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

Room: 134 Walker  
Time: 9:30-11:00 TT  
Semester: Fall 2003  
Instructor: Assistant Prof. Richard (Dickie) Selfe  
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Office Hours: 2-4 TT; other times by appointment  
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Class List: 4634-I@mtu.edu (Responses to messages to this list are posted to the whole list.)

Optional Texts


READING NOTES:

1) All students should buy and skim the readings for Tuesday class discussions. Come in with 'real-world' questions and comments that relate to those readings.

2) Those students with interests in graduate school or in management-level positions as a technical communicators should read the chapters carefully, make marginal notes, and come prepared to summarize and respond (critique) what you think is most important about the chapters for the day.

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 provide a review of current important issues in technical communication.** The field of technical communication is being influenced by a number of cultural institutions and forces: changes in communication technology; changes in the roles that technical communicators play, or should play, in our institutions; changes in the economy,... This is one of your last opportunities in an open academic environment, to discuss important issues that will influence your working lives.

3. **To provide you with the chance to develop a tangible product for your professional portfolios.** The development of a portfolio will be a required part of the class, and some class time will be set aside for this purpose.

4. **To introduce students to a comprehensive process of managing scientific and technical communication projects from conception through completion.** [See the eight stages described below, which Dr. Craig Waddell developed in teaching this course over the last decade.] 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) at least half 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, Portage Health Systems (3-1516), the Humane Society, the League of Women Voters, WGGL, 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 site 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 and early user testing or focus group, 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. Weekly Progress Reports, online

During weeks five through fourteen, you'll submit a progress report (approximately 200-400 words) using an online system called WebBoard. The audiences for these will be your client, me, your fellow students, and possibly an outside reviewer. These short reports must describe work completed, resources and materials necessary for the work yet to be done. If your timetable has changed, your progress report must include a revised timetable. You can also briefly describe problems encountered or anticipated and how you've resolved or how you plan to resolve those problems. These will be public, organizational reports, so please remember to be diplomatic. (Complaints and serious problems need to be handled privately and often face-to-face. Feel free to email me to set up meetings.) Your progress reports should also include any draft components of your final project. I will encourage your client to respond online briefly indicating that he or she is apprised of and (hopefully) satisfied with your progress to date. Again, if there are any problems, we will handle them together and in private via email or in face-to-face conferences.

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. Of course, the reverse is also true: your client shouldn't leave you uncertain of the circumstances of your project. Those concerns should also be handled privately and collaboratively. Do not assume that email is the preferred or an adequate form of communication with clients or experts. You are responsible for finding out how and when you can contact clients in ways the fit into their work process.

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: Considering why you choose this project, the intended audiences, and your intended purpose; how well is the project succeeding? What problems did you encounter along the way, and what did you learn as you tried to resolve these problems? Considering both the successes and difficulties associate with this project, what did you learn? (This last question is one that is likely to be asked during a job interview.)

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.

This letter of transmittal should also contain what I will call a colophon. In a print publication a colophon often contains very specific technical information and that will allow the person who will revise your project (all communication projects have a lifecycle. Without an accurate colophon your project will quickly become dated and useless.) Include any information that will be useful to the person who takes up your project including paper types, colors, font families, file names, storage media, application names and versions, supporting material files and formats, collaborators and contact information, .... 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 your prospectus and a duplicate copy that I can keep (for STC/STA program evaluation purposes: names will be deleted or masked if we do use your project for program evaluation purposes.). 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. The following are some rough guidelines for print publications, but the same could be said of online projects as well.

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
- 5% Progress reports
- 5% Oral report
- 5% Professional Portfolio
- 15% 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 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

Unexcused absences from more than 10 percent of the regularly scheduled classes can be grounds for failing this course. Excused absences include a medical excuse signed by your physician or a personal emergency authorized in writing by the Dean of Students. For a more detailed 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.

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

Individual conferences will be in my office (138 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.

Meeting Days/Non-meeting Days

Unless the class negotiates a different schedule, we will meet each Tuesday this term in order to conduct class business and hold discussions of issues important to technical communicators.

Reading Abbreviations:


Week 1:

In class, Tues. 8/26
Overview of course and syllabus; collective brainstorming for project ideas.
Out-of-class,
• Collect contact information from client and project description(s).
• Meet individually to discuss your project proposal.

Week 2:

In class, Tues. 9/2
• Prospectus assignment questions?
• Panel & discussion: Peep pp. 221-231 (Kalmbach). TC as technologies change: Database Composing, XML, & Blogging.
Out of class,
• Collect contact information from client and project description(s).
• Meet individually to discuss your project proposal.
• By Friday, September 5 by 12:00 noon, submit written prospectus to my office or mailbox.

Week 3:
In class, Tues. 9/9
• Lecture/activity/discussion: Peep Chpt. 8. Academic Versus Work-related Communicating
• Intro. to WebBoard as a progress report and file exchange site
Out of class,
• 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.
• Enter your first progress report on WebBoard (skipper.hu.mtu.edu/~rselfe) in the HU4634 Conference

Week 4:
In class, Tues. 9/16
• Lecture/activity/discussion: Peep Chpt. 7. The Technical Communicator in the Organizational Setting: Respect, Influence, and Work Practices
Out of class,
• Work independently on your project
• Progress report on WebBoard

Week 5:
In class, 9/23
• First project draft due
• Peer feedback session: bring The TC Handbook (Dan Jones)
• Portfolio Workshop 1
Out of class,
• Work independently on your project.
• Progress report on WebBoard

Week 6:
In class, 9/30
• Lecture/activity/discussion: Peep pp. 183-216 (Stephen Katz & Porter). The Technical Communicator as Ethical Decision Maker
Out of class,
• Individual conferences to discuss progress reports; continue to work independently—and with your client—on your project
• Progress report on WebBoard
• Dickie at CTPSC from the 2nd - 5th

Week 7:
In class, 10/7
Out of class,
• Work independently on your project
• Progress report on WebBoard

Week 8:
In class, 10/14
Out of class,
- Collect contact information from client and project description(s).
- Progress report on WebBoard

**Week 9:**

In class, 10/21

*Out of class,*
- Collect contact information from client and project description(s).
- Progress report on WebBoard
- Reminder: Second project draft due next Tues.

**Week 10:**

In class, 10/28
- Portfolio Workshop 2
- Lecture/activity/discussion: (Brown and Duguid) B&D pp. 1-34. Pay Attention to what's going on around you. "Information" isn't all it's cracked up to be.

*Out of class,*
- Continue independent work
- Progress report on WebBoard

**Week 11:**

In class, 11/4
- Second project draft due; meet as a class feedback session; sign up for conferences

*Out of class,*
- Individual conferences to discuss progress reports; continue to work independently--and with your client--on your project.
- Progress report on WebBoard

**Week 12:**

In class, 11/11

*Out of class,*
- Continue individual conferences to discuss progress reports; continue to work independently--and with your client--on your project.
- Progress report on WebBoard

**Week 13:**

In class, 10/18

*Out of class,*
- Thanksgiving Break begins at the end of this week.
- Dickie at NCTE Nov. 19th - 25th
- Final Progress report on WebBoard

**Week 14:**

In class, 12/2 & 12/4
- Portfolio Workshop 3
- Oral reports on projects.
Week 15:

*In class, 12/9 & 12/11*

- Oral reports on projects.

Last day of class: Oral reports on projects; final projects due; course evaluations.