The purpose of Reading and Usability in Technical Communication is to provide advanced instruction in the production and testing of print and on-line instructional texts. The course will focus on many of the theoretical/historical issues and practical skills necessary to understand "the how-to, the what, and the why" of these documents. In summary, in this course you will:

- design and produce instructional texts,
- design and carry out evaluations and tests of the communications you create,
- write various documents (reports, proposals, memos) that support your work,
- work with clients to achieve common communication goals,
- work collaboratively with your colleagues,
- schedule and manage several projects at one time,
- read research on technical and scientific communications for the purpose of bringing this research to your writing practices,
- develop your own strategies for solving the problems you encounter in your everyday writing and designing tasks, and
- augment your professional portfolio.

Course Requirements

There will be two major projects, accessory documents for the projects, and a number of readings accompanied by smaller projects. In addition, you will prepare what you do in this class for inclusion in your professional portfolio. I will give you individual memos for each project as we proceed through the semester, but below is a summary of the projects.

Major Projects (60%)

Usability Research and Project Design
- readings and independent research into usability and minimalist principles
- white paper on research findings
- oral report on white paper findings
- usability design proposal for your chosen document(s)
- individual evaluation of the project

Writing, Evaluating and Testing User Documents
- project definition and audience/needs analysis memo
- usability and document design proposal
- progress reports
- observations and interviews with users in context; interpretation of data
- final documents (mgmt. report; client report; user document)
- individual evaluation of the project

Supplemental Projects (30%)

Expert Usability Inspection
- readings and independent research on expert evaluation
- inspection of a product, documentation, or both
- report on findings and proposed development recommendations

Low-Fidelity User Evaluation
- readings and independent research on user-centered evaluation
- user analysis of a product, documentation, or both
- report on findings and proposed development recommendations
“Cost-effective” Usability Evaluation of a Website or Help System
• readings and independent research on cost-effective usability
• usability evaluation of a product, documentation, or both
• oral presentation of your evaluation process and findings

“Stun-light Dialogues”
• readings from Steven Casey’s book
• two-person lead dialogues in class on readings from Casey

Portfolio Development and Class Presentation
• visual mock-up w/categories
• portfolio skeleton (title page, t of c, dividers, explanations, examples)
• in-class presentation of portfolio design

Course Materials


Books and other materials on reserve in the Van Pelt Library.

Photocopies of some readings and course projects or other materials

Evaluation

You will be evaluated in three ways. The first method of evaluation will be grades given on major and supplemental projects as you finish them throughout the course. The approximate percentages for each category of project are listed above. I reserve 10% of the final evaluation for the semester for use at my own discretion.

The second method will be team (peer) and self-evaluations after each project is completed. Once a project has been completed, I will ask you to evaluate your performance and that of your team members. I will provide guidance for these evaluations; they will, in large part, be based upon industry evaluation models and academic models predicated on the importance of reflection as an important component in learning.

The third measure will be your performance as a member of the class. To some extent, this will be covered by the evaluations mentioned above, but here I particularly will be looking at your attendance, participation, and professionalism. Any in-class presentations will fall under this area of evaluation, too. Examples of the criteria here are • active participation in discussions and in group work • a sense that you are willing to contribute to the knowledge of the class • your ability to manage and maintain client relationships • your ability to manage deadlines • and a sense of humor (there are other more important things in life, you know). This is, more or less, the 10% I hold at my discretion.