English 392A: Theories and Practices of Documentation

Winter, 1994: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 10:00-11:30; AL 207

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Hours: Tuesday, 1:00-3:00, 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: William Horton, Illustrating computer documentation.

Recommended: STC Technical Communication (November 1993)

Requirements: Class Participation 20%
Solo assignment 20% (17 February)
Presentation 20% (8 March, 10 March)
Graphic Journal 20% (29 March)
Group assignment 20% (half from me; half from your collaborators; 5 April)

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>Field trip: <em>Gazette</em> facilities</td>
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<td>17 February</td>
<td>Processes cont.; <strong>Solo assignment due</strong></td>
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**STUDY BREAK**

| 1 March       | Abstract representation: organization     | 8                         |
| 3 March       | Organization cont.; relationships          |                           |
| 8 March       | Presentations                              |                           |
| 10 March      | Presentations; Icons                       | 9                         |
| 15 March      | Collaboration; Icons                       | 12                        |
| 17 March      | Graphic pathos                             | 11                        |
| 22 March      | Minimalist instructions                    |                           |
| 24 March      | Hot topics from TECHWR-L                  |                           |
| 29 March      | Hot topics cont.; **Graphic journal due**  |                           |
| 31 March      | Son of hot topics                          |                           |
| 5 April       | Daughter of hot topics; **Group assignment due** |                           |
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.

Note: 5% of your participation mark will depend on an honest and detailed appraisal of your collaborators on the group project.

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 and tape, whatever), reproduced (electronically, with pen and paper, 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. Both of

I’d recommend keeping a long-hand journal, kept on graph paper, to make any sketching or diagramming easier. But

LENGTH Ten entries.
GRAPHIC JOURNAL cont.

GRADING
The primary criterion will be your level of analysis, but not the academic semiostsconstrcet 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 graphic = message + redundancy + decoration + 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, should make sure that the topics discussed in class are reflected in your entries, and should allow your observations to develop from each other.

PRESENTATION

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

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 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 would 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.
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**
As above.

**LENGTH**
Ditto.

**GRADING**
Ditto, with the additional wrinkle that half of your mark will come from your collaborator's assessments.
COMPUTER ACCOUNTS

SIGNING ON

The userid is made up of three parts: course name, course number and name, (first initial and last name). (The id may be up to fifteen characters long. Long last names are truncated.) If your name was Bart Simpson, then, your id would be

enl392bsimpson

When signing on you must append the “home ring” to your userid:

enl392bsimpson@artscourse

The initial password is your student id number, but the system will force you to change it right away.

PRIVILEGES

Your account has been word-processing enabled. Within the faculty of arts students are charged for word-processing. We’re an exception to the rule, but only if you use the word processors for assignments for this course. If you are caught doing non-ENL392 course related word-processing on this account, you will lose the account.

The default printer is the LP27 draft laser located in PAS 1099 and HH 236. If you want high quality laser (POSTSCRIPT) printing, unfortunately, you’ll have to set up a laser printing account with ACO and pay for it.

Note: You should be careful not to select a POSTSCRIPT device within any application if you don’t have a laser printing account set up otherwise you will lock out ALL of your printing.

THE GROUP

Your account belongs to the group ENL392@ARTSCOURSE. You can send mail to this group and everybody will get it (that is, everybody in the class). Don’t send group messages idly; they can be annoying.

TECHWR-L

One of the reasons I set this account is so that you can monitor a bulletin board (AKA a list) on technical communication issues. On one of your early sessions, send a message to

LISTSERV@VM1.UCC.OKSTATE.EDU

Leave the subject line blank. The first and only line of the message should be

SUB TECHWR-L first_name last_name

So, using Bart again, the message he would send is

SUB TECHWR-L Bart Simpson

Pretty soon, you’ll get a message from the listowner giving you further particulars, and bunches of messages from other participants. The list can be gratingly mundane (dozens of messages were exchanged about barbecue sauce last month), or trivial in the extreme (some messages just say “good point!” without even indicating what they’re responding to), or incredibly technical (arcane mysteries of Framemaker), but there is a huge number of experts in a wide range communicative areas on the list, and you will learn a lot about technical communication. Don’t feel compelled to read every message, but try to follow a few of the discussions over the term, and bring some of them to class; I will.