

Writing Spaces

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Who Is This Space Designed to Exclude? Instructions and Usability/Accessibility Analysis (IAUA)

Megan Von Bergen

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Overview

Designed as a major assignment in a general education professional writing course, the Instructions & Accessibility/User Analysis (IAUA) assignment asks students to create a multimodal set of instructions for a simple task, while making design choices that improve accessibility. Students also conduct a user analysis of a classmate's instructions. The assignment hones students' experience 1) with a common technical communication genre, writing instructions; 2) with making ethical rhetorical choices, and 3) with accommodating audience(s) with diverse access needs.

As postsecondary students identify as neurodivergent (ND) and/or disabled in increasingly large numbers ([GAO](#)), writing educators face a corresponding obligation to center the needs of these students in course policies and assignments (Birdwell & Bayley, 2022). The IAUA, drawing on technical communication's commitment to social justice (Hull et al, 2019; Walton et al, 2019), invites students into ongoing conversations about who is invited into -- or excluded from -- the professional spaces they themselves inhabit, including both campus and future professional spaces. The project also introduces students to concepts of universal design, asking them to acknowledge that audiences' access needs are diverse and often undisclosed to the writer and to make proactive design choices that accommodate a wide range of readers.

Key to the IAUA is an early mini accessibility evaluation of a professional space (such as the university campus) or document (such as a memo distributed in a different class). Conducted after students have read about the history of disability access ("Curb Cuts") and/or

its importance in public communication (“Tools of Oppression,” Sims), the evaluation invites students to identify (in)accessible elements in the document or on campus, guiding them to make the connections between ongoing class activities and the professional, public spaces they already inhabit. The evaluation also primes students to be intentional about how their own instructional document may be designed in such a way as to include as many people within their target audience as possible. This evaluation may be taught independently, as its own assignment.

I designed and taught this assignment in Writing in the Workplace (ENG 295) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a predominantly white university (PWI). There, I linked the assignment with ongoing conversations about the importance of vernacular/diverse language and professional choices to building inclusive environments (Hull et al). These connections allowed me to validate the needs and communication practices of students from minoritized communities, while also urging students from majoritized communities to take steps to make the professional spaces they belong to more equitable.

Time Commitment

The entire assignment takes 4-5 weeks of instructional activity. The mini accessibility evaluation, which can be taught on its own, requires approximately two instructional days.

Materials

Because the IAUA is a multimodal project, students will need access to a computer and/or a smartphone to compose the project.

For the mini accessibility evaluation, students will need access (through the university library or provided by the teacher) to “Tools for Overcoming Oppression” (Sims), along with access to their university campus and/or a professional document in their field.

Students are specifically urged to select a topic personally interesting to them for the instructional project to ensure classmates have access to the needed materials. However, they need to select a topic that is accessible to/doable by their classmates, especially since a classmate will user test the set of instructions. For instance, “how to run a 100 mile race” is not a good topic, though “how to prep drop bags for a 100 mile race” would likely work fine, as most students have the necessary materials for assembling “drop,” or resupply, bags (Ziploc bags, sunscreen, energy bars, etc.) Students are also specifically asked to avoid any topics that include sharp objects or weaponry (“how to clean your gun”); if they choose a topic that involves personal information (“how to complete your FAFSA”), they will need access to blank documentation.

Finally, if students choose to use identifiable images of another person, such as a classmate, they will need a signed release form from that person. Usually the college or university can provide a blank release form for students to use.

Assignment Process

Students will:

- ***Explore the genre.*** Together we read and discuss guidelines in technical communication textbooks on how to write instructional documents, from the [*Introduction to Technical and Professional Communication*](#) and in [*Open Technical Communication*](#). We also read the assignment directions at this time.
- ***Describe access/accessibility and evaluate accessibility in a professional space.*** This activity, much of which can be completed out of class, culminates in students’ submission of a mini accessibility evaluation. Prior to the activity, students either listen to the podcast episode (or read its transcript) “Curb Cuts” (99% Invisible), on the history of

accessible design in the United States; or they read the *IEEE* journal article “Tools for Overcoming Oppression” (Sims), on plain language in immigration documents. Students who listen to the podcast evaluate the accessibility of campus spaces, while students who read Sim’s article evaluate the accessibility of a professional document circulated in their field. In either case, students identify points of accessibility and inaccessibility on campus or in the professional document, using universal design resources to guide their analysis. Their evaluation concludes by reflecting on what they learn from the experience for their own instructional document. I typically cancel one class period to allow students to conduct the evaluation. The evaluation may be done independently or with a partner. Additionally, this activity may be done as its own assignment, without asking students to complete the instructional document.

- ***Guest Speaker.*** During project development (see below), I invite a guest speaker to discuss the importance of disability access/accessibility in rhetorical choice-making and professional communication.
- ***Project development.*** Students select their topic idea for the instructional project and begin to plan/develop it, including selecting the modality they will use (e.g. Google Docs with embedded images; Power Point / Google Slide deck, also with embedded images; short video, website, etc.) During this period, students learn to write alt text for their images; the alt text activity also serves as an entry point into the importance of accessible design writ large¹. I also send students out from the classroom across campus to take both “good” and “bad” images for promoting the campus to

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Kristin Bennett for the suggestion of teaching students to write alt text.

potential students.² I then display the images for the class and we use them to discuss strategies for image composition and the role of imagery in rhetorical communication.

- ***Collaborative assessment.*** Together, students and I construct a pass/no pass rubric, reflecting on the prior weeks of instruction and discussion to identify qualities essential to a successful multimodal instructional document. I use a labor-based grading contract in my courses, so the pass/no pass rubric is useful for me, especially partnered with the assignment directions, to assess student work and guide decisions on whether student work passes or does not pass. The rubric is also key in students' self-assessment (see below).
- ***Peer review.*** Students are partnered with a classmate for usability/accessibility review, in lieu of a peer review. Prior to beginning the usability review, students read about usability reviews/usability testing in [Open Technical Communication](#). Then, students use their classmate's instructions to complete the task. They write a report on the result, loosely following the IMRAD format: students are asked to describe their methods for testing their classmate's instructions, including what materials they had and whether any materials were missing; their results, including whether and how well they were able to complete the task; and their recommendations for their classmate to make in improving the instructional document. Students use the usability report to make revisions to their project.
- ***Submission.*** Students submit their instructional document along with a self-assessment. The self-assessment asks students to describe their perceptions of the strengths/weaknesses in their own work, the process they

² This activity adapts one I read about on Twitter; the post is long since lost to time. The original activity asked students to take pictures of doughnuts.

followed in preparing the document for submission, and any changes they made following the usability report. Students refer to the pass/no pass rubric to guide their self-assessment, especially their analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Explain how the design or rhetorical choices made in a composition affects its readability/usability for a specific audience
- Evaluate the accessibility/usability of a text and clearly communicate their results in writing
- Explain the value of accessibility/usability in professional writing and in their own field
- Rely on media (images, audio, video, etc.) as well as text to convey their point(s) clearly
- Select and analyze an audience for their writing, paying attention to differences, compared to their own experience
- Produce accessible multimodal writing; account for access/accessibility in composing
- Adapt the genre and format of writing to meet their rhetorical purpose
- Produce thorough, detailed writing that relies on language that is clear to their audience and aligned with their rhetorical purpose

Learning Accommodations

- Material should be presented in multiple formats to include in-person instruction and asynchronous, digital delivery.
- For the mini accessibility evaluation, students may choose to physically explore the campus and evaluate its accessibility, or they may choose to evaluate the accessibility

of a document circulated in their professional field. This accounts for varying levels of mobility.

- Students may choose any modality they like for the IAUA, so long as it incorporates digital tools: audio, visual, video, or a combination, depending on their varying learning students. This variety allows students to select modalities that accommodate their own learning/communicative preferences.
- In writing their IAUA, students are asked to create alt text for the images, which may aid their peer/usability reviewer in providing a complete review for the project.
- Several instructional days occur out-of-class and asynchronously: the mini accessibility evaluation and the user/usability analysis. The out-of-class work allows students to work at times and at a pace that suits their own dis/abilities and needs.

Works Cited

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Walton, Rebecca, et al. *Technical Communication After the Social Justice Turn: Building Coalitions for Action*. Routledge, 2019.

Further Reading

Educators may want to briefly discuss the limitations of accommodations, defined as individual carve-outs for standardized, professional expectations, to help students identify the shortcomings of accommodations and accessibility as a model for inclusion. Please refer to *Crip Spacetime*, Margaret Price; Duke UP, 2024.

I also share the following resources with my students during their evaluation of campus/professional accessibility, to guide their work:

"5 Ways Universal Design Makes Products More Accessible." *Section 508.gov*. General Services Administration. n.d. <https://www.section508.gov/blog/5-Ways-Universal-Design-Makes-Products-More-Accessible/>.

"Universal Design: What's In It For Me?" *Section 508.gov*. General Services Administration. n.d.

<https://www.section508.gov/blog/universal-design-whats-in-it-for-me/>.

“What Is Universal Design?” *Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology*. University of Washington. 24 May 2022.

<https://www.washington.edu/doit/what-universal-design-0>

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