

Revised Courses

I teach English 391, the Junior English course designed for Arts and Humanities majors who have not signed up for one of the more narrowly directed courses like Engl 394, Business Writing, or Engl 390, Science Writing. They are a diverse bunch, who, in years past, have shown interest in a variety of topics including sustainability, philanthropy, historical preservation, transportation, local food, education, and social justice. Because English 391 is not specifically an environmental writing course and one already exists (Engl398V), I am reluctant to limit my students' major project selection to "environmental" issues. I am very comfortable, however, with adding a mandatory sustainability requirement.

I hope in this way to encourage my students to keep sustainability concepts in the back of their minds in all of their endeavors, hoping that what they learn about sustainable practices while researching their projects will stay with them, a seed that will grow their entire lives.

I have revised one assignment, the Proposal, and added a new one, a Topic Selection Website, which I am trying out this Summer II session (2011). So far, the course has met once for three hours, during which the students explored the Sustainability web site and brainstormed topic ideas, each student submitting a memo briefly describing five possible topics. I am delighted with the results. It could be the luck of the draw, but this semester's topic considerations are probably the best ever generated in my class, creative and original beyond expectations.

Each of the two assignments is associated with numerous supplementary handouts.

Proposal Overview

This semester, your major project is a ten-page "Quality of Life" proposal intended to increase the enjoyment of life for a local population such as the campus community; the surrounding cities and towns; particular life style groups, such a hikers or musicians; or organizations needing funding, volunteers, and/or donated goods. Broadly, proposals might address issues of education, economics, transportation, social equity, cost efficiency, public aesthetics, or consumerism. You must choose topics that interest you because you will be thinking about them for most of the semester.

While considering any topic, please be aware of the following assignment parameters:

1. All proposals shall adhere to current best practices in sustainability, meaning that whatever topic you choose to research and write about must take into account both short- and long-term effects on the environment. For example, if you chose to initiate a remedial reading program for under privileged children in one of the less affluent surrounding cities or towns, consider the environmental costs of purchasing new texts rather than organizing a clean-used book drive and adding a lesson in recycling to your curriculum. Look for some ideas in the Web Page Folder. (See also "Sustanibility Big Ideas" at http://www.sustainability.umd.edu/content/curriculum/chesapeake_project_resources.php).

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2. All proposals shall address issues or problems that can be organized locally. Proposing an environmental study abroad program to a faculty member for sponsorship is something that you can do from campus. However, organizing on-site relief efforts for foreign disaster areas is probably not something you can do without established government contacts both here and abroad; specific knowledge of the affected area; and access to transportation, equipment, money, and supplies in the affected area.
3. All topics must be feasible. This means that each idea must be do-able. A team from semesters past once proposed a fund raising turtle race on Maryland Day. It sounded like a fun idea; however, when they tried to track down racers, they found that animal rights activists frown on turtle sports, that pet stores and zoos had no interest in participating, and that purchasing large enough turtles themselves was prohibitive. A fraternity sponsored volleyball tournament, however, was feasible.
4. You must be qualified to write about the topic you choose. If you do not have an advanced degree in engineering and many years of experience, you are probably not qualified to propose catwalks above campus. This does not mean you cannot work on something you do not yet know much about. Phase One of this project requires extensive research, so by the time you write the proposal, you may be an expert of sorts. However, do not pick a topic that requires years of research and study. Learning the ins and outs of getting off the electrical grid will take more time than we have. Learning about small-scale rainwater collection systems, however, can be an interesting short-term endeavor.

Phase One is an Individual Assignment, a website that will introduce your three most viable topics to your classmates and serve as an advertisement of your suitability as a team member. It will display your preliminary research engagement, analytical abilities, attention to detail, and writing skills. Even if no one wants to work on your topic ideas, style can make you a sought after partner.

Phase Two, the Proposal itself, is a Team Assignment, written in planned stages, broken down into a six step process: 1) Introduction, 2) Detailed Plan, 3) Conclusion, 4) Caveats/Qualifications, 5) Executive Summary, 6) Front and Back Matter. Instructions for each step are in the Assignments folder on Elms.

Keeping abreast of assignments assures a stress-free completion of the Proposal Assignment; letting things slide and pile up will result in undue anxiety and a poorly written document, neither of which elicits sympathy in this class or in the professional world, where submitted documents are judged on merits alone.

Web Page Overview

Phase 1

Step One

This pre-proposal assignment is designed to help you and your classmates explore your three most promising Proposal topics, so it starts with research. Beginning with an Internet search engine such as Google, find as much relevant information as you can in twenty minutes. You will be looking for

1. ways to define the problem/issue addressed,
2. its causes and effects,
3. successful remedies for similar situations,
4. administrative trails, statistics and/or studies that support any part of your concept,
5. who will be interested in seeing your vision implemented.

As you quickly skim through material, keep a running record of site names, keywords, and URLs in a separate Word document. This step is vital as you will be using this material in citations and in another assignment. Make sure that you save this document and all others with an appropriate file name such as "LastnamePreliminaryresearch.doc" and upload it and all others to your TerpConnect account so that you always have a copy to work with in class or at home.

Step Two

After twenty minutes, take ten minutes to organize your material into these categories: Definition, Cause, Effect, Comparison, and Classification. When you have finished, open a new Word document and write these headings on separate lines:

Problem

Background

Remedy

Carefully look over your preliminary research and copy and paste the site names, keywords, and URLs into the proper categories. When you are finished, stand up and shout. Just kidding. Raise your hand, and I will come by and check your work so that you can move on to Phase 2, writing your web page material.

Phase 2

Step One

Open a Word Document. Go to "Word Options" and click on proofing, then "Grammar & Style," then click every box—yes, every box. As you write, pay attention to the hints that Word supplies. It is not always right, but Word will always warn you of the use of first person, for example, which, except for Personal Statements, Letters, and some Memos, is outlawed in this class.

Once you have set the "Grammar & Style" options, begin writing three paragraphs for each topic under each heading: Problem, Background, and Remedy, using the relevant information you found during the research phase. Define the Problem, organize the Background material, and rough out the Remedy. Take only an hour to write these nine paragraphs. These are drafts, and your material is organized already, so

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you should be able to get each one drafted in five minutes. Upload all of your drafts to Terpconnect. When you have finished, raise your hand.

Step Two

At home, conduct further research and refine your work. Ask yourself some questions prefaced by "If I were a classmate who had never thought about this topic, would I. . ."

- 1) consider this topic to actually be an issue/problem? be interested in working on this problem/issue? find its presentation compelling? find statistics or studies to support all assertions? find it relevant to my interests, studies, ethical values, or self-concept?
- 2) understand the issue from the information provided? Have enough information, but not too much, to make an informed decision about working on the project? Be convinced by a logical train of thought? find acronyms spelled out? find terms defined?
- 3)approve of the sentence structure, the use of punctuation, or the diction? think that I might get stuck doing all of the editing if I worked with you?

Step Three

If you have trouble revising by yourself, the Writing Center located on the first floor of Tawes can help you with all three areas.

Phase 3

Read the material in the Elms Assignments folder Web Page. Create your Web Page folder in your TerpConnect account. Read the Web Page Technical Requirements. We will be learning to make the Web Page itself in class, following these steps:

1. Making a practice page in Notepad
2. Learning to use HTMLeditor
3. Learning design techniques
4. Copying and Pasting material into the Web Page
5. Uploading and Downloading the Web Page
6. Working from home
7. Editing and submitting the Web Page