

Memo

Date: August 27, 2014

To: Dr. Kent Walker, Instructor
Department of English
Brock University

From: Daniela Slater, E-Learning Instructor
Faculty of Adult Education
Brock University

Subject: Capstone Project (DRAFT)

The original focus of this project was too broad, therefore, I have narrowed it down to the proposal of using technical writers for online courses. Attached is the report for my study on "Using Technical Writers for Online Courses: A Recommendation Report". The tasks described in the proposal of August 8, 2014 and progress report of August 20, 2014, have been slightly modified to accommodate the change: acquiring basic understanding of written content in online courses, defining qualities of good writing, identifying benefits provided by technical writers to improve written content, and finally, compiling and analyzing data from the research.

To perform these tasks, outlined in "Research Methods", I examined a series of articles and websites on: technical writers, content writing, and qualities of good writing. Then, I analyzed the findings and made my recommendations.

The findings suggest that technical writers can reduce wordy content and simplify instructions making it easier for students to complete their courses. I found that this, in turn, will make the faculty's job more effective spending less time clarifying instructions to students. Students were approached and have been very receptive to the idea of streamlined content and simplified instructions.

I would like to recommend that Brock proceed further in discussions relating to this study to enhance students' success. I would appreciate your approval to continue work on this project, and discuss how to proceed. If you have any questions, please contact me at ds08sw@brocku.ca or (416) 327-9873.

Using Technical Writers for Online Courses: A Recommendation Report

Prepared for: Dr. Kent Walker, Instructor
Department of English
Brock University

Prepared by: Daniela Slater, E-Learning Instructor
Faculty of Adult Education
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Introduction

On August 8, 2014, Dr. Walker authorized the study on using technical writers for online courses to improve the clarity of online content.

As it stands now, the content is written by faculty and subject matter experts who form as our instructional designers. Their main focus is to provide course content and instructions and may not be as skilled in writing which can impact the student's comprehension of the course requirements. With the increase in implementation of online courses and intake of International students, it is imperative that the content is well written.

Students often struggle in online courses with the volume of reading, deciphering instructions and comprehension of concepts. A review of this information was vital as our students are important to us.

Mr. Walker had asked me to perform research that would answer the following questions:

1. Are we satisfied with the writing of the content in our online courses?
2. Are students finding the material easy or difficult to follow?
3. Would the use of technical writers be of benefit to our students?

The following sections will outline the research methods used, results to include the findings of the research, conclusions and recommendations that correspond with the results and references used.

Research Methods

In order to obtain the information required by Dr. Walker, I divided the project into the following tasks which identifies how I administered them.

Task 1. Acquire basic understanding of content writing in online courses

Dr. Walker provided some resources for me to review regarding the efficiency in clarity and comprehension of written content for online courses. Various scholarly articles and websites were reviewed to obtain a basic understanding of the efficacy of content writing.

Task 2. Define qualities of good writing and the effects on online course content

What was available to define qualities of good writing was found in journal articles and websites. The actual effects of written course content would not be known until students provide feedback or are evaluated and can only be anticipated at this time. Faculty and student interviews were briefly conducted but was not enough information to draw any conclusions and will bring this forward for future work.

Task 3. Research benefits of using technical writers for online courses

In order to determine what technical writers are capable of and what benefits they can contribute to the cause, the research was centered on websites that describe technical writers. This provided a form of job description and would help us decide the need to use them. I was also able to find articles that described the benefits of well written content that could be derived from technical writers.

Task 5. Analyze the data and prepare a recommendation report

This draft was prepared to provide an introductory view of findings prior to presenting the final report on August 28, 2014.

Results

This section presents results of my research and the most significant data acquired for each task.

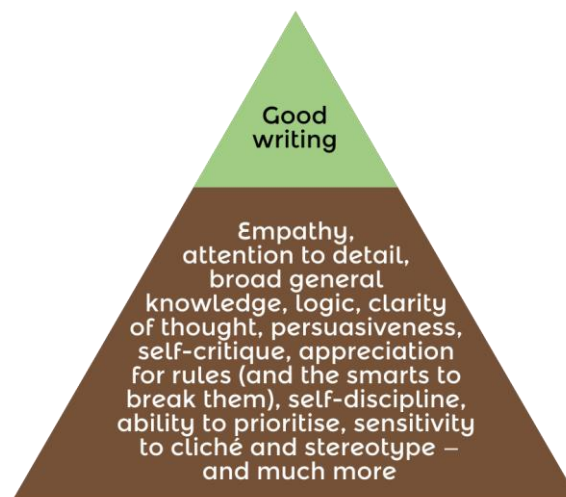
Task 1. Acquire basic understanding of content writing in online courses

Writing can be complicated and provides in-depth learning in many disciplines (Johnson, 2006). Writing has been viewed as an activity that is diversified to accommodate the “purpose, situation, and audience” and requires meaning “that occurs over time and in a social context” as observed by Roberta Camp (as cited in Johnson, 2006). Marilyn S. Sternglass (as cited in Johnson, 2006) notes that critical writing “allows students to ‘understand the significance of ideas in their particular field to the level where they become able to question some of the assumptions of that field’”. With this in mind, the information acquired will enable further reasoning to pursue this study.

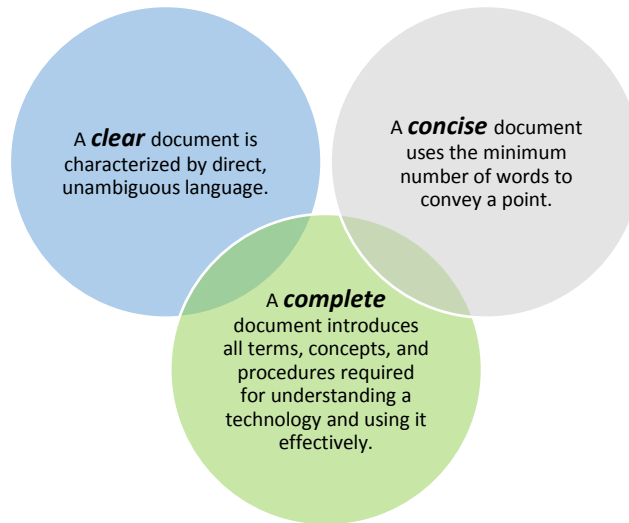
Task 2. Define qualities of good writing and the effects on online course content

Palmer (2002) as cited in Wang et al (2013) writes that when there is a higher level of quality in content, there will be higher level of success by its users. The success rate for students taking online courses depends on the management of the course structure, according to Morris & Finn (2008), as cited in Hachey et al (2012). Statistics were not available at this time and will be brought forward for future work.

Students’ confidence can increase if simple instructions are provided in aesthetically consistent language (Hachey, 2005; Morris & Finn, 2008). The difference between poor and good writing is depicted in Attwell’s (2013) triangle:



Qualities in good writing play an instrumental role in the effectiveness of the content if properly applied as outlined below in Gordon’s (n.d.) “Three C’s”:



Task 3. Research benefits of using technical writers for online courses

Many educational institutions are now implementing, or increasing the number of, online courses and are often created too quickly and carelessly (Jaggars, 2013). They find it difficult to monitor and ensure the courses are implemented with high quality, as they are, “driven by instructor interest rather than a department- or college-based decision-making process” (Jaggars, 2013).

Technical writers can streamline courses and provide high quality writing that will condense information without losing meaning and required detail. They reduce redundancy and unnecessary phrases to simplify information and provide a better learning experience as students gain confidence when they are able to interpret and follow what they are reading. Technical writers are not subject matter experts in this case and should be primarily identified as editors.

Joan Van Duzer, Educational Technologist at Humboldt State University (2002), prepared a document on “Instruction Design Tips for Online Learning”. Here are sample items of the checklist she provides to assist in writing of online course content:

✓	Spelling and grammar are consistent and accurate
✓	Written material is concise
✓	Language of written material is friendly and supportive
✓	Clear directions are given for each task or assignment

Conclusions

This section provides conclusions based on the research conducted related to the tasks.

Written content in online courses

The information required for online courses can be extensive and should be reviewed and modified where needed. The writer of content must be qualified to write or edit, and incorporate the information, effectively so it will be easily interpreted.

Qualities of good writing and the effects

Students need to be able to comprehend the content, follow instructions and understand concepts. Wording should be simple and streamlined to avoid redundancy. Gordon (n.d.) writes that courses should consider how the user thinks and should be carefully planned.

Technical writers

Specialists with good writing and editing skills are needed to condense and edit information to simplify content. Athabasca University writes that, “the editor adds value to the course development value chain by improving course material quality, enhancing students' learning experiences, and ensuring that course quality standards are set and maintained for the delivering institution” (Thiessen, n.d.).

According to Johnson (n.d.), technical writers are not the subject matter experts so they need to position themselves as students to view the information is written in comprehensible standards.

Recommendations

My recommendations based on findings are as follows:

1. Online courses should be reviewed for writing deficiencies.
2. A technical writer would work with instructional designers and faculty (subject matter experts) to review content.
3. Content should be written with students in mind.
4. Train instructional designers and faculty on technical writing for post-maintenance.

Further studies are needed to track feedback and evaluation for a specified period of time from a number of students in a controlled environment to answer the following questions for specific courses and programs:

- Is there is enough or too much content?
- Are the instructions easy to follow?
- Is the vocabulary language easy to understand?
- Is poorly written content one of the causes of poor grades?

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