

English 379J: Writing for the Web

Course Overview:

This English (rhetoric and comp) course is designed for undergraduate students who want to learn strategies for structuring electronic information.

Specifically, the course will teach students how to write for the performance-based environment of the Web. Research shows Web users don't just want to find information; they want to do something with it - compare it, differentiate among its details, act on it. In this class, students will learn how people read on the web and how as web writers, they can fashion your text, visuals, and architecture to support Web users

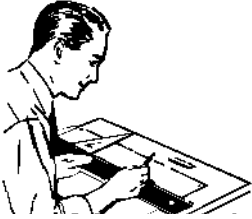
Course Audience:

The course, designed for students who have completed a Jr. English course (although not a prerequisite), offers an opportunity for students to work on writing and rewriting to help people find information and apply it. The course is not designed as a basic HTML course and a basic understanding of web building is required. Students without fundamental web building skills will need to develop these skills in conjunction with the course.

Course Objectives:

There are five overlapping course objectives

- Explore the literature of performance-focused web writing.
- Invent, arrange, and present information according to a specific purpose, specific audience, and specific context.
- Improve clarity, cohesiveness, and connections in web writing
- Enable people to find Web information, use it, and appreciate the experience.
- Attain personal/professional goals for communicating electronically



Thom Haller

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English 379J

Writing for the Web

Instructor:

Thom Haller has more than 15 years experience in the fields of professional communication and performance improvement. He has worked with the University of Maryland College Park for more than five years and also works as an Adjunct Professor at Georgetown University and the USDA Graduate School. Thom is principal of the information architecture consultancy Info.Design, and works as a consultant with Government agencies and Washington-based associations.

(highlights of instructor's philosophy)...

- The world we have created is the result of our thinking (Einstein)
 - Man is always a teller of tales. We live surrounded by our stories and the stories of others. We try to live our lives as though we are telling a story (Sartre)
 - Pray for the dead. Fight like hell for the living. (Mother Jones)
 - If we design things in the spirit of helping users, we create better living and greater satisfaction (Henry Dreyfuss)
 - Never consider yourself a failure. You can always serve as a bad example. (Fortune cookie)
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Required Texts:

- *Writing for the Web: Structuring Information with the User in Mind* (Haller/Info.Design), 2002.
- *Non-Designer's Web Design Book, 2nd Edition* (Williams) 2001

Recommended Texts:

- *Usability Testing and Research* (Barnum) 2002
- *The Yale Style Manual, 2nd Edition* (Lynch) 2002
- *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web (2nd Edition)* 2002
- *Dynamics of Document Design* (Schrivver) 1997
- *On Writing Well: 6th Edition.* (Zinsser; Harper Collins), 2002.
- *Style: Ten Lessons Toward Clarity and Grace* (Williams) 1997.

PURCHASING TEXTBOOKS:

The required texts have been ordered and should be available at the Maryland Book Exchange and at the Campus Bookstore. If you are unable to get a copy of *Writing for the Web: Structuring Information with the User in Mind*, contact Christy Turner -- cturner@infodn.com

Administrative Info You Need to Know

Academic Integrity/Plagiarism

- Plagiarism will NOT be tolerated.
- Refer to UMCP's Undergraduate Catalog (UC) for specific guidelines on academic integrity.



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* **Attendance fine print:** It is the policy of the university to excuse the absences of students that result from the following causes: illness (where the student is too ill to attend class), religious observance (where the nature of the observance prevents the student from being present during the class period), participation in university activities at the request of university authorities, and compelling circumstances beyond the student's control. Students claiming excused absence must furnish documentary support from the assertion that their absence resulted from one of these causes.

Class Attendance

- Attendance is mandatory.*
- You are expected to arrive in class on time. You will sign a class attendance list to ensure you were present and on time.
- If you miss class, it is your responsibility to learn about assignments and make up the missed work. (*First person note: Because of my schedule, I recommend you gather information from other students before contacting me.*)

Special Accommodations for Disabled Students

- Students with a documented disability requiring special accommodations should see the instructor as early as possible in the semester. It is the student's responsibility to register with Disability Support Service (DSS) and provide the instructor with a statement from DSS on the accommodations required. [DSS—0126 Shoemaker Hall]

Course Framework

PRINCIPLES FOLLOWED

- As user advocates we have the challenge to envision our readers' worlds more vividly and the opportunity to apply systemic, structural, and orderly principles to make documents work.
- Good writing develops from a process, which includes planning, drafting, and editing
- There is always a situation or need which requires a particular piece of writing, and the writer must write to fit it.
- The writer must anticipate the readers' needs, assumptions, and possible objections, and must write to these
- The writer must organize and format his writing to allow the quickest and most efficient reading possible, so that the readers will be able to clearly understand the writer's ideas and information.



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Class Structure

The class is divided into four key “parts”

Part I: Our class goals

Part II: Presenting ourselves online (individual web project)

Part III: Constructing a communication product (group web project)

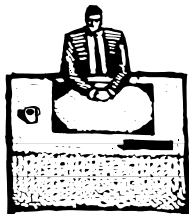
Part IV: Reflecting on our progress

Part I is designed as a way for you to identify how your classwork will support your education and career plans. It provides me a way to quickly assess your professional writing skills.

Part II provides you with an opportunity to jump into the frustrating and fascinating world of developing web content -- and sites to support that content. You will be evaluated during this period on your ability to improve your “communication product” and articulate why you are making these changes.

Part III gives you an opportunity to structure information for a specific audience (who is trying to accomplish something within the context of their lives or jobs). You will work through a process of building an architecture and/or structuring content for your user. Your final product does not have to be a working web tool - - but should enable an organization to implement user-focused change.

Part IV provides an opportunity for you to reflect on the work you have accomplished. You have the chance to relate your progress to your goals and assess how you might continue your study and apply your knowledge.



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w4w

* Points fine print:

You will have the opportunity to earn 210 points (150 for writing and 60 for attendance).

You will have the opportunity to rewrite any report where you receive more than 5 points, with the exception of the final group paper. A rewrite can raise your grade either 1, 2, or 3 points.

I will reserve the right to reward an extra point to any student who excels on any project (or during class time). You can also get extra credit points by reviewing a book or undertaking a “creative endeavor” related to web writing or our class discussions. If you wish to receive extra credit points, please contact Thom to discuss your idea(s).

The class is structured on a point system

You will work on two projects and write several “progress reports/client deliverables” along the way. You will also receive points for attendance. (4 points each week) [*bracket refers to the due date*]

Part I: Introduction

My Goals Email draft [wk 2]	5 points
My Goals Paper [wk 4]	10 points
Week 4 Fundamentals Quiz [wk 4]	15 points

Part II: Individual Projects

Progress Email: What I did to improve the task focus and visual structure [wk 5]	5 points
Progress Email: What I did to improve the navigation and inherent structures [wk 6]	5 points
Progress Email: What I did to improve the text [wk 7]	5 points
Heuristic Analysis of site [wks 9 & 10]	20 points

Part III: Group Projects

Project Plan email to Thom [wk 11]	5 points
Scope Definition Document/ Overview [wk 12]	10 points
Group Progress Email #1 [wk 12]	3 points
Group Progress Email #2 [wk 13]	3 points
Group Progress Email #3 [wk 14]	3 points
Presentation of work to “client” -oral [wk 15]	10 points
-written [wk 15]	26 points

Part IV: Assessment

Structuring Information with the User in Mind: Accomplishing Goals [<i>due Finals wk</i>]	20 points
Group Analysis	5 points

Attendance/Extra Credit

Attendance - 4 points each week	60 points
Book Review	5 points
Innovative Idea (OK via email)	5 points

Writing for the Web

Calendar/Planning ahead:

To help you plan ahead...

(note: This may change some as class needs dictate)

Week 1: Intro to Course/Helping Users GAIN (9/3)

- Discuss structure for the class
- Review homework
- Discuss initial impressions of web writing
- Discuss our experiences as users; review strategy for helping users find information, use it, and appreciate the experience.

Homework:

Reading Assignment:

- *NonDesigner's Web Book*: 1-86
- *W4W Workbook*: intro/chap 1; chapter 6
- *On Writing Well* 1-54 (suggested)

Writing Assignment:

- Identify your goals for the class. Describe for me your experience as a web reader and your sense of what it takes to be a web writer. What do you want to accomplish by the end of the class? How will you be able to tell you have gotten there? Let Thom know via a well structured email. [5 points.]

Due Date: Monday Morning 9/9 9AM

Exploration Assignment:

- Interview someone who constructs text for the web and/or structures web sites. How did they get into that position? What "real world labels" do they use? What is their relationship to the users of information? What works for them in their "real world" environment. What would they change? Be prepared to discuss your findings in class.

Week 2: Rhetorical Foundation (9/10)

- Explore audience, purpose, and context for your site
- Look at structure of "task-focused" thinking
- Plan for improved user performance (explore strategy for planning web structure).

Writing for the Web

Homework for Week 3 and 4:

Reading Assignment:

- *NonDesigner's Web Book*: 87-124
- *W4W Workbook*: chap 2 & 3

Writing Assignment:

- Rewrite your goals email as a paper. Craft the document clearly. Use a conversational style. Incorporate headings and subheadings. Present with "professionalspacing" 12/14.

Exploration Assignment:

- Dig into site building. Do whatever it takes to bring to class a live communication product on Week 4. Your eventual goal is to represent yourself to a professional audience. This person could, potentially, hire parttime content/web development people, and you want to present your qualifications online. Your goal for week 4 is to launch a draft you intend to improve during the next few weeks. **Email your URL to Thom by 9AM Monday September 23rd.**

Week 3: Site Work (9/17)

- Thom absent. Guest "builder" speaker? [to be determined]

Week 4: Incorporating Graphic and Action Structures to Improve Human Performance (9/24)

- Identify reasons for structuring information visually
- Identify techniques to enable easy information processing
- Relate types of information to a suggested visual format for each type
- Apply design criteria that incorporate "gestalt" and "cognitive" cues

Reading Assignment:

- *Non Designer's Web Book* 125-144

Writing Assignment:

- Send Thom an email explaining how you've incorporated lessons learned into your individual site ("What I did to improve the task focus and visual structure")

Exploration Assignment:

- Assess your site based on what you have just learned. Identify reasons your audience would want to visit your site. Do you have content to support them? How would your content and navigation change to help your users get their jobs done? **Email your assessment to Thom by 9AM Monday September 30th.**

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Week 5: Inherent Structures and Usable Text

- Discover why navigation matters
- Learn the 4Rs of successful navigation: recognizable, responsive, routed, and rhetorical
- Explore inherent structures and why they matter for seeing connections

Reading Assignment:

- *Non Designer's Web Book (info on text...approx 213--)*

Writing Assignment:

- Send Thom an email explaining how you've incorporated lessons learned into your individual site "What I did to improve the navigation and inherent structures"

Exploration Assignment:

- Assess your site based on what you have just learned. Have you provided different routes to help your users get their jobs done? Are your users likely to see the connections and relationships in your document? **Email your assessment to Thom by 9AM Monday October 7th.**

Week 6: Content: Present web text that users will read and understand (10/15)

- Explain to content providers how people read on the web vs. how they read in print
- Practice task-based writing
- Structure text so users can find and read the information they need

Reading Assignment:

- *W4W Workbook: Modules 4 & 5*

Writing Assignment:

- Send Thom an email explaining how you've incorporated lessons learned into your individual site "What I did to improve the text"

Exploration Assignment:

- Assess your site based on what you have just learned. How have you changed your text to help your users more? **Email your assessment to Thom by 9AM Monday October 14th.**

Week 7: Usability and Structure: Testing and Heuristics (10/22)

- Justify and explain the role of usability testing in web development projects
- Follow process for completing usability testing
- Apply principles for usability testing to your site.

Writing for the Web

Reading Assignment:

- *W4W Workbook: Modules 7*

Writing Assignment:

- Begin planning your evaluation report. You will need to assess your site based on research, discussion, and the experience of users going through your site (in class during weeks 8 and 9). Your report will be due to Thom the week following the usability review of your promotional site.

Exploration Assignment:

- Complete your “self-promotion” site for an audience of a potential employer or someone you want to impress with your understanding of web structure and specific tasks. Identify five specific tasks you want someone to complete on your site. **Bring list of five specific tasks for your audience(s) to class on Week 8 and 9.**

Week 8 & 9: Heuristic Analysis of Site (10/22 & 10/29)

- Assess sites; provide information to site owner.

Writing Assignment:

- Write your evaluation report. Assess your site based on research, discussion, and the experience of users going through your site (in class during weeks 8 and 9). **Your report will be due to Thom the week following the usability review of your promotional site.**

Exploration Assignment:

- Decide on a group project and a group that best meets your class goals. Discuss your ideas with Thom during his office hours or during break.

Week 10: Managing Web Projects/Gathering Content (11/5)

- Challenges with structuring information for business and organizations

Reading Assignment:

- *W4W Workbook: Module 2; Module 4*

Writing Assignment:

- Form your group. Decide on your audience, purpose, and context. Send Thom one email (for the group) in which you provide an overview of what you intend to accomplish and who you intend to support

Exploration Assignment:

- Start exploring the questions you will have to list as part of your *Scope Definition Document*.

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Week 11: Rhetorical Filter/Evaluating (11/12)

- Evaluating what you leave in and take out

Writing Assignment:

- As a group, send a progress email to Thom by **Monday 11/18 9AM**

Exploration Assignment:

- Depending on your project, collect content -- evaluate it, assess labels

Week 12: “Chunking” (11/19)

- Challenges with labels and content groupings

Writing Assignment:

- As a group, send a progress email to Thom by **Monday 11/25 9AM**

Exploration Assignment:

- Work on project

Week 13: “Knowing” (11/26)

- Working through content challenges

Writing Assignment:

- As a group, send a progress email to Thom by **Monday 12/2 9AM**

Exploration Assignment:

- Work on project

Week 14: “Organizing” (12/02)

- Working through content challenges

Writing Assignment:

- Prepare for oral presentation and final “deliverable”

Exploration Assignment:

- Work on completing project.

Week 15: Presenting(12/07)

- Working through content challenges

Writing Assignment:

- Complete your final assessment