Assignment Book

Preface

*Technical writing is the art of passing along information.* In *Professional Technical Writing* you will write five different technical documents, each one requiring you to learn about and demonstrate mastery of basic technical writing skills. You may have previous experience in one or more of the exercises planned for this course but, as the best writers know, you can always learn more, you can always improve.

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Introduction

Technical writers specialize in organizing information so that readers can use it to do something, learn something, or understand something. Unlike poets who write to move the soul, or academic writers who write to exercise the mind, technical writers shape words in order to inform. They often do this with an action or body response in mind.

A VCR manual, for example, ought to teach you how to play videos, tape your favourite show, or set the timer to record a TV program. You are probably not interested in the computer chip and how it works, or the intricate mathematical codes that set the timer. You want to know just enough to make the VCR work -- right now. In this case the technical writer stands as translator or interpreter between the VCR designer and you, the VCR user.

If you easily programmed the VCR on the first try, you can be sure there is a skilled technical writer who wrote the manual. If, however, you wasted countless hours trying to make the machine work, there is a good chance that the engineer and the technical writer are unskilled communicators. Since you cannot see either of them you are likely to take out your frustration on the machine. Your disdain, although misdirected, is real and you vow to avoid that product and that brand under any circumstances.

We have designed Professional Technical Writing course materials and assignments to teach you effective technical writing skills, skills that will help you avoid producing documents like the oft-maligned VCR manuals mentioned above. If you wish to write for fame, glamour or prestige, you might be in the wrong course -- technical writers are rarely noticed unless they do a poor job. However, if you delight in succinctness, clarity, and accuracy, it is time to begin writing, editing, and revising.

Start now by reading through the course assignments to get an idea of what you will be doing this term. If you prefer, you may double-click on the Table of Contents button at the bottom of this screen to view an expanded outline of the course requirements discussed in this book.

Attention: Professional Technical Writing requires not only good writing skills but an understanding of the tools used in many technical writing situations. This means that part of your "learning curve" this term includes gaining a practical understanding of SGML, an SGML editor, Internet technologies, email attachments, and online communications. For some of you, this will be very simple since you already have experience with computer applications and programs. For others, this will be quite a challenge--everything will be new, and learning how to use the technology AND learn the writing at the same time represents a great deal of work. You need to know this fact at the front end of the course so that if you find yourself spending much time, as some do, learning the basics about the SGML editor or trying to find email attachments, you will recognize this as a very real part of what this course is about. Effective technical documents are, of course, the end product, but without the ability to create the documents via current technologies you have not really become a technical writer.

Some of you will be wonderful "techies" but will need a lot of help with the writing; others might have much experience in writing but will need extensive support with the technology; and still others will fall somewhere in between. For this reason, half of Professional Technical Writing consists of group work where students learn by sharing their strengths and experiences with each other during the writing process.
Assignment #1 requires students to write a letter of introduction to the Instructor, followed by a personal Resume and Business Letter directed to the whole class.

Assignment #2 requires students to work in a group of three to produce a technical Manual.

Assignment #3 requires students to continue working in their groups for Usability Tests of their Assignment #2 document. They will complete a Manual Rewrite.

Assignment #4 requires individual students to write a technical Report.

For additional information about the course and assignments, select from the following list:

- Course Reading Materials lists the required and supplemental reading materials for Professional Technical Writing.
- Course Design describes the course and its fundamental concepts.
- Assignment Schedules lists important dates to remember.
- Assignment Marks and Values identifies the value for each assignment and how marks are given.
- Assignment Submission Process outlines the process of submitting your work to the Instructor.
Assignment Schedule - Fall 1998

Students should review the following schedule and refer to it as needed during the term. You will notice that there is a submission "window" during which submissions will be accepted. Since all of you have very different personal and academic schedules you must arrange your timetable to meet the deadline sometime within the window. After midnight on the last day of the assignment submission period assignments will be considered late.

The Fall course offering for Professional Technical Writing assignment schedule is:

- **Mandatory introduction email to Instructor** (Instructor's Comments will list the details you need to include).

  Submission Window: September 14-19, 1998

- **Assignment #1 Letter and Resume**

  Submission Window: September 23 - 25, 1998

- **Assignment #2 Manual**

  Group Formation Window: September 28 - October 5, 1998
  
  Group Proposal Window: September 28 - October 12, 1998
  
  Assignment Submission Window: October 25 - 29, 1998

- **Assignment #3 Manual Revisited**

  Assignment Submission Window: November 19 - 22, 1998

- **Assignment #4 Report**

  Assignment Submission Window: December 1 - 11, 1998
Assignment Marks and Values

- Introduction email to Instructor -- mandatory but no marks allotted (see Instructor's Comments for details)
- Assignment #1 (Letter and Resume) -- 15%
- Assignment #2 (Manual) -- 25%
- Assignment #3 (Manual Revisited) -- 25%
- Assignment #4 (Report) -- 35%

Assignments will be assessed on style, content, and effectiveness. Markers will look for correct use of language, accurate information, and clear thinking. In addition, markers will look for evidence that students have not only read course materials but have tried to employ the strategies described.

Group assignments (#2 and #3) are meant to be produced by group members who all contribute equally, although perhaps differently, to assignments. If, for some reason, group members do not meet the expectations of the group and do not participate fully, a concerned student should send a confidential email message to the Instructor describing the circumstances so that the situation can either be rectified or, in extreme cases, marks can be adjusted.