HU4634-01 Advanced Practicum in Scientific and Technical Communication:
Keweenaw Communicators

Room: 108 Walker
Time: 3:05-3:55 MWF
Semester: Spring 2002
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Optional Text


MTU Career Center staff report that recruiters consider co-op or similar work experience "absolutely essential" for STC and STA majors. Recruiters consistently ask, "Have students done any technical writing for a client?" and "Do they have a tangible sample of their work?" In order to provide such experience, all Scientific and Technical Communication majors at MTU (in both the BS and BA options) are required to take 3 credit hours of either co-op or HU4634. Over 85 percent of our majors meet this requirement by taking HU4634, and recruiters have told Career Center staff that they consider projects completed for this course to provide adequate evidence of the practical work experience they require. Consequently, Career Center staff have indicated to our faculty that they "cannot emphasize strongly enough how important this course is for [our] students."

Goals of HU4634

1. To serve as an alternative to a co-op. The bulk of students' time in HU4634 will be devoted to working on projects with their clients, not to classroom activities; this distinguishes HU4634 from other project-based courses and allows students to undertake much more ambitious projects in this course.

2. To serve as an assessment tool for the STC/STA Program. Each degree-granting program at MTU is required to conduct an annual, outcomes-based assessment. Each assessment requires at least three different assessment instruments, at least one of which must be a "direct measure" of the success of the program. Success in HU4634 is to some extent a direct measure of how well our program has prepared students for entry-level scientific and technical communication tasks.
3. To provide a tangible product for STC/STA majors' professional portfolios.

4. To introduce students to a comprehensive process of managing scientific and technical communication projects from conception through completion. [See eight stages described below, which I've developed in teaching this course since 1991.] You should be able to use this or a similar process successfully as an independent contractor, as a corporate employee, or as a manager of other technical communicators.

Hence, HU4634 provides you with an opportunity to select a project that is of interest to you and to pursue that project through to a finished product that will (1) be put to good use by someone on campus or in the larger community, and (2) provide a valuable addition to your professional portfolio. The course differs from other project-based courses in that (1) you will work on a real project with a real client; (2) you will primarily exercise and enhance skills you have learned elsewhere in the curriculum; and (3) the bulk of your time will be devoted to working on the project with your client, not to classroom activities. This final condition allows you to undertake much more ambitious projects in this class than you might in other classes.

Eight Stages in Developing Your Project

1. Selecting a Client and a Project

The ideal client is someone who's willing and able to work closely with you at various stages in the development of your project. For example, early along in the project, your client should be willing to sit down and brainstorm with you in order to generate an initial pool of ideas for the project. Further along in the semester, your client should also be willing to sit down with you and review your progress in order to help ensure that the final product will meet with his or her satisfaction. When you first negotiate a project with a client, you should make clear that to serve his or her needs effectively, you'll need a few hours of his or her time. You should also inform your client at the outset that he or she is responsible for providing me with an informal evaluation of your work. This evaluation will influence but not determine your final grade.

Another thing to consider when selecting a project is your career aspirations. If you want to work in the auto industry after graduation and you have the option of either working with MTU Sports Information on the hockey magazine or working for the Department of Mechanical Engineering on a manual for an experimental vehicle, your choice should be obvious.

Also, be sure that the project you choose is one that you're actually qualified to complete. For example, if you haven't already taken at least two video courses, you should not undertake a project that involves producing a videotape.

In recent years, we've had requests for help on projects from many organizations and individuals, including (but not limited to) the following: Portage Township Library, the Humane Society, the League of Women Voters, WGGL, the AIDS Task Force, the MTU Career Center, MTU Counseling Services, the STC Committee, the Lode, the Gundlach Shelter for Abused Women, the Copper Country Arts Council, Keweenaw National Historical Park, the Van Pelt Library, and Educational Opportunity. (If you work for a student organization, your client must be the group's advisor, not another student.)

Bill Curnow, Executive Director of University Relations, informs me that "University Relations has been given the mandate to centralize and provide visual and content consistency to the University's undergraduate student recruiting materials as well as alumni communications. We have been asked to review and approve all publications for these two 'streams' prior to printing." If you work with
clients on materials that will be used either for undergraduate recruiting or alumni communications, do not assume that your clients are aware of this policy. Be sure that they understand that whatever you do can be no more than a draft, which must be cleared through University Relations.

If you choose to do a collaborative project, be sure to select as a collaborator someone you know you can work with and someone who you are confident will make a valuable contribution to the project.

2. Brainstorming and Oral Project Proposal

By the end of the second week of the semester, you should have identified a client, negotiated the preliminary details of a project with this client, and met with me to propose a suitable HU4634 project. During this brief individual conference, we will negotiate appropriate details and quickly develop the outlines of an acceptable project.

3. Written Project Prospectus

Once I've approved your oral project proposal, you'll describe your project in an approximately 750-word (three-page) prospectus. (If you're doing two projects during the same term, you'll need to submit two prospectuses.) The prospectus helps to ensure that you've planned your project carefully, that you've discussed your project with both your client and me, and that you've had an opportunity to get feedback on your project from both of us. The prospectus also provides further practice in technical writing.

If problems become clear in the prospectus that were not apparent in your oral proposal, you'll have to renegotiate your project with me and with your client. If you don't have an approved project by the end of the second week of the semester, you should withdraw from the class.

Your prospectus must include at least the following five components:

• a description of your client and of the nature of your project (promotional materials, manual, videotape, informational brochure, newsletter, etc.);
• a rhetorical analysis of your project; that is, a description of the audience for and purpose of your project and an explanation of how you'll appeal to this particular audience in order to achieve this particular purpose;
• a description of your qualifications to undertake this project;
• a timetable for completing the project by the end of the semester; and
• the approval and signature of your client (your client may also submit his/her approval to me via e-mail).

These various components of your prospectus should be separated by appropriate headings. Any document or software that provides instruction must be user tested; if you're developing such a document, be sure to include user testing in your timetable. If appropriate, your prospectus should also include a budget.

Your timetable (which you can present in either graphic [e.g., Gantt chart] or narrative form) must break your project down into component tasks (e.g., initial interview with client, preliminary
research, first draft of text, selection or composition of graphics, rough layout of document, consultation with client, follow-up research, second draft of text, user testing, consultation with client, third draft of text, final approval by client, production of master copy, printing) and indicate when you expect to begin and complete each of these tasks.

Within approximately one week, I'll post prospectuses outside my office door. Pick them up there as soon as you can and consider the feedback I've provided. (If you don't want your prospectus left outside my office door, make a note to that effect on the first page of your prospectus.)

4. Two Progress Reports

In week five and again in week ten, you'll submit a progress report (approximately 500-750 words). This report must describe work completed and work yet to be done. If your timetable has changed, your progress report must include a revised timetable. You must also briefly describe problems encountered or anticipated and how you've resolved or how you plan to resolve those problems. Your progress report must also include a draft version of all or part of your final project and the signature of your client, indicating that he or she is apprised of and (hopefully) satisfied with your progress to date. As with your prospectus, your client may also submit his/her approval to me via e-mail.

Be sure to keep in regular contact with your client throughout the course of your project. Under no circumstances should you arouse anxiety in your client by leaving him or her unaware of your progress. Even delivering an otherwise acceptable product at the end of the term is inadequate compensation for arousing such stress.

5. Schedule of Billable Hours

Students must keep a record of billable hours for all of the work on their projects. At the beginning of the term, the course instructor will provide forms for this purpose.

6. Oral Presentation

During the final weeks of the semester, you'll deliver an oral presentation (10-12 minutes, including questions) on your project. In this presentation, you should address questions such as the following: How and why did you choose this project? What is the intended audience of the project? What is its intended purpose? What problems did you encounter along the way, and how did you resolve these problems? This presentation should allow you to share ideas with other students in the class, practice your oral presentation skills, and conceptualize what you've learned in the process of completing your project. (This last point should prove valuable when discussing your project with recruiters.) When preparing for and delivering your presentation, be sure to stick closely to your time limit.

7. Letter of Transmittal

Also accompanying your final project should be a brief (one-page) cover letter or letter of transmittal, which you can present in either letter or memo form. A standard letter of transmittal (1) introduces the reader (often a client or employer) to the report or other document it accompanies with a brief description of the document's content and purpose; (2) describes any problems or recommendations relating to the document; and (3) invites the reader to contact the author with any questions. (Note that most of what you will need for a good letter of transmittal you will have
already generated for your prospectus, progress reports, and oral presentation.) The letter/memo should be addressed to your client and copied to me. If there is any additional information that you want to pass along to me, you can include that in a separate memo.

8. Final Project

The appropriate format of your final project depends upon the nature of your project itself. When you submit your final project, please submit along with it your prospectus and your progress reports. Hence, be sure to safeguard these documents after I've returned them to you. If your project has involved the revision of older documents, also submit copies of these original documents.

How Many Credits is a Project Worth?

Whether or not a project is substantial enough to justify three credits depends on the nature of the project. Some three-fold brochures can be completed in a single afternoon and certainly aren't worth three credits. Other brochures require extensive research, consultation with clients, and design considerations. Such a brochure might be worth three credits. On the other hand, your final product might be a one-hundred-page document, but if all you've done is mechanically edit a previous edition of this document according to your client's specifications, you won't have exercised much creativity or gained much experience. Again, this wouldn't justify three credits. A twelve- or fifteen-page document that you start from scratch would be more appropriate. Roughly speaking, a three-credit project should entail 130 to 150 hours of your time over the course of the semester (this time estimate assumes that you're working at an average rate of efficiency).

You cannot receive credit in this class for work you've done for another class.

Evaluation

Your final grade will be determined approximately as follows:

10% Prospectus
10% Each of two progress reports
10% Oral report
10% Participation in class and conferences
50% Final project and letter of transmittal

Your Client's Evaluation of Your Work

Toward the end of the term, I will ask your client to submit an evaluation of your work. This evaluation will influence, but not determine, your final grade. This assessment may also be used in assessing our Scientific and Technical Communication Program. The evaluation consists of the following six questions:

1. Did your HU4634 student accurately represent to you his or her qualifications for this project?
2. Did your student establish a reasonable timetable for completing this project and adhere to this timetable?

3. Did your student keep in regular contact with you about his or her progress and consult with you as necessary about drafts, problems, modifications, and design and production considerations?

4. Overall, were you satisfied with your student's skill, diligence, responsibility, and professionalism?

5. Are you satisfied with your student's progress toward or final completion of this project?

6. If you had a similar project in the future and you had the resources to hire someone to undertake this project, would you hire this student?

Attendance Policy

"Ninety percent of success is just showing up." Woody Allen

If you miss more than three of our regularly scheduled meetings (including conferences), you will automatically fail the course. There will be no exceptions to this policy unless you have either a medical excuse signed by your physician or a personal emergency authorized in writing by the Dean of Students. For a description of what constitutes an excused absence, see the below excerpt from the Michigan Tech Student Handbook:

"Students are expected to attend all classes, including recitation and laboratory sessions, beginning on the first day of regular instruction as stated in the University academic calendar. This date can be found in the Undergraduate Catalog and in the Time Schedule Booklets.

Students having excused absences are permitted to make up graded work. Whenever possible, students should contact the instructor prior to the absence and arrange a mutually acceptable make-up procedure. Otherwise, the students should account for the absence at the first opportunity.

Students who are unable to notify instructors concerning their absence from class or who must notify several instructors on short notice should contact the Office of Student Affairs for assistance.

An absence is excused under the following conditions:

1. A student is participating in off-campus, University-sponsored activities, such as field trips, fine arts performances, intercollegiate athletics, judging teams, etc. The faculty or staff members supervising the off-campus activity will send a notice via e-mail to all academic departments and the Office of Student Affairs before the activity takes place. The notice will include the name and date of the activity, the name of the supervising person, and a list of all participating students.

2. The instructor is assured that a student's absence from class was due to circumstances beyond the student's control. The student must provide verification of the special circumstance if the instructor requests it.

3. Excuses are usually given in the following circumstances: illness, funeral of any relative or close friend, military duty, court appearance, and personal emergencies.
4. The instructor deems it excusable. Some examples might include professional and graduate school interviews, plant trips, job interviews requiring travel, and professional society meetings."

Late Assignments

I won't accept any assignment that's more than two days late. There's no penalty for one late paper (as long as it's not more than two days late); subsequent late papers, however, will be lowered by one part of a letter grade (e.g., from a B/C to a C). Remember that this is Project Management, and you will be evaluated on the basis of your project management skills, a significant aspect of which is working to meet a deadline. An F will be the rule (and an X or an I will be the exception) for work that remains unfinished at the end of the semester. Exceptions to this rule include cases in which—due to the client's production schedule—you have negotiated from the outset for a project to extend beyond the end of the semester.

Academic Dishonesty (from the Michigan Tech Student Handbook)

"Academic integrity and honesty are central to a student's education. Ethical conduct in an academic context will be carried forward into a student's professional career. Academic honesty is essential to a community of scholars searching for and learning to seek the truth. Anything less than total commitment to honesty undermines the efforts of the entire academic community. Both students and faculty are responsible for insuring the academic integrity of the University.

In their academic work, students are expected to maintain personal academic integrity; treat all academic exercises as work to be conducted privately, unless otherwise instructed; ask faculty to clarify any aspects of permissible or expected cooperation on any assignment; and report any cheating activity.

Definitions of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, cheating, fabrication, and facilitating academic dishonesty, can be found in the Academic Integrity Policy [see below]. Copies of the policy can be obtained from the Office of Student Affairs and chairs of academic departments.

Students found guilty of academic dishonesty can receive a sanction ranging from academic integrity warning to expulsion. Please refer to Student Rights and Responsibilities in the University Community or the Academic Integrity Policy for more information."

Definitions of Academic Dishonesty (from the Michigan Tech Academic Integrity Policy)

"A. Plagiarism: Knowingly copying another's work or ideas and calling them one's own or not giving proper credit or citation. This includes reading or hearing another's work or ideas and using them as one's own; quoting, paraphrasing, or condensing another's work without giving proper credit; purchasing or receiving another's work and using, handling, or submitting it as one's own work.

B. Cheating: Intentional, unauthorized use of any study aids, equipment, or another's work during an academic exercise. This includes unauthorized use of notes, study aids, electronic or other equipment during an examination; copying or looking at another individual's examination; taking or passing information to another individual during an examination; taking an examination for another individual; allowing another individual to take one's examination; stealing examinations. All graded academic exercises are expected to be performed on an individual basis unless otherwise stated by the instructor.
C. Fabrication: Intentional and/or unauthorized falsification or invention of any information or citation during an academic exercise. This includes changing or adding an answer on an examination and resubmitting it to change the grade; inventing data for a laboratory exercise or report.

D. Facilitating Academic Dishonesty: Knowingly allowing or helping another individual to plagiarize, cheat, or fabricate information.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

MTU complies with all federal and state laws and regulations regarding discrimination, including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). If you have a disability and need a reasonable accommodation for equal access to education or services at MTU, please call Dr. Gloria Melton, Associate Dean of Students (487-2212). For other concerns about discrimination, you may contact your advisor, your department head, or the Affirmative Action Office (487-3310).

Schedule of Assignments and Class Activities

Your three individual conferences will be in my office (342 Walker); if I'm still meeting with the previous student when it's time for your conference, please knock to remind me that it's time for your meeting. Once we've scheduled your conferences, be sure to mark your calendar. Missed conferences will be difficult to reschedule and could affect your final grade.

Week 1: Overview of course and syllabus; collective brainstorming for project ideas.

Weeks 1-2: Meet individually to discuss your project proposal.

By the end of Week 2: Submit written prospectus to my office or mailbox.

Weeks 3-4: Work independently on your project, and consult as necessary with me and with your client about your progress and about any problems you encounter. Check with me during my office hours, e-mail me, or call me at school or at home (see numbers on page 1) any time you have a question or a problem.

Week 5: Wednesday: First progress report and project draft due; meet as a class to discuss progress and problems and to sign up for individual conferences.

Weeks 6 & 7: Individual conferences to discuss progress reports; continue to work independently—and with your client—on your project.

Week 10: Wednesday: Second progress report and project draft due; meet as a class to discuss progress and problems and to sign up for conferences and oral presentations (bring your calendar; if you will need a VHS and TV, let me know); bring name and mailing address of your client to class with you; tips on oral presentations; continue with independent work.

Weeks 11 & 12: Individual conferences to discuss progress reports; continue to work independently—and with your client—on your project.

Weeks 14 & 15: Oral reports on projects.

Last day of class: Oral reports on projects; final projects due; course evaluations (submit an SASE if you want your final project returned by mail).