English 392A: Theories and Practices of Documentation

Spring, 1995 Thursdays, 7:00-10:00; HH 227

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Hours: Tuesday, 2:00-4:00, Wednesday, 9:00-10:30; whenever you can catch me.

Course epitome This course has two main components, closely related to each other:
document design and graphic communication. And it has one main
orientation: technical communication.

Although there will be considerable overlap, the first month or so focuses on
design issues such as information navigation, layout, and genre, and the last
two months focus more closely on graphic communication issues such as
representation, the use of icons, and rhetorical effects.

Overlaying, and hopefully uniting, the two sections will be a recurrent
emphasis on clear and effective communication. We're going to pretend that
we can unproblematically isolate messages "behind" document and graphic
design, and discuss ways to increase the efficiency of expressing those
messages.

Required texts Horton, Illustrating computer documentation.
Koren & Meckler, Graphic design cookbook
Swann, How to understand and use design and layout

Recommended STC Technical Communication (November 1993)

Requirements Class Participation 20% 
Solo assignment 20% (14 June)
Presentation 20% (28 June)
Graphic Journal 20% (19 July)
Group assignment 20% (26 July)

Rules No late assignments will be accepted, no extensions will be granted, and no
incompletes will be awarded, without very strong reasons.
# Schedule

Please have all readings done **BEFORE** class, and be prepared to **DISCUSS** them.

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<td><strong>Show and tell: Graphic information</strong></td>
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<td>17 May</td>
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<td>7 June</td>
<td><strong>Layout</strong></td>
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<td>12 July</td>
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<td>19 July</td>
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<td>26 July</td>
<td><strong>Wrap-up</strong></td>
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Participation

Worth

20% of final grade.

Format

Contribute to discussions, fulfill small assignments, and cooperate with others; be cheerful, thrifty, and brave.

Grading

Everybody begins with a B, and I will use a merit/demerit policy to adjust the grades from there. Merit will be awarded primarily on the quality of participation: asking relevant questions; making relevant observations; complementing or developing someone else's contribution; and generally taking a constructive part in the class. Quantity of participation is a positive factor to the extent that lots of quality contributions are preferable to a few quality contributions. Demerit will be assessed reluctantly, and only on the basis of repeated instances. The grounds for the demerit system are: absenteeism (you can't participate if you're not there); whispering or chatting while other people are talking (or, especially, while other people are giving their presentation); or making lengthy, unfocused comments that draw away from the general thread of discussion.

Presentation

Topic

You have two options: an analysis of a graphic (or a related sequence of graphics); or an analysis of a layout (magazine, book, newsletter, poster, etc.).

Worth

20% of final grade.

Format

Completely up to you, but the safest road is to stand at the front of the room and talk, with a clear reproduction of the graphic(s) at hand. Use any props you want, but if you need any equipment (slide projector, overhead projector, VCR, etc.), make sure you have everything arranged ahead of time.

Given the small size of the class, photocopies of the graphic would be affordable, and you might want to use one or two to supplement your talk, but it is not a good idea to orient the whole presentation around them; everybody will be staring at the paper.

Length

10-15 minutes. This won't be rigidly enforced. You'll get a few minutes liberty, especially if an active discussion develops.

Grading

Think of this as a bigger and more dynamic version of your journal entries. The analysis should be practical, and should be oriented towards extracting morals for document or graphic design. The grading will focus on the level of analysis, though your presentation skills will also enter into my evaluation.
Graphic Journal

**Topic**
In a sense, this is a record of your observations about graphic information over the course of the term, but it should not be too impressionistic. A reasonable level of analysis is required. Sometimes I will assign specific images or graphic patterns that I want you to analyze; mostly, it's up to you. Sometimes, you may want to analyze a graphic or a design of your own.

**Worth**
20% of final grade

**Format**
Each entry will consist of captured (electronically, with scissors, whatever), reproduced (electronically, with pen and paper, with tape, whatever) or described graphic, and an analysis. My bright idea for this assignment came from Horton's brief discussions of a "visual journal" (19) and of a graphic notebook (20), but his approach is a little informal and personal for the purposes of the class. Don't doodle. Don't write cryptically. Don't arrange by categories. By all means, do that for your own purposes, but this assignment should be a little more structured.

I'd recommend (but don't require) keeping a long-hand journal, kept on graph paper, to make any sketching or diagramming easier. But that doesn't mean you should put your pen down on the paper and then just stop writing when you hit 300 words; you may need a draft or two first. This should be informal, but not sloppy or careless.

**Length**
Ten entries, approx. 300 words each.

**Grading**
The primary criterion will be your level of analysis, but not the academic semiopostdeconstructed sense of analysis. Use any techniques you find valuable, including academic ones, but the course is intended primarily as a practical one, in which we try to figure out how we can repeat the successes and avoid the failures of certain graphics or designs. Here's an analogy: if the topic of this course was texts, we are approximating journalism more closely than literary criticism.

So, for instance, Horton's simple little formula that a

\[
\text{GRAPHIC} = \text{MESSAGE} + \text{REDUNDANCY} + \text{DECORATION} + \text{NOISE}
\]

will frequently be more useful than de Saussure's formula that a sign = a signifier + a signified. Why? Among other reasons, because the former is tied to effectiveness; it leads you to make value judgments about what is good and bad about the object. The latter is value neutral, and leads you mostly to abstract speculation.

**Note**
Although there is a specific deadline for the submission of all ten entries, you would be very unwise to put this off and do all of them the night before. One entry a week should keep this assignment manageable. You should make sure that the topics discussed in class are reflected in your entries, and should allow your observations to develop from each other.
Solo Assignment

Topic
Your choice, but for your own sanity, it's best to choose something already familiar to you. You might even choose something familiar to virtually everybody—shoveling snow, taking out the trash, decanting the perfect glass of beer—but you have to provide a realistic context: when would instructions for shoveling snow be necessary, for what audience, in what context, etc.?

Worth
20% of final grade.

Format
A technical document. Period. The rest is completely up to you; in fact, part of the assignment is to choose an appropriate format for the task or object you document. But a quick reference card or a disposable user guide are probably the most manageable.

You should include a brief rationale with your project: in particular, you should specify the audience that would use your document and the context in which it would be used (are there other documents? has the user been trained in some way? is it snowing?),—factors which are crucial for your design decisions.

Length
It depends on the genre, but if it runs much over ten pages, you've probably chosen something to ambitious for the assignment.

Grading
Given the focus of the course, design issues and graphic incorporation will be weighted most heavily, but I'll be assuming a fairly high level of writing competence as well.

Group Assignment

Topic
The groups will be chosen at random, to simulate the wonderful world of work, but after the choice is made, it's up to you collectively to decide on the project. Public-domain software pulled off of internet servers is a good place to look.

Worth
20% of final grade.

Format
Same as solo assignment.

Length
Ditto.

Grading
Ditto, with the additional wrinkle that half of your mark will come from your collaborator's assessments.

Note: Everybody in the group must submit a memo assigning a grade for participation to every one else in the group, along with at least five sentences justifying that grade.