

## **Descriptions of Writing Assignments**

The writing assignments in this class are designed in such a way as to give you experience and practice in different modes of writing and research. They are also designed to give you experience and practice in writing for the Internet. You need to remember, however, that this is, first of all, a writing class. Therefore writing activities always take precedence over learning about the technology or construction of websites.

### **1. JMU Students and Technology: An Informal Survey**

There is no doubt that computers technology has affected our lives immensely, both in positive and in negative ways. We often assume that most, if not all people, have embraced computers and the Internet and use in daily life and for a variety of reasons and purposes.

Your job in this informal research project is to find out what the situation with the use of technology is on the JMU campus, among your peers. After reading the debate between the “luddite” and the “fetishist” in *The Wired Society* as well as the article on constructing effective surveys by Georgia Rhoades and Lynn Moss Sanders, construct an informal survey to find out about JMU students’ relationship with technology. After you complete the survey, report your results in a three to four page paper.

#### **Purpose and audience**

As stated above, your goal in this project is to learn about patterns of technology use among JMU students and report these patterns. In addition to reporting, you should also be able to provide commentary/draw conclusions on the basis of your results. You are writing for a general audience that includes not only your classmates and your teacher but also anyone from the “outside” world who is willing to listen. Therefore, you need to include enough details in your paper for it to be understood by the people outside of our class.

### Possible areas of research

Some possible areas for your investigation may include: how often your subjects use computer technology and the internet and for what purposes; how long have they been using them and when and how they learned to do it; what are their opinions about the role that computer technology and the internet have played in their lives and in the lives of others, etc. You are not limited to these topics, and you will have a better idea of what questions to ask after you read Rhoades and Sanders essay.

### Scope of the survey

This is a limited survey. Plan to construct about ten to twelve survey questions and survey 20 to 25 people. The surveys can be done in your dorm, in the computer lab you use regularly, in the cafeteria, etc. Make sure that your survey is detailed but not too long so that you can complete it well in a week or so.

## Stages of the project

- After reading the essays from *The Wired Society* and the essay by Rhoades and Sanders, we will draft the survey questions and workshop them in small groups.
- You will then go out “into the field,” conduct your survey, and collect your results
- In the first draft, you will describe the setting (place and time) of your research, your respondents, and report your results
- In the second draft, in addition to reporting the results, you will need to provide some kind of commentary on them, to draw conclusions about the patterns of technology use you have found on JMU campus during the survey.

## **2. Online Communities**

Arguably, one of the most significant achievements of the electronic age and of the Internet are the so-called “online communities.” Most of us have probably participated in them or participate in them now, sometimes not even realizing it. Online communities include Internet discussion boards (such as ours in this class), e-mail mailing lists, chat rooms, MUDs and MOOs (find out what these are), and some other forms. Some people claim that these communities bring us together, allowing us to meet and communicate in ways never before possible. Others argue that they have decreased the “human touch” in our communications.

## Purpose and audience

Your task in this project is to learn more about online communities by joining one, participating in it, and writing about it. In addition to simple reporting about what went on in your community, you need also to draw some conclusions about the nature of online communities on the basis of your experiences and the readings from *The Wired Society*. As in the first project, you will be writing for a broad audience for people both in and outside of our class.

## Some possible areas for research

After joining and participating in an online community, you can consider the following questions. These are merely suggestions and you are not limited to these areas

- What is the community you participate in and what goes on there?
- What kinds of people participate in it and what do they discuss/do?
- What kind of language is used and what kinds of interaction take places between people?
- Was your experience positive or negative? Why?
- What can you say about online communities in general on the basis of your research and your readings?

## Project stages

After completing the readings from *The Wired Society* dedicated to online communities, you will conduct research on the Internet learning about the different types of online communities that exist and deciding which one you want to join.

After participating in the community for several days, in the first draft, you will need to report what you saw. In the second draft, analyze and generalize your experience.

### **3. A Study of a Digital/Mediated Culture Issue**

In this project, you will study some issue related to mediated or digital culture which interests you. You will need to conduct both primary and secondary research to do this, but this will not be the traditional “research paper.” Again, for those of you out there who hate research papers, I repeat: this will be a research-based project but not a research paper the way we have come to know it.

We will practice and develop qualities essential for quality research: finding reliable sources and studying them; questioning the sources and creating our own theories and opinions on the basis of our research; carefully acknowledging and documenting the sources.

Possible areas for research

Look through *The Wired Society* for topics. The book is full of interesting topics worth writing about. Keep track of your own activities with computers and on the Internet. Notice what 's in the news. Remember what your friends discuss when they talk about "digital culture."

### Project stages

After identifying possible topics for research and writing, we will conduct searches for appropriate sources both in the library and on the internet. The first draft will be written in the form of a story, a conversation between your sources. You will be asked to create an actual setting, a situation where the people who wrote your sources could meet and discuss about the problems that interest them (and you). You will host such a meeting. In the second draft, you will be required to write extensive commentary on your quests' discussion. There will be several requirements to this project which we will discuss in detail during class. For now, however, be sure to understand that, although this is not a traditional research paper assignment, it is still a researched project and all conventions and habits of mind of sound research must be met.

### **4. Comparative analysis of a "professional" website and a student "e-zine."**

We are now moving from traditional writing to web, or hypertext writing. This project will require you to study two websites: one "professional" and one constructed by first-year college writers just like yourselves. You will write a comparative rhetorical analysis of these two websites. The areas of analysis will include:

- What are the two websites' stated or implied purposes?
- What are their stated or implied audiences?
- How does the style and tone of the writing correspond to those purposes and goals?
- How does the design of the site (colors, fonts, navigation) contribute to or undermine those goals?
- What is your general reaction to the site as a reader?

#### Tips for picking a website for analysis

In choosing a “professional” website for analysis, you have complete and total freedom. Make sure you choose a site with some sort of content in it. By content, I mean writing, graphics content, some kind of a message or meaning, not just flash and nothing else. In the required readings section of the website, you will find a list of student E-zines to choose from. When you have the two website chosen, write a comparative analysis, covering the areas suggested above for each of them.

#### **5. Original group hypertext (website+process report).**

This is a group project. You will work in groups of 3 or 4 to create original web projects which will contain both the revised work that you have done during the semester and the writing which you will produce specifically for the website.

### Purpose and audience

Your purpose is to create a concept for the website, not just to “copy and paste” your writing on the web. Your site should inform, or argue, or do a combination of both. Look through the writings that you have done through the semester and select those pieces which can be revised to construct such a concept. Also, consider what other writings (probably shorter ones) you will need to add. For example, if you wrote about electronic music file-sharing (Napster and similar), you could create a concept website about some aspect of the issue. You would need to revise your writings to fit into a website format, the process which we will discuss extensively.

Writing for the web is different from simply writing a paper for a class. When building a website, you are, in effect, publishing your work for the whole world to see. Therefore, audience awareness becomes very important.

### Stages of the project

- Discuss what hypertext is and examine examples of student hypertexts
- Break up into groups and brainstorm ideas for the website concepts

- Prepare short group statements (1 page) identifying the purpose and the audience of the site
- Plan the website
- Draft websites in groups using Netscape Composer and saving the work on floppy disks
- Peer workshop the draft websites
- Revise the sites and the writing on them
- Edit and prepare for publication
- Submit the disks with the finished sites to me for uploading to the server

**The front page of your group hypertext must contain the following information:**

Your purpose in creating this hypertext

Your intended audience

How does your text serve your audience and your purpose?

Everything else is up to you.