Assignment #4: Usability Memo

This fourth assignment in part tests how well you are learning the concepts in this course, especially the rhetorical concepts of audience, purpose, organization, style, and visual design. Moreover, this assignment will give you an opportunity to practice usability testing, an activity that many technical writers use to assess the effectiveness of their documentation.

As you have learned in this course, technical communication happens all around us; it is indeed a central part of our professional and personal lives. You read the user’s manual to learn how to set up the speed-dial function on your cell phone. You access the help menu to find out how to put footnotes into a Word document. You check the ITS FAQ to determine how to upload files to your Website. Yet, more often than not, these activities lead to feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Why does technical writing so often doesn’t work? Why doesn’t anyone know how to program a VCR? Why are 80 percent of child safety seats improperly installed? And why is filing taxes such a painful process?

In this assignment, you’ll write a usability memo that helps to answer this question. You will plan, set up, and conduct a usability test of your instruction set—working with real members of your intended audience—in order to assess its effectiveness and to deepen your understanding of how technical writers can make documents more usable.

For this assignment, then, you will evaluate the usability of your instruction set. You will (1) plan and conduct a usability test to analyze the document’s usability; and (2) write a usability report that organizes your analysis in both a logical and convincing way.

1) Plan and Conduct a Usability Test

For this assignment you will tailor your usability test in ways that enable you to gather the specific kinds of information you’re interested in learning about your document. Everyone will complete the Usability Test Planning Worksheet in order to identify the specific information you want to gain from your test, to select the most effective testing methods to gather this information, and to establish a means for recording data as you conduct the test. Once you have planned the usability test and your data-gathering methods, you will set up testing sites in the real-world spaces where you imagined readers would want or need to use your document, and then you will test your instruction set with two or more real-world members of the audience you envisioned for your instruction set.

2) Write the Usability Memo

Your report should take the form of a memo, and your memo should be addressed to me. The purpose of your document is present an evidence-based evaluation of your document’s usability as well as to outline revisions suggestions for improving the document’s usability. As you write, provide specific details and examples to support your usability claims. Although I’m certainly familiar with the usability principles we've discussed in class, you still need to explain why a certain feature makes the document ineffective and why a certain suggestion would improve the document.
Contents

♦ **Introduction.** Briefly describe the purpose of your memo and give an overview of what it will cover. You should explain the means by which you have arrived at your claims (that is, the methods you used for testing the document’s usability), and you should give me, your reader, a sense of why this memo will be important for you (i.e. how it will benefit your aims in producing the instruction set, how it will guide revision of your instruction set, why usable documents are important).

♦ **Rhetorical analysis.** Who is the audience for the instruction set you created? What was the purpose of your document? Why did you believe the audience would be using the document? What were the different needs or questions you anticipated the audience having? How and in what context did you imagine the audience would be using the document? And, most importantly, how did your answers to these questions guide the major decisions you made as you composed your instruction set?

♦ **Usability analysis.** You will want me to know how you went about analyzing the document’s usability, so begin this section by explaining your testing methods. Then provide your detailed analysis of the elements that effect the document’s usability in positive and negative ways:
  - Content,
  - Organization,
  - Style,
  - Design,
  - Ethical, legal, and cultural considerations.

For each paragraph within these sections, make the following three moves: (1) describe the major aspects of the document you identified as problems through usability testing; (2) present evidence from usability testing that led you to see this aspect as problematic; and (3) explain how specific revisions would begin to resolve this problem.

♦ **Conclusions.** Summarize your analysis.

♦ **Recommendations.** Make specific recommendations to improve the document.

Format

You can change certain design features for the memo (e.g., type face and size), but you should include the following:

♦ The word Memo or Memorandum at the top
♦ The Date, To, From, and Subject lines, including your initial news in the Subject line
♦ Topic headings (this memo won’t be short)
♦ Proper paragraph spacing (single-space within paragraphs, double-space between paragraphs)
♦ Headers on pages after page 1
♦ Copy, distribution, and enclosure notations if applicable

The length should be at least three single-spaced pages.
Grading & Evaluation

Research. The usability testing methods were logical ones to use. The usability test was well planned and conducted with professionalism and attention to detail. The results of the usability test were recorded thoroughly. The data was analyzed in a way that acknowledges the strengths and limitations of the particular testing method employed.

Content. The memo includes each of the sections listed above. Within each section, the usability claims are supported by concrete examples and evidence. The section goes beyond reporting answers to the usability questions—it explains why a given item is effective or ineffective. That is, the memo moves well beyond description and into analysis.

Organization. The memo is organized in a logical manner overall and within each section. Headers mark each section.

Format: The memo includes each of the format features listed above. The overall design is clear and consistent. The memo uses fonts, white space, headings and sub-headings appropriately and effectively.

Style: The memo creates a professional ethos, one that demonstrates a solid understanding of the basic principles of technical communication. The tone is effective for the audience. The document is free from typographical and grammatical errors.

What to hand in:

- Your Usability Testing Planning worksheet
- The data you collected during your usability test
- Your Usability Memo
- Your pre-draft workshop, post-draft workshop, and final postwrites