

Analysis report project: Audience, e-writing and information design

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Since many business students will become entry-level managers with some connection to an organization's intranet or the Internet, they need to develop an awareness of what components contribute to Web site effectiveness. They also need to develop their writing skills, specifically for electronic media. A five-week assignment is based on a short case study in which students become members of a Web development team at an investment firm seeking to attract college students and young, new investors. Student response to the assignment has been very positive - they like learning about personal finance while completing a writing assignment, and are pleasantly surprised by the exposure to a topic they had previously found daunting. They also like the challenge of assessing stylistic techniques and determining best practices.

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[Headnote]

My Favorite Assignment

WHEN BUSINESS STUDENTS are asked to explain whether a Website is effective or not, they often lapse into vague generalities and abstract qualifiers. Since many of these students will soon become entry-level managers with some connection to an organization's intranet or the Internet, they need to develop an awareness of what components contribute to Website effectiveness. They also need to develop their writing skills, specifically writing skills for electronic media, often referred to as e-writing (Wilhelm, 1999; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2000; US Department of Labor, 1993). The analysis report project described in this article aims to meet both these goals. It presents students with the opportunity to evaluate e-writing techniques and information design components of two financial and investment Websites. In doing so, students develop criteria for judging excellence by defining and justifying best practices. Students identify with the audience by learning the sometimes unfamiliar material on the site as they become readers, users, and evaluators of the sites. This article describes the assignment and discusses some strategies for teaching e-writing and assessing the project.

Theoretical Background

Because the assignment turns students into evaluators, they develop all of the cognitive skills listed in Bloom's (1956) taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Meeting the assignment's objectives requires analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which, as Dyrud and Worley (1998) point out, helps "... students to extend themselves beyond the information-gathering stage to a consideration of what that information means, how it can be applied, and the consequences of application" (p. 63). Students must learn specific e-writing techniques, classify information design components, compare and contrast site effectiveness after analyzing the audiences, synthesize the information in a report, and

make specific recommendations. Because students must say why or how an e-writing technique is effective and use concrete, specific examples as evidence, they are forced to analyze rather than merely describe (Roger, 1998; Varner & Pomerence, 1998).

I use the three-part information design model developed by Carliner (2000) and discuss how the physical, cognitive, and affective aspects all work synergistically to create user-centered sites, so students begin to understand that each site must be created from the audience's perceived needs. While the primary objective is to analyze e-writing techniques, students also develop an increased awareness of how design components help or hinder the audience's understanding of the material (Andrews & Dyrud, 1996).

Assignment Description

This five-week assignment is based on a short case study that provides context and background, so students will think about audience in terms of both the report objectives and the report readers and be assessed accordingly (Varner & Pomerence, 1998). As part of the case study, students become members of a Web development team at an investment firm seeking to attract college students and young, new investors. Appendix A reproduces the handout with details about the assignment. To simulate the first step in a development project, the student/Web developers write an analytical report comparing two effective investment Websites: Fool.com (Investing, 1995-2002) and Fidelity.com (Understand, 1998-2002). Although the students are business majors, most have not yet had a finance class, so the sites and their financial information are new to them. I provide some background on the Motley Fools and Fidelity Investments and note some of the assumptions I make about the audiences for each site. We then discuss issues about the audience so the students get an idea about the analytical process.

I also give them a set of questions to help them assess these two sites, characterize their audiences, and discuss the e-writing techniques and the information design components of each site (Appendix A). Their goal is to develop a set of best practices gleaned from the techniques they found on the two sites. Beyond gathering and reporting data, they must interpret that data; in other words, their reports must answer the question why. After students have had a chance to review the Websites individually, they discuss their observations with the class and begin writing their rough drafts. In the last two weeks of the project, students participate in a peer review session (Appendix B) and then write their reports.

This assignment works well as both an individual and a team assignment. After assessing both sites, students can answer the questions in Appendix A individually and then select the evaluation criteria as a team. Within the team, each student can produce a rough draft of comparison and contrast sections, share these drafts via e-mail, and then meet to choose the most effective approaches and create the final drafts. Another variant is to have students rewrite poorly written material using the Fool.com style. While particularly challenging, this assignment encourages students to look closely at the Fool.com writing style and raises their awareness of how difficult it is to rewrite poor writing. For a more extensive project, student teams could take the next step and develop the actual site implied by the case. Teams could then test other teams' sites for usability.

Teaching E-Writing Techniques

Because emerging technology changes what audiences expect in a Website, students need to be aware that an audience analysis must be re-evaluated frequently as user patterns and target audiences change. In addition to discussing audience, I explain how writing for the Web is different from writing for print because the Web is an active and interactive medium with unique information structuring capabilities. Students have to understand the rich capabilities of each medium and compare media organization with media use. Websites can be organized in a linear fashion, and paper documents are usually linear, but both media can be used in a hyperlinked pattern (Spyridakis, 2000). Skipping around paper documents to read different sections is similar to using links. And pop-up windows are similar to sidebars, offering the reader or user another reading option. Many guidelines for writing on paper, then, are also effective for e-writing. But e-writing needs to exploit other options in the medium, as noted in Appendix C. These guidelines, however, should be re-evaluated as technology advances and user sophistication increases.

To demonstrate the special nature of e-writing, I analyze and assess an e-writing article on the Herman Miller site (Accenture, 2000) that both informs readers and promotes products and services. Students evaluate the site against the guidelines in Appendix C, and in doing so develop a list of best practices as well as suggestions for improvement. They usually find that the authors keep the paragraphs succinct and use topic sentences; however, to be more effective, the article needs concrete, specific examples and stories about actual Accenture employees to help the audience visualize how people function in this innovative office space. While some of the deviations from the e-writing guidelines are acceptable, most detract from the effectiveness of the message. Working through this example gives students enough confidence to look at content and style issues as they begin their own Website analyses.

Skills Developed From the Project

By comparing two sites with similar information, students see how information design affects an audience's ability to assimilate new material. In their reports, students discuss the graphics and the interactive components of these sites by citing specific examples. Their use of examples demonstrates that students have increased their awareness of how information design affects usability and meaning.

In addition to learning about information design, students develop the ability to distinguish between telling through abstract exposition and showing through examples or stories. When discussing the same financial concept presented on each site, students point out that the concrete example or the story was much easier to understand and to remember than the explanation. They also see how writers need to adjust their style and tone for different audiences. Finally, in selecting evaluation criteria and formulating questions based on those criteria, students develop analytical and assessment skills.

Evaluating the Assignment

Similar to many of my colleagues in the School of Business, I use point-specific evaluation sheets to review the assignment (Appendix D). These sheets are the subject of a class discussion before students submit their assignments. Thus, these sheets help students understand what managers look for in a report. Since I use similar sheets for each assignment, the sheets help students identify areas of improvement and track their own progress across several assignments (Hiemstra, 2001). In addition, this

structured approach helps me be consistent in my evaluations and in tracking student progress.

Student Response to the Project

During the five semesters that I have used this assignment, student response has been very positive. They like learning about personal finance on the Fool.com site while completing a writing assignment and are pleasantly surprised by the exposure to a topic they had previously found daunting. Also, they like the challenge of assessing stylistic techniques and determining best practices; many students continue to look analytically at Websites even after the class ends. The case study approach gives them a sense of professional communication: "This is just like what I'll do in my future job," wrote one student about the report.

The close analysis of writing techniques also helps students analyze their own writing and make significant improvements when writing the report. During the assignment post-mortem, students explain that they were able to see how a well-written message made understanding and using the information much easier, so they realized the need for improving their own writing. Clearly, both sites use writing techniques explained in most business writing texts, but seeing these techniques applied in a "real world" context helps students understand the direct connection between class projects and the world of work.

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