INF385T Presenting Information

Spring 2014
Tuesdays 9-12
UTA 1.210A (Computer Lab Teaching Room)

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Who Should Take This Course

I designed this course for students who wish to hone their skills in the presentation of information in its many forms. Without getting too caught up in semantics, I think it is fair to say that data become information when their presentation elicits understanding. Being able to present information well is, therefore, important if one is to help others understand and use information. Although presenting information effectively is a boon to any working professional, this talent is a particularly critical asset for information professionals. My goal in offering this course is to prepare you for your professional career by helping you acquire the skills needed to present information in numerical, visual, textual, and verbal form. I welcome students who are curious about the theory behind and the techniques of presentation, who are keen to add to their professional toolkit, who are able to work independently (no group projects), and who, in class, are willing to contribute in a friendly, non-competitive manner to facilitate learning in an active and open class environment.

Learning Outcomes

When I say that you will learn the skills of presenting information, I mean in particular that you will learn how to:

- Design tables and graphs that fit the data
- Design an information dashboard
- Give talks that allow people to hear and see your message
- Create effective visualizations
- Master the basics of clean layout and design
- Apply your new skills to posters, handouts, infographics, and other materials
- Write tight memos and emails that elicit action and understanding
- Prepare succinct reports that get read
- Assemble slide decks that illustrate your words, support your points, and transform your talk
- Be a confident, engaging, and thoughtful presenter
- Grasp theoretical underpinnings from fields like cognitive psychology and communication so that you understand how the senses and brain work together to permit perception, and then design with those underpinnings in mind
Overview

Bad information design choices confront us every day. Posters and flyers force us to hunt for basic information of where, when, who, what, and why. Emails ramble, address too many topics, and bury requests at the bottom. Reports lack clear formatting that would help us find information quickly; graphics appear in reports with no explanatory text or titles. We see newsletters with vague content and hear talks that meander with no clear point. Slide decks inundate us with bulleted lists and animation. Whether the presentation is numerical, visual, textual, or verbal, bad design choices hinder our ability to comprehend and use information.

As information professionals, we, of all people, ought to know better. This course is one attempt to make sure we do. But mostly, it is an opportunity for us to have fun exploring new areas while learning how to be good presenters of information. That is to say, if you think you’ll like learning why white space is our friend, why tables look better with shading than with grid lines, why a three-panel layout is a winner every time, and why “tell them where you’re going, tell them where you are, tell them where you’ve been” is a bit tired as a plan for talk outlines, this course is for you. Although our time together will be slanted towards gaining practical skills, we will build up these skills on the basis of our understanding of fundamental theories in areas such as cognitive psychology and communication that explain how people perceive and construe sensory input.

Course Policies

Attendance and Participation

You are expected to attend every class and to have completed the reading and any assignments so that you can actively engage in discussions. Your attendance and participation in class, including your willingness to discuss topics and your helpful, genuine behavior towards your classmates, may affect your grade at my discretion.

Grading

Let’s begin with the understanding that I expect you to give each assignment your best effort; you simply cannot gain these skills if you don’t put in the time. To help you focus on gaining skills, not grades, three of your assignments are pass/fail (P/F), meaning that if you do the minimum that I ask, you will get full credit. P/F assignments are particularly helpful in cases where you will be gaining a skill step by step. Thus, for example, you will give three talks, but the first one is pass/fail because talks are stressful; I want you to begin your learning without the added worry of a grade. Similarly, the tables and graphs assignment is a prelude to your dashboard, and your two pages of text will help you develop skills as you build towards your report. See the next section for descriptions of assignments in this list.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tables and Graphs</td>
<td>5% (P/F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dashboard and Description</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Talk I</td>
<td>5% (P/F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poster, Newsletter, or Brochure</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Two Pages of Text</td>
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<td>Slide Deck</td>
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<td>Talk II</td>
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<td>Written Report</td>
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<td>Talk III</td>
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**Late Work Policy**
I think that meeting deadlines is good preparation for a professional career. Thus, you will lose a letter grade if your materials are not ready by the beginning of class on their due date. You will lose another half a grade per additional weekday late. When handing in your work, please do not tell me that your work is late or inappropriately constructed because a printer was not working, that the software failed that morning, or that you could not find a stapler. After all, the entire point of this course is the professional presentation of information, so be professional.

**University of Texas Honor Code**
The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community. Source: [http://www.utexas.edu/welcome/mission.html](http://www.utexas.edu/welcome/mission.html)

**Documented Disability Statement**
Any student with a documented disability who requires academic accommodations should contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) at (512) 471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone). Faculty are not required to provide accommodations without an official accommodation letter from SSD.

- Please notify me as quickly as possible if the material being presented in class is not accessible (e.g., instructional videos need captioning, course packets are not readable for proper alternative text conversion, etc.).
- Please notify me as early in the semester as possible if disability-related accommodations for field trips are required. Advanced notice will permit the arrangement of accommodations on the given day (e.g., transportation, site accessibility, etc.).
- Contact Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 1-866-329-3986 (video phone) or reference SSD’s website for more disability-related information: [http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/for_cstudents.php](http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/for_cstudents.php)

**Assignments**
There are no group assignments in this class. My sense is that you do plenty of group projects in our program, and I want each of you to gain all the skills in this class, not rely on someone else for them. Therefore, I expect you to hand in assignments that reflect your individual effort and what you have learned. I encourage you, however, to seek your peers’ help, advice, and feedback. In short, I want to free you from the binds of collaboration and coordination that group assignments typically entail while allowing you to learn from each other.

**Tables and Graphs.**
Due Week 5 – Feb 11
You will be given a handout in class week 3 with instructions for designing a set of tables and graphs. This assignment is pass/fail: If I determine that you have exerted effort in good faith (e.g., you did what was asked, your design was thoughtful), you will get full points; else you will receive no points.
Dashboard and Dashboard Written Description.  

Due Week 7 – Feb 25

You will design an information dashboard for an organization of your choice. The organization must be real and cannot be a company that you are thinking of starting. The organization must agree to your plan to build a dashboard for them and should be willing to provide you with the necessary information to do so. To convince an organization that they could use a dashboard for internal or external use, you might show them some examples; just type “information dashboard” into Google images, or direct them to this one at a museum: http://dashboard.imamuseum.org/. You are responsible only for the front end design of the dashboard, not the back end programming that would fetch and deposit information. You will hand in the dashboard design with a written description of it: what information it displays, why the dashboard displays information the way it does, and why the dashboard includes the information that it does (for example, what the information’s relevance to the organization is). Your description will begin with a one-paragraph description of the organization. You should include in your description a brief discussion of information that you considered for, but chose not to include on, the dashboard. I will grade your work based on how well you address each of these items in your written description in addition to the quality of the dashboard itself. I will judge dashboard quality according to the readability of its components, the sense that a viewer can readily make of it, the perceived value that the organization would gain from it, the perceived appropriateness of the quantity and type of information that you display, and your attention to detail. I will not grade the description as a report in its own right (as a written presentation of information) because at this stage we will not yet have covered those skills. Nonetheless, a clear, logical description free of grammatical and typographical errors will aid your cause. I expect the written description to be at least three pages long and typically not more than five.

Talk I.  

Due Week 7 – Feb 25

You will give a talk in which you treat the class as an audience from the organization for which you designed the dashboard. Your talk will be the “reveal” of the dashboard, in which you will lay out for the organization many of the same points you included in your dashboard written description. In addition, you will want to convey to your audience how they should use the dashboard. You will not use slides or a projector for this talk. Instead, you should print your dashboard on posterboard (20x30 preferred), which we will display on a stand during your talk. I will provide the stand; you will provide the posterboard. For tips on printing your posterboard, see https://tutorials.ischool.utexas.edu/index.php/Poster_Design_%26_Printing_Resources. This talk is pass/fail, which means if you make an attempt that I deem conscientious (e.g., you are prepared and have clearly practiced), you will get full points, else you will get zero points. In other words, this talk is your chance to get down basic skills without the added anxiety of graded assessment. You will receive feedback from the class and me that will highlight what you did well and where you can improve. See the form at the end of this syllabus for the performance areas on which we will comment. Class size will determine talk length, but a reasonable ballpark figure for now is 4 minutes.

Poster, Brochure, or Newsletter.  

Due Week 9 – Mar 18

We will have an in-class design workshop week 8. At the beginning of the workshop, I will present you with a choice: You will create a poster, a newsletter, or a brochure per my in-class specifications. (I have a set of organizations who have submitted design problems of these types.) You will submit your final creation as a digital file (that I can read without special
software) by 9 a.m. Tuesday morning (March 18th). I will grade the designs according to the quality of your application of layout and design principles that we will have discussed in class, such as your use of white space, font type, placement, and so on.

**Slide Deck.**
Due Week 11 – Apr 1
You will create a slide deck for an organization of your choice. The organization must be real and cannot be a company that you are thinking of starting, but in this case they need not know about or approve your intentions. In other words, you may fabricate the data in your slides if you like, although real data is always more interesting and meaningful. You must have at least five slides in the deck, with no two slides exactly alike. I want to see you display a range of information that demands a range of presentation formats (e.g., text, charts, graphics, and photos), yet forms a coherent set. The deck can be a deck that an organization gave to you and asked you to fix up or it can be a deck that you create from scratch. I will grade the designs according to the quality of your application of layout and design principles that we will have discussed in class, such as your use of white space, font type, placement, and so on, in addition to principles tailored to slide decks, such as font size, use of bullets, and color combinations.

**Talk II.**
Due Week 11 – Apr 1
You will give a talk using your slide deck. You will not give a talk that explains your design choices in relation to the slide deck (as you did for the dashboard); rather, you will give the talk that a person from the organization might give with the slide deck. You will construe the class as the audience appropriate for that talk. Class size will determine talk length, but a reasonable ballpark figure for now is 4 minutes. I will grade the talk against criteria that we will discuss in class. You will receive feedback from the class and me that will highlight what you did well and where you can improve according to the performance aspects outlined in the evaluation form at the end of this syllabus. I will grade this talk.

**Two Pages of Text.**
Due Week 12 – Apr 8
For a class writing exercise, you must bring to class in hard copy form the first two pages, and two pages only, of a paper that you wrote for some other class, either here in the iSchool or elsewhere. Do not alter the text in any way from its original submission other than to ensure that it is double-spaced and 12 point font. You gain full points simply for timely submission of two full pages; failure to submit earns zero points.

**Infographic.**
Due Week 15 – Apr 29
You will create an infographic for an organization of your choice. The organization must be real and cannot be a company that you are thinking of starting, but in this case they need not know about or approve your intentions. In other words, you may fabricate the data behind your infographic if you like, although real data is always more interesting and meaningful. You will hand in the infographic in the form of a digital file that I can read without special software. I will grade your infographic according to the readability of its components, the sense that a viewer can readily make of it, the perceived value that the organization would gain from it, the perceived appropriateness of the quantity and type of information that you display, your attention to detail, and your application of layout and design principles as we will have discussed in this class.
**Written Report.**

You will write a short report detailing for your organization the features of their new infographic. As part of your report, you will spell out the research that you did about the organization, its mission, and its needs that shaped your design. You will explain why you included the content that you did, and why you rejected some other possibilities. You will note what your objective was in this design. There is no page limit for this report; you should balance brevity with necessary detail. The report should begin with an executive summary labeled as such and no longer than one page, followed by a table of contents. The balance of the report should feature orderly sections with subtitles. Use graphics such as tables and figures, all neatly titled and labeled, to help convey data-rich information. This information may have informed your design, may be part of it, or may be information that you considered for inclusion but ultimately rejected. Text must be double-spaced, in 12-point font, with minimum one-inch margins. Staple your reports, and, if possible, print them double-sided. A cover sheet with the report title, your name, the organization name, and date is acceptable; a plastic cover or any binding other than a staple is not. I will evaluate your report based on solid writing, logical organization, coherent presentation, quality of content, and conformity to all specifications.

**Talk III.**

In this talk, you will address, as the designer, the organization for which you have redesigned an infographic. You will explain to them your design and your rationale for it, raising points similar to those that you included in your written report. Class size will determine talk length, but a reasonable ballpark figure at this time is 4 minutes. You may use any display technology you like, including, and most seemingly, simply a posterboard of your infographic. You will receive feedback from the class and me that will highlight what you did well and where you can improve according to the performance aspects outlined in the evaluation form at the end of this syllabus. I will grade this talk.

**Materials**

**Required Physical Implements** (bring the first four to class every day)

1. Calculator.
2. Wooden (preferred) or rigid plastic ruler.
3. Sharpened pencils: black lead and colored.
4. Blank unlined paper or a sketch pad of full page size.
5. Posterboard for dashboard assignment, 20”x30”.
6. Spraymount (buddy up with 2-3 friends to split a bottle, good for ~4 posterboards).

**Required Books** (bring to class on appropriate day)


**Required Articles and Book Chapters** (on Canvas)


**Handy Books** (not required, but useful in everyday work)


**Informative Books** (not required, but useful in gaining scientific knowledge)


**Fascinating Books** (not required, but intriguing and helpful in developing understanding)