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Vancouver, WA 98682
December 1, 2006

Mrs. Kimberly Sullivan
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1800 E. McLoughlin Blvd.
Vancouver, WA 98663

Dear Mrs. Sullivan:

As per our agreement, I am submitting the enclosed report entitled *Writing for the Web*.

The purpose of this report is to provide the Curriculum Committee with an informative recommendation to add a new course entitled *Writing for the Web* to the current curricula here at Clark College. This course is intended to complement the current Website Design & Development (WDD) degree. The report describes the many benefits of adding this course to the curricula. Additionally, the report provides extensive details regarding the study and utilization of certain fundamental web-writing guidelines as well as an explanation of the differences between online and on-campus courses. The report will conclude with an overview of the potential benefits of this course and closing comments.

Hopefully this report meets your expectations.

Respectfully,

Ted Dejony

Encl.: Writing for the Web
Attachments A through I

**Report
on
Writing for the Web**

Submitted to
Mrs. Kimberly Sullivan
Clark College
1800 McLoughlin Blvd.
Vancouver, WA 98663

December 1, 2006

by
Ted Dejony

This report provides an informative recommendation to add a new course entitled *Writing for the Web* to the current curricula at Clark College. The *Writing for the Web* course guidelines are described, its characteristics are compared with those of several online courses, and several attachments are offered which detail key aspects of the proposed course. This report concludes with an overview of course benefits to both the student and Clark College.

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I. Introduction

I have created this report to recommend the addition of a new course entitled “Writing for the Web” to the curricula at Clark College. The proposed course will demonstrate how to effectively combine Technical Writing and HTML/PHP skills for the purpose of creating concise and highly usable web-content.

This report will describe the key components of the course itself and illustrate the utilization and instruction of content generation methods. When utilized, these techniques produce impressive improvements in overall content usability and functionality.

Several examples of these claims will be presented later in this report. These claims will be affirmed through several examples of studies conducted by the Nielsen Norman group (NN/g).

I feel it is important to bring to the committee’s attention that no other Colleges in our area currently offer a program such as this. With the addition of this course come many benefits which will be discussed later in this paper.

Writing for the Web will educate students in the proper formatting and composition of online content while operating in a web programming environment. It will also teach students to combine their existing Technical Writing and Web Development skills in order to produce highly usable Web-content. During this process the student will develop valuable skills and abilities which are in high demand in today’s Web Design workforce.

The primary focus of this course will be the instruction of proper web writing etiquette as well as to reinforce the fundamental guidelines outlined in this report as well as to emphasize the importance and benefits of creating quick data retrieval web systems.

This course is intended to be a component of the Website Design and Development (WDD) degree. Because the students will already have a background in Technical Writing and Web Development, this course will not focus on the instruction of how to create web-sites, nor will it focus on teaching the fundamentals of Technical Writing.

This course will instead help the student develop solid content generation skills and instruct them in the art of creating efficient and user-oriented Web-content. It is my intention to introduce this program as a 5 credit course.

In lay-mans terms, this course leans more towards teaching the student how to write and format text within websites, rather than teaching the student how to program websites.

II. Course Addition Benefits

Through extensive research I have determined that no other Colleges in our area offer a “real” course such as the proposed one. My research criteria included courses held on campus at a “real” College in a classroom with an instructor. Specifically, my research criteria included the instruction of foreground process, such as proper and efficient content creation, navigation and hypertext linking, as well as background applications such as “search engine effective” meta-tag creation and search systems development.

There are several “distance learning“ classes offered by out-of-state online “self-help” companies. These services are vaguely similar to the proposed course, however they offer brief 2 day to 1 week sessions and cover a very small fraction of material. *Writing for the Web* covers an extensive amount of valuable information over a period of 3 months (one quarter). The course offers a “real” instructor in a “real” classroom, in-person help, and the opportunity for the student to associate with his/her peers. These invaluable benefits are not currently offered in any online course.

Online courses omit the “human factor” from the equation. The student no longer has the ability to raise his/her hand and ask a question that they may feel is important. They also remove any possibilities of developing “quality relationships” with other students and instructors. Relationships that could prove to be invaluable in future endeavors.

Without a real mentor, the student receives not a word of praise or recognition for his/her skills and abilities. This sort of encouragement builds confidence and self-esteem. For students who may have low confidence or low self-image, the absence of this “human factor” in no way benefits them. Educational institutions work hard to provide students with as much socialization and tutoring as possible. Therefore, a course such as *Writing for the Web* could yield extensive future benefits for both the student and the college alike.

Considering how difficult a class such as this is to find, if this program were to be offered at Clark College it would provide a highly valuable and rewarding service. As attachment “A” illustrates, the benefits of offering a Web-Writing course on campus are therefore clear.

With the addition of Writing for the Web, Clark College will be setting a great example by demonstrating its willingness to contribute to the quality of future educations.

This class would be very advantageous for those seeking employment in the field of Web Design. Formal training in this specific subject would also impart the student with the skills that are in high demand in the field itself.

I recently discovered that this proposal has been considered in the past but never acted on, and therefore it is highly crucial for this new class to go forward. Therefore, it is time to move forward from thought to action and transform this idea into a reality.

III. Course Research Results

If Clark College were to add this course to the curricula, we would be offering a much needed and highly demanded service that no other College in our area currently offers.

Many students attend a Technical Writing, HTML Fundamentals, and/or Introduction to PHP course, then go on to other subjects required by the WDD (Website Design & Development) degree.

Although these courses provide the student with invaluable skills, none specifically address the concepts and techniques regarding composing content in a web based environment.

This skill could be a very valuable addition in today's rapidly changing workplace.

IV. Nielsen Norman Group Web-Usability Studies

About the Nielsen Norman Group:

The Nielsen Norman Group (NN/g), founded in 1998, was created by well-known user experience experts Donald Norman, Jakob Nielsen, and Bruce Tognazzini.

Throughout their 8 year history, they have conducted many "usability" studies that have analyzed the efficiency and effectiveness of not only Web content, but websites themselves.

The areas studied include content format, website navigation systems, and hypertext linking. NN/g also conducted several studies in which they analyzed how people read websites.

The data from these studies have proven highly valuable and have lead to the development of content creation methods which when utilized, can potentially boost website usability by as much as 124% (higher in some cases).

The results of these claims have been verified by numerous tests conducted by NN/g, which are detailed in the attachment.

Due to the impressive results these guidelines produce, I strongly believe they should not only be considered, but also standardized and established as fundamental guidelines for the proposed course.

NN/g Usability Study Results:

Although there are many different writing styles to choose from, there are several valuable techniques that have proven to be highly beneficial.

In attachment “**B**” you will find the results from a “web-*usability*” study conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group on October 1st 1997. The results illustrate the usability increases when using different writing styles.

Users’ were given reading and memory tasks to be performed on 5 separate websites. The tasks measured the success of several content creation methods. The results show which writing styles were found to be most effective and what formats worked the best.

Usability was dramatically higher (58%) for the concise version and 47% higher for the scannable version. When all three writing styles were combined (Concise, Scannable, and Objective) the results were truly impressive: 124% better usability.

Even though this study may be considered “outdated” by some, I believe its results provide valuable information which can be used to design more “user-friendly” web-systems.

Technology may change, but in general our reading characteristics do not. These characteristics are ingrained within us at an early age and aid in the formation of reading habits and techniques that follow us into adulthood and beyond.

Given this fact, it seems the most logical solution would be to suggest that web designers and content authors alter their content creation techniques in order to provide an “easier to read” and more “user friendly” web environment.

Change doesn’t happen by itself; in most cases it requires some sort of human intervention to affect change. *Writing for the Web* will impart students with the skills necessary to affect this kind of change.

It would be far less ethical and unreasonable to suggest that millions of people change their reading habits in order to read website content better.

These results have compelled and continue to compel website designers/authors to create highly user focused websites with one common goal in mind: User Satisfaction.

Considering the high success rate proven by the tests, I recommend these content generation methods and guidelines be considered when creating the *Writing for the Web* course.

The Usability Test scores were derived from the criteria listed in attachment “**C**”.

NN/g Eye-Tracking Study Results:

In a recent “eye tracking” study conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group on April 17, 2006 (www.nngroup.com) it was discovered that users don’t read entire web pages, rather they “scan” them. In fact, it is estimated that 79% of website users scan content.

Scanning is a process in which users read or, more to the point, “skim” over material at high rates of speed, searching only for key words and specific information. In general, during this scanning process most of the information that presents little or no value to the reader is disregarded.

This study recorded how 232 users looked at thousands of Web pages. The study revealed that users’ main reading behavior was fairly consistent across all the test websites.

This reading pattern looks somewhat like an “F” and has the following three components:

- Users first read in a horizontal movement, usually across the upper part of the content area. This initial element forms the F’s top bar.
- Next, users move down the page a bit then read across in a second horizontal movement that typically covers a shorter area than the previous movement. This additional element forms the F’s lower bar.
- Finally, users scan the content’s left side in a vertical movement. Sometimes this is a fairly slow and systematic scan that appears as a solid stripe on an eye-tracking heatmap (illustrated below). Other times users move faster, creating a spottier heatmap. This last element forms the F’s stem.

Attachment “D” illustrates the eye-tracking “heatmaps” from this study.

NN/g Eye-Tracking Study Conclusions:

- Users won't read your text thoroughly in a word-by-word manner. Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when users come to your website seeking specific information. Some people may read more, but most won't.
- The first two paragraphs of your content must state the most important information. There's some hope that users will actually read this material, though they'll probably read more of the first paragraph than the second.
- Start subheads, paragraphs, and bullet points with information-carrying words that users will notice when scanning down the left side of your content in the final stem of their F-behavior. They'll read the third word on a line much less often than the first two words.

V. Paper vs. Online Presentation

The following is an excerpt from the Sun.com website entitled “**The Difference Between Paper and Online Presentation**”. It offers valuable insight into the world of online information presentation, and the standard “paper” methods.

“In print, your document forms a whole and the user is focused on the entire set of information. On the Web, you need to **split each document** into multiple hyperlinked pages since users are not willing to read long pages.

Users can **enter a site at any page** and move between pages as they chose, so make every page independent and explain its topic without assumptions about the previous page seen by the user.

Link to background or explanatory information to help users who do not have the necessary knowledge to understand or use the page.

Make the word count for the online version of a given topic about **half the word count** used when writing for print: Users find it painful to read too much text on screens, and they **read about 25 percent more slowly** from screens than from paper.

Users don't like to scroll through masses of text, so put the most important information at the top.

Web **users are impatient** and critical: They have not chosen your site because you are great but because they have something they need to do. Write in the “news you can use” style to allow users to quickly find the information they want.

Credibility is important on the Web where users connect to unknown servers at remote locations. You have to work to **earn the user's trust**, which is rapidly lost if you use exaggerated claims or overly boastful language; avoid “marketese” in favor of a more objective style.

A few hyperlinks to other sites with supporting information increase the credibility of your pages. If at all possible, **link quotes** from magazine reviews and other articles to the source.

The Web is an informal and immediate medium, compared to print, so users appreciate a somewhat informal writing style and small amounts of humor.

Do *not* use clever or cute headings since users rely on scanning to pick up the meaning of the text.

Limit the use of metaphors, particularly in headings: Users might take you literally.

Use **simple sentence structures**: Convoluting writing and complex words are even harder to understand online.

Puns do not work for international users; find some other way to be humorous.

Add bylines and other ways of communicating some of your personality. (This also increases credibility.)

The Web is a fluid medium: **Update pages** as time goes by to reflect all changes. Statistics, numbers, and examples all need to be recent or credibility suffers.

For example: Before a conference, the page about the event might point to a registration form; afterward, point to slides or presentation transcripts instead.

VI. Web Writing Guidelines

Attachments E, F and G illustrate valuable components of the Web-content development process such as content creation methods, guidelines, ideas and techniques. I recommend that Writing for the Web emphasize and encourage the use of these valuable methods and guidelines.

Enhanced readability:

During my search for useful content creation guidelines, I found several very informative internet based sources. Each source suggested the use of several different content creation guidelines which I felt were of great value and should be included in a *Writing for the Web* course. The sources will be cited at the end of this report.

According to the Nielsen Norman Group, *people tend to scan Web pages rather than reading every word and prefer not to scroll*. Because of this NN/g suggests using the guidelines located in attachment “E” to break up text, allowing for easier reading, or “scannability”.

Content Structure:

When a user visits a webpage, it generally takes them only a few seconds to form an opinion of the site and what it has to offer. Well formatted content gives the visitor a good reason to explore the website, and could potentially lead to more return visits.

The guidelines located in attachment “F” were retrieved from the Penn State (Pennsylvania State University) website. The Penn State Web Development department recommends the utilization of the following content creation guidelines which could result in a better user experience.

Active vs. Passive Voice:

Online readers are generally in a hurry to retrieve information. If you take too long to get to the point or tell your story, you’ll lose readers before they finish your first couple of paragraphs.

To prevent this, use what is called “*Active Voice*”. In Active voice, the subject of a sentence does the action; whereas in Passive voice, the subject receives the action. Utilization of this technique will make your sentences and paragraphs stronger, clearer and less wordy.

Active verbs give energy to your sentences. This grabs your readers’ interest and keeps them on the page. Attachments “G” and “H” explain in more detail the differences between active and passive voice, when to use them and when not to.

Search Engine Referrals

Readers frequently search for very specific information or key words online through the use of various search engines. Because of this, all paragraphs in the content must focus on a specific point or idea and stay on that topic. Wandering off into other topics could result in the visitor wandering off into other websites.

Knowing the Audience:

Understanding the audience and keeping their wants and needs in mind is a vital step toward building a usable website that meets the needs of its visitors.

The outline in attachment “**I**” was compiled from several cited internet sources. It suggests several important aspects to keep in mind while creating online content.

Many readers scan only the first sentence of a paragraph. Because of this, efficient and effective paragraphs should begin with strong topic sentences. When writing content it is essential to provide more details which clarify the original point.

Recognizing the audience is a key factor in the creation of web content. Understanding how much they know about a particular subject will help students compose more “user-friendly” content. This will enable the audience to comprehend information that the author is attempting to convey.

Knowing your audience requires in-depth research; what topics will be of most interest to them, what types of information they will be interested in, what type of writing style(s) will best benefit the reader.

These are all very important aspects to consider when composing online content.

Chunking:

Splitting up paragraphs into small readable and specific chunks of information is commonly referred to as Chunking. Points or ideas should be “self-contained” or kept within that paragraph only, so the users’ can quickly find what they are looking for. This could potentially result in future return visits because the user found what he/she was looking for, quickly and easily.

Writing for the Web focuses on compacting information so the reader can retrieve quickly. When compacting information however, do not omit the details, only omit unnecessary wordage.

VII. Guidelines Conclusion

All the aforementioned aspects of content creation and management may be partially covered in separate classes. However, imagine how effective a class would be if it were to incorporate all of these methods into one course! In this perspective, the benefits of the proposed course are abundantly clear.

Certainly the committee has the authority to pick and choose which guidelines to include in *Writing for the Web*. The listed guidelines are essential, each in their own right. However, use of any number or combination of them will prove to be highly beneficial and very effective.

VIII. Course Requirements

Writing for the Web is intended to reinforce and combine the concepts covered in CTEC 122, CTEC 140 and ENGL 111. Therefore, this class will definitely require the use of a computer lab. Each student will need access to a computer with internet capabilities and USB ports for storage device usage. The computers will need software appropriate for the course such as Microsoft Office and HTML / PHP programming software such as those utilized in the Web Programming courses. The student computer stations will need to be networked together, with an instructor station capable of viewing each student's computer screen.

The classroom itself will need to be equipped with a projector screen and projection unit capable of displaying live computer screen output. The classroom will also require a standard "white board" of the type found in most classrooms on campus. A good example of the type of computer lab that will be needed is HKH-102, the English 111 classroom that Kimberly Sullivan currently uses for Technical Writing instruction.

IX. Report Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be The Next Step for Clark College to move to a higher "playing level" by providing a course that no other local Colleges currently offer. Clark College could be the "first on the scene!". Eventually, more students from this and other outlying areas would hear about this new program, and be eager to enroll due to the current needs of this skill in the Web Development "world of work". If a student is more educated in Website Development he/she will probably go on to reap greater financial benefits in the long run, as well as highly increase their own employability!

I plan to present this idea to the Clark College Curriculum Committee and hopefully they will act on this proposal as soon as it is propitious for them to do so!

X. References

A portion of the findings, facts, statements, statistics, diagrams and pictorial examples used in this report originated from the following sources:

Web Writing Guidelines:

Morkes, J. and Nielsen, J. (1997). *Concise, scannable, and objective: How to write for the Web*. Retrieved November 17, 2006, from Jakob Nielsen's website: www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html

Active vs. Passive Voice, retrieved November 19, 2006, from Utah Valley State College Online Writing Lab (OWL) website:
www.uvsc.edu/owl/handouts/revise%20handouts/writing%20style/active%20passive%20voice.pdf

Guidelines for Web Writing, retrieved November 19, 2006, from University of Washington Trio Virtual Center website: <http://depts.washington.edu/trio/center/howto/write/writing/write.html>

Writing for the web, retrieved November 19, 2006, from Pennsylvania State University Web Development website: http://tlt.psu.edu/suggestions/research/Write_for_Web.shtml

Horton, S., Lange, C., & Ke, X. (2000), *Web Teaching guide*. Retrieved November 19, 2006 from Dartmouth College website: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~webteach/articles/text.html>

Nielsen, J., Schemenaur, P.J., Fox, J., *Writing for the Web*. Retrieved November 20, 2006 from Sun Microsystems website: <http://www.sun.com/980713/webwriting/>

Web Writing Styles

Morkes, J. and Nielsen, J. (1997). *Concise, scannable, and objective: How to write for the Web*. Retrieved November 17, 2006, from Jakob Nielsen's website: www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/writing.html

Morkes, J. and Nielsen, J. (2006). *Inverted Pyramids in Cyberspace*. Retrieved November 17, 2006, from Jakob Nielsen's website: www.useit.com/alertbox/9606.html

Online Web-Writing Course References

Writing For the Web Course Outline, retrieved November 17, 2006, from Plain Words Ltd. website: http://www.plainwords.co.uk/co_web_writing.html

Writing For the Web Course Overview, retrieved November 17 2006, from gbdirect website: <http://training.gbdirect.co.uk/courses/web/writing-for-the-web.html>

Writing For the Web: Skills for Developing Compelling Content, retrieved November 17, 2006, from The Learning Tree International website: <http://www.learningtree.com/courses/221.htm>