

392A SYLLABUS FALL 2001

2:30 - 3:50 TUESDAYS & THURSDAYS, ML 117

THE BASICS

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hours: wednesdays, 3:00-5:00; tues & thurs 10:00-11:15

COURSE EPITOME

the calendar says:

ENGL 392A 0.5

Theories and Practices of Documentation

This course will introduce students to recent research on documentation in fields such as information design, reading, and technical writing. Students apply this knowledge by developing or revising documents.

Prereq: ENGL 292

yes, it will. but primarily this course is a course in document design in the domain of technical communication, with both "document" and "technical communication" construed very broadly: the former as any collection of **INFORMATION** consciously assembled by humans for humans; the latter as communication in the service of technology. we will be talking about, pulling apart, and making documents.

we will proceed zoologically, looking at one little beast after another until we can figure out what they do, how they do it, and why they bother. but our motives are not benign. our motives are frankensteinian. once we have some primitive knowledge about a beastie, we will stitch some together ourselves and charge them up.

TEXT NONE

an earlier version of this syllabus, and the bookstore list, says that the following book is required for the course:

jacobson, robert (ed.), information design, the mit press, 2000; ISBN 0-262-60035-8

it's not. it was, but only on the basis of a hopeful and cursory reading, which on further consideration proved completely misguided. the book is really terrible, a self-impressed, swill-filled tribute to corporate consultancy. forgive me.



REQUIREMENTS	course participation	20% (all the livelong day)
	presentation	10% (9, 11 october)
	solo project	20% (25 october)
	document journals	20% (8 november)
	group project	30% (29 november)

WHAT THE HELL ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO WHEN THE PROF SCREWS UP THE TEXTBOOK??!!

WEBSEARCHES frankly, i've had trouble for years getting a decent text for this course; i've changed it very year, mostly going from bad to worse. i thought i might have finally hit a usable one with information design, based on a rather quick scan in february (on my back, with a broken leg, doped up on pain killers; don't get me started). it looked pretty good through the haze: i read the key sections, the headings, and random points throughout. but on a more sustained and sober reading, it stinks. it was written mostly by a bunch of consultants, all interested in padding their resumés and drumming up new clients. virtually every chapter promotes some vague-but-snappily-named methodology which it never spells out very clearly. the best thing about it is the afterword, by jef raskin, which says that the book is misnamed and the authors are mostly both misguided about their topic and vacuous in their theorizing. i know, i still haven't said what we're going to do, but i felt the need to vent.

the crux: instead of reading the textbook, you will do a series of websearches, on the topics, for the days, outlined on the following schedule. you don't have to read much, but you should find, read, and come to class prepared to discuss, at least two sites dedicated to the topic specified. the web is not especially reliable, but, believe me, whatever you find won't be worse than the book.



SCHEDULE

CLASS		TOPICS	WEBSEARCHES
11	september	hello; how are you?	
13	september		
18	september	information	information design
21	september	design	
26	september	document	document design
28	september	type	typography
2	october	space	(typographical) space
4	october	weight, colour	(typographical) weight & colour
9	october	<u>presentations</u>	
11	october		
16	october	card	quick references
18	october	<u>peer review discussion</u>	
23	october	spread	2-page spreads
25	october	cooking; <u>solo projects</u>	cookbook design
30	october	children's infobooks	
1	november	travel guides	
6	november	hiking, camping, sitting in the woods	
8	november	tables, charts; <u>journals</u>	quantitative display
13	november	technical communication	technical communication
15	november	<u>think tank</u>	
20	november	maps	map design
22	november	interface-graphic	graphic interface design
27	november	interface-voice	voice user interface design
29	november	<u>group projects & presentations</u>	



COURSE PARTICIPATION --20%

DO THIS

carry out the websearches, contribute to discussions, on the basis of what you've learned from the searches, as well as on your own experiences and intuitions; play nicely with others.

HOW YOU MAKE THE GRADE

notice that this grade is for course participation, not (just) class participation. that is, it's meant to reflect your engagement with the materials of the course, and with the other participants of the course. in addition to my own evaluation of your involvement and commitment, everyone else in the class will have the chance to comment on your participation, and i will take those comments seriously.

at my end, i have a merit/demerit policy. 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; being cheerful, thrifty, and brave. quantity of participation is a positive factor to the extent that lots of quality contributions are somewhat preferable to a few quality contributions (but not to the extent of shutting out others). but calibre is much more important than volume. 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, sniggering, or chatting while other people are addressing the class (or, especially, while other people are giving their presentations); or making lengthy, unfocused comments that draw away from the general thread of discussion (a. k. a., verbal wanking).

I WANT SOME PAPER FROM YOU

do not miss this: you will get an automatic grade of f- for course participation if you do not submit a memo grading and commenting on everyone else's course participation. some people, obviously, you may not have any informed opinion of--they're quiet in class, you don't have any 392a-relevant contact with them outside of class--but for everyone you form an opinion of, assign them a participation grade and submit it with a few justificatory comments, something like:

fred derf c+	he was always talking, but didn't say much, and his comments seemed unduly negative.
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wilma amliw a	always helpful; very knowledgeable; constructive. learned a lot from her analysis of repair manuals.
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dino onid --	he was quiet. i don't have an opinion about him.
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COURSE PARTICIPATION CONTINUED

PEER REVIEW

by 13 october, you will have a peer match-up (on the web site): exchange project proposals with your peer reviewer by 16 october; look over the one you get with a critical eye, and your design sensibilities ratcheted up; on 18 october come prepared to discuss your mutual evaluations.

SOLO ASSIGNMENT--20%

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.?

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 job card is probably the most manageable.

RATIONALE

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're probably getting too ambitious for the assignment. if you want to design something big (a user manual, a travel guide, a cook book), then only include representative samples (frontmatter, spread, section opening, index, and so on), greeked if you like. don't worry about populating the document, just framing it in.

PROPOSAL

prepare a project proposal (any structure you choose, and any medium you choose, is fine: it's your peer you have to satisfy, not me), and get it to your peer reviewer by 16 october.

HOW YOU MAKE THE GRADE

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.



DOCUMENT JOURNAL--20%

DO THIS

go out and trap some documents. bring them home and mount them in the pages of a journal. comment upon them, astutely, sensitively, knowledgeably. i would advise, very strongly, that you not only start collecting your documents right away, but that you also start assembling the journal right away. a good schedule would be one-per-week, 1 september - 30 october, with a bit a cushion at the end.

JOURNAL DESIGN

think of the journal as a document-design problem. what's the best size? ...the best shape? ...the best material? ...the best layout? consider your resources. consider the topic. consider the documents and images that must be incorporated. consider the audience. it may be that you want to do it all on the web. it may be that an old-fashioned scrap book, or an engineering notebook, or a three-ring binder, suits your material and your interests most fully. it's upto you. but it should show some thought, not be slapped together.

LENGTH

six entries, around 500 words each. keep in mind that 392a construes both "document" and "technical communication" quite widely: cd cases, web pages, jeans labels, course syllabi, are all appropriate fodder for entries, as are standard-issue quick reference cards, user guides, or reference manuals. (for longer documents, reproduce relevant pages--index, table of contents, typical multilevel page, whatever--to illustrate those aspects of the document you want to comment on.) you can include more than one entry on the same document (one on navigation, for instance, and another on typography). images can also be drawn diversely, --an icon, a photograph, a bus-route map. do not, however, include any entries on ads in your journal.

HOW YOU MAKE THE GRADE

you will get a base-line grade of b just for completing and handing in the journal on time. you will get a zero for not completing the journal. think of it as a contract job: if you do the work, you get paid. if you don't, you don't. grades higher than b will be awarded for (1) the quality of your journal design, and (2) the quality of your analyses. if you find interesting documents embed them in a thoughtful design, and analyze them in sharp, knowledgeable, theoretically informed ways, you will do very well. discussions should demonstrate familiarity with the terminology and the concerns of the text and the course, but if you find them inadequate for a given analysis, feel free to innovate or adapt analytical methods (from rhetoric, from social semiotics, from literary criticism, whatever works).



GROUP ASSIGNMENT--30%

GROUPS

the groups will be assigned by the end of october. you will have plenty of time to develop your ideas and coordinate your efforts. but i expect that time and effort to be reflected in the project.

necessary qualities:

"we need a strong individual who's also capable of being a team player. a sense of humour is a must. they have to be adaptable to unusual and stressful environments: humidity; heat; cramped, close quarters with no privacy at all. they need good judgment and just a dash of self-analysis--too much may lead to depression. we need someone with good language skills, who thrives on cultural diversity and who has strong social and interpersonal skills" that's dr. al holland, the chief nasa psychologist, describing the appropriate personality for astronauts going to mars. it's not a 392a group-member description. your requirements are higher. you need all of that, and some design sense too.

you'll have to manage your time well; aside from some brief discussions and possibly overlapping projects, no class time will be allocated to the projects.

GET REAL

the topic is your choice, but it would be a very good idea to discuss it with me before going ahead.

i encourage you very strongly to make this a real-world project. it's going to have inevitably the taint of the transcript about it, since we're all trapped on campus and you're trying to escape with a piece of paper that makes prospective employers sit up and beg, if not lie down and roll over. but try to find an existing programme, product, or place that needs documentation, and supply it. if you sign contracts and collect filthy lucre for this project outside of class, so much the better.

WHAT IS IT

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.

RATIONALE

you should include a brief rationale (yes, another written object) 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.



GROUP ASSIGNMENT CONTINUED

LENGTH

it depends on the genre, but if it runs much over ten pages, you've probably chosen something too ambitious for the assignment. if you want to design something big (a user manual, a travel guide, a cook book), then only include representative samples (frontmatter, spread, section opening, index, and so on), greeked if you like. don't worry about populating the document, just framing it in.

THINK TANKING

by 15 november, you should have your genre and topic worked out. come to class, sit as a group, give us an outline, and we will kick ideas around as a class.

PRESENTATION

your group will present your document to the class—what you did, why you did it, how it will change the world on 29 november.

MAKING THE GRADE

given the focus of the course, design issues will be weighted most heavily, but i'll be assuming a fairly high level of writing competence, accuracy, and usability as well. half of your mark will come from your collaborator's assessments (see below).

MUTUAL ASSESSMENT

everybody in the group must submit a memo assigning an individual grade for participation to every one else in the group, along with at least sixty words justifying that grade. if you do not submit this memo, you will get either an f- or an inc, at my discretion. this memo should be similar to the course participation memo, with more specificity, something like:

fred a+ he surprised the hell out of me. i always thought he was a bonehead,
derf but he knows everything there is to know about granite, and provided
virtually all the technical material. he worked very hard,
especially on the last-minute layout problems, and was relentlessly
encouraging to everyone. can we get him to solve the balkan crisis?

wilma f- a complete washout. she missed meetings, fought with us about
amliw trivial issues (or, worse, matters we'd already decided) when she
did show up, and blew her deadlines. in the end, we gave her some
small jobs, writing some of the copy, but nobody was happy with what
she did, and we had to group-edit it. if i meet her five years from
now, and find that she graduated and got a stable job, i'll eat a
yak, horns and all.

dino b a good team player. he never seemed to go out of his way, and his
onid contributions weren't particularly inspired. he pulled his weight,
though, and brought his sections in on time. he clearly wanted the
project to succeed, but was happy to let others do the main work.



PRESENTATION--10%

DO THIS

pick some document that interests you (for reasons of attraction or repulsion, or, i guess, both) and figure out what makes it tick. then tell us. you'll need to pay attention to the rhetorical situation of the document—which means, minimally, genre and audience—and the elements that carry the communicative freight of the message. do not use an ad as your document, unless it is really compelling or novel, and conveys **INFORMATION** beyond BUY ME, BUY ME, C' MON, WONTCHA? BUY ME!.

FRIENDLY ADVICE

you can double up with your journal here: your presentation can (and probably should) be on one of the documents discussed in your journal.

LENGTH

no more than ten minutes.

DELIVERY

stand up and talk, gesticulate.

you might want to prepare handouts. you might need an overhead. you might want to use a computer network and a data projector. make all arrangements beforehand.

HOW YOU MAKE THE GRADE

oratorical brilliance will help you, and drooling incoherence will hurt you. but it's the 'content' i will attend to most closely, not the 'style'. and the features of content that will determine your grade are (1) the quality of the analysis, and (2) the relevance of both the document and (especially) your treatment of it to the concerns of the course.

ASSORTED NOTES

WHY YOU HAVE ALL OF THIS INFORMATION

this syllabus is our contract. familiarize yourself with the details. i expect you to fulfill your requirements according to its specifications; i will fulfill mine. if you have any questions, make sure you ask.

RULES

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

LISTEN TO QUINTILIAN

"as it is the duty of the master to teach," he said, "so it is the duty of the pupil to show himself teachable. the two obligations are mutually indispensable."



CHECKLIST

	DATES	REQUIREMENTS	
COURSE PARTICIPATION	2 september to 29 november	be cheerful, thrifty, brave	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	18 october	review a classmate's project proposal	<input type="checkbox"/>
	29 november	hand in participation memo.	<input type="checkbox"/>
SOLO PROJECT	25 october	hand in project and rationale.	<input type="checkbox"/>
CLASS PRESENTATION	9, 11 october	stand up and talk; gesticulate.	<input type="checkbox"/>
DOCUMENT JOURNAL	(26 september) (2 october) (9 october) (16 october) (23 october) (30 october)	six entries, roughly 500 words each.	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
	8 november	hand it in, please	<input type="checkbox"/>
GROUP PROJECT	20 november	think-tank; come prepared to discuss.	<input type="checkbox"/>
		document (group)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	29 november	rationale (group)	<input type="checkbox"/>
		evaluation memo (individual)	<input type="checkbox"/>

