity. Use varied sentence structure.

Source Documentation: Whenever you borrow information (direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary), cite the source according to MLA format). Be sure you pay particular attention to the way in which source citations refer to specific pages where borrowed information (direct quotation, etc.) is located in a source.

Plagiarism and Cheating: Cite the source of all ideas, facts, and words not your own. Courtesy, honesty, and convention require this. Ignorance of citation (documentation) techniques is no excuse. Plagiarism (as defined in class) and other forms of cheating will result in your failing a given project and may cause you to fail the course. Any student participating in any form of academic dishonesty will be subject to sanctions as described in the *Student Academic Integrity Policies and Procedures*, which can be found at <http://www.missouristate.edu/provost/AcademicIntegrity.html> (also available at reserves desk in Meyer Library).

Special Warning About Computer Technology and Deadlines: No deadline extensions will be granted because of problems with computer technology, including printers. Store your work on hard drives and back up often with floppy and/or zip disks. You are assumed to be computer literate and personally organized enough to avoid ALL data storage and retrieval problems, regardless of such causes as crashes, viruses, and mysterious and cosmic conspiracy. Only designated projects will be submitted by email or email attachments because electronic submissions can create computer hassles.

Attendance

You are allowed to miss three class periods without question ("unexcused absences"). Beginning with the fourth unexcused class absence, you will receive a penalty of four (4) percentage points deducted for each unexcused class period from the total raw points you will have earned prior to the final exam. To avoid an unexcused absence, you must either provide documentation before the absence or hand it to the instructor in the following class period. Documentation will be allowed only for legitimate reasons (e.g., illness, death in immediate family, and participation in such official Missouri State activities as sports competitions). Documentation for an illness is written proof of a doctor's appointment, Taylor Health Services visit, etc. The instructor may require that the documentation be provided on Missouri State letterhead and be signed by a Missouri State official from a student services office. Documentation for death in the family is always a letter from the appropriate student services office at Missouri State. Documentation for an absence related to a Missouri State activity must be provided before the absence.

Nondiscrimination

Missouri State University is a community of people with respect for diversity that emphasizes the dignity and equality common to all individual faculty, staff, and students. The University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, ancestry, age, disability, or veteran status in employment or in any of its program or activities. Missouri State is an equal opportunity institution and maintains a grievance procedure incorporating due process available to any person who believes he or she has been discriminated against. At all times, it is your right to address inquiries or concerns about possible discrimination to the Equal Opportunity Officer, Carrington 128, (417) 836-4245. Concerns about discrimination can also be brought directly to your instructor's attention, and/or to the attention of your instructor's department head. The Missouri State University statement of nondiscrimination can be found at http://www.missouristate.edu/equity/Nondiscrimination_Statement.htm.

Disability Accommodation

Missouri State University is committed to making reasonable accommodations in policies, practices, or procedures necessary to ensure that no individual with a disability is excluded, denied services, segregated, or otherwise treated differently from other individuals in the University community. The instructor in this course strongly supports the University's disability accommodation policy and will make reasonable accommodations for any student with a physical or documented learning disability in order to facilitate the student's learning and performance. Students requiring an accommodation should contact the instructor during the first week of classes, and they are encouraged to use the Learning Diagnostic Clinic and the Office of Disability Support Services. To request accommodations for disability, students must contact Disability Services <http://www.missouristate.edu/disability/>. Plaster Student Union Suite 405, 417-836-4192; TTY 417-836-6792. Students must provide documentation of disability to Disability Services prior to receiving accommodations.