

Assignments for 21W.780: Communicating in Technical Organizations
Spring 2005

C1: Résumé

Find a job in your field that you'd like to apply to, or imagine such a job. Create a résumé that you would submit in advance of an interview for such a job. Bring your résumé to class on Tuesday, Feb. 8, and also submit a pdf copy by email to the instructor by Sunday, Feb. 6. We will critique these résumés in class.

C2: Explication

In class you were assigned a topic in your field of expertise. Write a one-page, single-spaced explanation of this topic, understandable to a bright high school student. Bring this page to class on Tuesday, Feb. 8, and email a copy of it to the instructor as an attachment by Monday, Feb. 7 at noon.

Also, be prepared to present an explanation of your topic to the class, given about five minutes. You are welcome to prepare slides (using PowerPoint or other software) to accompany your explanation.

Though you are not required to do so, you may wish to do some research on your topic. This is not primarily a research assignment, however, so do not spend too much effort on this research. Should you do any research, make sure to cite your sources on a bibliography page accompanying your page of explanation. Refer to Chapter 10 of *The Mayfield Handbook* for information on how properly to format your citations.

A1: Critique of Communications Technology

Write an essay in which you analyze the meaning of some communications technology, looking especially at the cultural implications and understandings of that technology. Choose some communications technology (current, future, or archaic), find a number of cultural artifacts relating to that technology, and produce an essay in which you discover the meanings of that technology in those artifacts.

The challenge of this essay will be to find something worth saying about the culture surrounding your chosen technology, something to tie together all of your interesting analysis into a motivated essay. While you may have something in mind at the start of your writing process, it is often a good idea to allow yourself to write freely about your topic, generating ideas in a forum unconstrained by a preconception of a thesis. Then, take the most interesting few ideas at which you arrive, and weave them together into a consistently probing, progressive essay.

The exemplar in this assignment is George Myerson's monograph, *Heidegger, Habermas, and the Mobile Phone*. You may wish to look back at some of Myerson's arguments and strategies, and adapt them for your own analysis. In particular, you would

do well to emulate Myerson's approach to the rhetoric of the mobile phone as a *symptom* of cultural attitudes.

Research: This assignment requires at least some research, to find artifacts concerning your chosen technology. You are also encouraged to consult secondary sources that analyze your chosen technology or its cultural implications, and to make use of these sources (with appropriate citations, of course) in your essay. However, "secondary" research is not essential. Though you may end up wanting to do a fair amount of research, be certain that your essay is mostly a presentation of your own original analysis and ideas. This is not a "research" essay, and should not be a summary or list of the discoveries you make as you research your topic.

There is no length requirement for this essay, but I imagine that it will take around five to seven pages to treat the culture of a technology in adequate detail. For rules of formatting, please refer to the class website.

- Your *essay's ideal audience member* is a thoughtful, educated person, familiar with though not expert in current technologies. If you are analyzing an obscure technology, you should spend some words explaining it to readers who might be unfamiliar with it.
- Your *purpose* is to offer an original and engaging insight into the culture surrounding a technology. It may be of particular interest to contrast the rhetoric of the technology with the actual effects of the technology, and this could constitute an excellent essay. Or it may turn out that the technology lives up to its billing. In either case, your analysis should engage substantially with the way that the technology is represented in advertising, technical papers, popular stories, journalism, etc.
- **Features of successful essays** include
 - A clearly stated and provocative insight into your object of analysis, a thesis or problem that guides and motivates the entire essay,
 - Organized and flowing paragraphs that dig progressively deeper into the central insight and the rhetoric under analysis,
 - Appeals to sound logic, critical intuition, and defensible judgment,
 - Original, engaging commentary that defends your position while respecting its complexity,
 - Informative and fair summary or other means of presentation of the object of analysis, well integrated into the essay's flow,
 - Careful selection of specific moments or elements of your object of analysis, such that you make an effective case for your central insight without deliberately ignoring or eliding aspects of the text under study,
 - And clear, concise, accurate, correct prose with some memorable phrasings.
- **Features of unsuccessful essays** include
 - Unclear, inaccurate, wordy, and/or incorrect prose,
 - Dogmatic claims that are not critically examined,
 - A central insight that is not especially insightful,
 - Arguments that may be logical but that do not seem intuitively plausible or ethically conscionable,
 - Choppy, haphazard organization, no organization, or paragraphs that constitute a list

- of claims without a sense of progression,
- An essay that could be written for a high school class in terms of sophistication of thought or language.

This essay will be submitted twice, first as a draft then as a revision. The draft is due *in class Tuesday, March 1*. The revision is due *in class on Tuesday, March 15*. In both cases, please submit an additional copy as an attachment by e-mail to the instructor on the due date. While the revision will determine the bulk of the grade for this assignment, the draft should be no less a submissible document. Both draft and revision should be properly formatted, free from typos and from grammatical and spelling errors, thorough, and complete. In short, edit.

C3: Memorandum

Write a memo, *no more than one page long*, to the president of a major telecommunications company asking for an appointment. (It doesn't have to be a particular company, and you can make up the name of the president.) You must make it clear why you should have the appointment, but the memo is probably never going to make it to the president. Though your memo need not provide details, you should have in mind some good reason to meet with the president, an idea or comment you wish to present her. The challenge of this assignment is that you don't know who your audience is really going to be, so you must choose your words carefully.

Bring a copy of this page to class on Tuesday, March 8, and email a copy to me by then as well. For the email version, pretend that the email itself *is* the memo.

FDW: Full Draft Workshop

Before next Monday, March 7, I will send you two drafts, A1D, written by two of your peers in this class. Please read these carefully and come to class prepared to discuss and critique them. As part of your preparations, do the following three things for *each of the two drafts*.

- 1 Find the *thesis* of the essay, and think about whether this seems like a good thesis.
- 2 Find two things that the essay does well. At least one of these two should be specific to a particular spot in the essay, a place you could point to.
- 3 Find two things that the essay should do better. At least one of these two should be specific to a particular spot in the essay.

These three items of commentary will form the basis for our class discussion of these two drafts. As such, try to focus your thoughts on aspects of the essays that are generalizable, so that your comments could be of service not to just to the author of this particular essay but to any essay writer. For instance, instead of critiquing grammar or spelling, think about the use of evidence or the organization of ideas.

W1: Web Design Project

Design a website to spread information about an idea of yours. Assume that people have heard of you or your idea, and want to know more about it.

Your idea should be related to technology, but there are no other restrictions. It could be an idea for changing some aspect of MIT (registration, parking, classrooms, social life), an idea for facilitating progress in the war in Iraq, an idea for growing or distributing food around the world, an idea for dealing with music piracy, etc.

Your website can promote your idea to some extent, but the principle aim is not to compel your audience to adopt your idea but to inform your audience of its details. You should include consideration of its advantages and goals, but you should also consider its hurdles and costs. Your website will therefore present your idea while also critiquing it, looking at it from every angle.

We will evaluate these websites together in class and develop schemas for judging web design. Most generally, your website will be evaluated based on

- how well it delivers information,
- how thoroughly and thoughtfully it examines this information,
- how original and interesting is its central idea,
- and how robust, beautiful, and efficient is its design.

This web design project will be conducted in groups, and each group will choose their idea together. The group can divide the labor however they choose. Each member will report briefly and privately to me about her contribution to the group project.

The website is due in class on April 5.

C4: Blogging Presentation

Look over the materials available on the class website regarding blogs. Feel free to find other materials as well. Come to class on March 29 prepared to give a three- to five-minute presentation on some aspect of blogging. Three to five minutes is probably not long enough to develop a fully-fledged argument, but you should offer an original insight, a claim that a reasonable, thoughtful, educated person might take issue with or find surprising.

Some questions you might consider in your presentation include the following:

- 1 Why do people blog? What's the appeal of blogging?
- 2 Who reads blogs and why?
- 3 What sorts of communities form around blogging?
- 4 Do blogs encourage a diversity of opinion or a homogeneity of opinion?
- 5 How do blogs reflect the more general framework of "online culture," and how do they diverge from this framework?
- 6 Should bloggers be entitled to the legal protections that journalists are given?
- 7 Is blogging a valuable new medium? Is it valuable but not really innovative? Is it novel but not especially valuable?

Answering one or more of these questions does not guarantee that you will offer a genuine insight in your presentation, but I imagine that these sorts of questions should point you in the right direction.

In addition to the sources in the Materials section of the front page of this website, you might want to check out some actual blogs, too!

Each presentation will be followed by a short question-and-answer period.

Presentations will be judged on clarity, critical intensity, persuasiveness, originality, and overall form.

C5: Computer Game Review

Write a review of a computer or video game. The game can be recent or old. It can be for adults or kids. It can be for Windows or GameCube, etc. Pretty much any computer or video game is appropriate material.

Length: While there is no length requirement, I imagine that a thorough and appropriate response to this assignment will be about three (double-spaced) pages.

Content: Your chief aim is to say whether or not this is a good game. But you should recognize that this evaluation is not a simple one, as “good” can mean many different things. Include consideration of who is the intended audience for the game. Who would likely enjoy playing it? How does it compare to other games in the same genre? In what ways does it break new ground and in what ways is it just a repetition of familiar tropes? What are its chief pleasures? Does it involve lots of thinking or is it a “twitch” game, all about hitting the right keys? Does it make good use of the controls, or is it clumsy or limited? A good review goes beyond this evaluation, offering a lively and engaging description of the game, as well as a context or history. And the best reviews penetrate to the essence of the games they analyze, not just offering a thumbs-up or -down but providing an insight into what makes this game what it is.

You are encouraged to include in your review a consideration of your game, and gaming generally, from a broader perspective, along the lines of the readings by Douglas and Friedman. What does your game tell its players? What sorts of attitudes or beliefs does it instill? What buried politics or presuppositions does it make? What kinds of freedoms does it offer the player and what sorts of constraints does it impose?

Research: To prepare your review, check out some other reviews of computer and video games on the Internet and in print. *The New York Times* publishes game reviews and commentary, as do many other non-specialist publications. There are hundreds of websites devoted to reviewing games. If you have trouble locating examples, please let me know and I’ll steer you in the right direction.

Audience: Your audience for this assignment consists of MIT students and faculty. Do not assume that your reader is an avid gamer, but you may assume that she is at least familiar with the usual gaming platforms and has played a few games herself, at least casually.

Due date: Please email me a copy of your review—as an attachment—on Sunday, April 10, by 3pm. We will look at some of these together in class on Tuesday, so it is important that I have a chance to look them over first. Also, bring a paper copy to class on Tuesday for peer review.

A2: Proposal to Heads of Industry

Because of your outstanding work in this class so far, you are invited to a meeting of the heads of the technology industry, including Bill Gates, Larry Ellison, Steve Jobs, Michael Dell, etc. In addition to these industry leaders, poet Maya Angelou and other artists and creative people will attend the meeting. Your job is two-fold: you must write a proposal in which you urge those assembled at the meeting to heed your recommendations about the technology industry, and you must give a ten-minute presentation in which you summarize and reinforce your ideas.

Subject Matter: These high-tech leaders are interested in your vision regarding the direction of high-technology in the next five to ten years. Where do you think computers or other technologies are heading, and what should we do to promote the best possible future? While you should offer your analysis and recommendations against a broad background of cultural and international trends, considering the whole technology industry and its relationships to society, you should also focus your predictions and recommendations more narrowly, choosing a particular technology or group of them that you can provide particular insight into. For instance, you might choose to focus on servers, arguing that the Western world continues to shift toward a client-server model of computing. Or you might focus on wireless technologies, or PDAs, or quantum computers, or routing technologies, or food processing, or virus detection, or insulating materials. This list only suggests the sorts of things you can choose to focus on, and also indicates that your choice might be very narrow or relatively inclusive. Hardware or software, business or consumer, backbone or front-end, utility or vertical market, cutting edge or already ubiquitous, the choice of focus is in your hands. But choose wisely, for with such an esteemed and powerful audience, this is your chance to move the world.

Writing: The written proposal should be in two parts. First, offer an original theory about your technology, showing what role, what problems, dangers, tendencies, relationships to culture (economics, ethics, aesthetics, politics, media, etc.) this technology poses. Then propose some specific ideas about where your technology could or should go. Is there a particular piece of hardware that we should develop? Is there research that needs to be done? Should resources be diverted from one area and funneled into another? The bottom line here is not how to make money but how to make the world a better place. What should all of these industry leaders be working towards?

The first part of the proposal will therefore be more of an expository essay, offering an analysis and probably centered around a claim that puts forth your urgent vision of the role of your chosen technology. For example, you might argue that video games are unnecessarily violent. Or that the growth of eBay has not served high-end boutique business very well. Or that computing growth will soon cease when physical constraints eventually limit further increases in circuit density on chips. The second part of the proposal will then offer concrete recommendations about how to address this issue. Maybe you will suggest a greater emphasis on research in a particular area to resolve nascent problems. Maybe you will suggest a bi-annual meeting of certain key players in your chosen industry, to keep the lines of communication open. Maybe you will recommend the distribution of broadband hardware throughout Africa. You don't need to claim to be able to solve the problem you have identified in the first half of your proposal. Rather, you need to show your audience that you have already thought a lot about this problem and have generated some policy recommendations aimed at resolving it eventually.

Speech: The oral presentation should offer some version of the same ideas as the written proposal, specifically adapted for a speech. It would be unwise just to summarize your proposal, and you certainly will not have time to read the whole thing. Rather, you should recognize that a speech must be substantive but must also leverage a rhetorical appeal. Speeches can use visual aids or other demonstrating materials. Assume that the audience for your speech was too busy to read your proposal carefully, so you can count on only the most cursory recollection of its details.

Audience: As stated above, your audience is a group of powerful leaders in the high-tech industry. These people have the power to shape the future of the industry, and their wealth and connectedness means that they wield considerable political influence as well. Since Maya Angelou and other creative people are among the committee members, you must pitch your discussion toward a highly intelligent but not necessarily technically savvy audience. Explain the details of any technical concepts you employ in language that educated but non-technical adults can understand. Note that your (imaginary) audience is also intended to guide your choice of topic; topics specific to your town or even to MIT will not take full advantage of the grand opportunity available to you.

Research: This assignment will require some research to obtain a fairly precise view of the segment of industry on which you choose to focus and to gauge its current direction. It is strongly recommended that you not confine your research exclusively to Internet sources, but avail yourself of the wealth of information available in the MIT and other Cambridge libraries. However, this is not primarily a research assignment. Your research will provide the raw materials but you will be evaluated mostly on your original contribution: the strength and urgency of your analysis and the wisdom and thoughtfulness of your response.

Length: There is as always no length requirement for this proposal, but I imagine that it will take a total of seven to ten pages to offer an original, analytic argument and a critically considered recommendation. For rules of formatting, please refer to the class

website.

Due Dates: Written proposals are due at the start of class on Tuesday, May 3. This deadline is firm; late proposals will be penalized according to the policy stated on the syllabus. Please do not ask for additional time to complete the assignment; instead, plan ahead to get it done on time.

Oral presentations will be given on Tuesday, May 3, and Tuesday, May 10. Volunteers will be solicited. Should no one willingly volunteer, the order of speeches will be determined by a suitably random process.

Last Word: Typos, misspellings, and other errors will count against you. Please proofread and edit carefully. It is also recommended that you have at least one other person carefully examine your proposal before submission. Feel free to take advantage of the Writing Center.