

Heuristic Evaluation of the Humanities and Technical Communication Department's Web Pages

Based on Jakob Nielsen's 10 usability heuristics, each team member conducted a heuristic evaluation of Southern Polytechnic State University's (SPSU) Humanities and Technical Communication (HTC) Web pages.

As an aside, this evaluation is not intended to address other departmental pages. However, the colors and design on these pages vary by department and are not consistent with the top-level SPSU pages. Consistency among the departments gives the university a cohesive, coordinated appearance.

We reviewed our heuristic evaluations and used it as a basis for developing our test plan. A comprehensive summary of issues identified by our heuristic evaluations follows.

Visibility of System Status

- Unanimous agreement regarding the Writing Program link: based on the program's primary audience being undergraduates, this link should be moved to a section that undergraduates, not graduates, would be more likely to view—perhaps as an option within the undergraduate course options. As our target user is the prospective graduate school candidate, the Writing Program will not be included in the following heuristic evaluation.
- Site navigation could be clarified with a site map, more links including "home" to prevent the user from having to rely on the "back" button.
- Add a search function by key word.
- In the first level after the home page, frame buttons offer navigation but the same button words as listed in the main frame are not links; this appears problematic.
- The user needs visual feedback as to where one is on the site (selected link is a different color).
- Section titles were clear. Titles matched links for the most part, although some links were a little vague, like "Guidelines," "Procedures," and "TCOM." With regard to the TCOM navigation link, all the HTC Web pages are about (humanities and) technical communication. We suggest renaming the navigation link Program Overview, Degrees or simply Overview to fit.

Match Between System and Real World

- All headers should spell out TCOM and MSTPC. A user may jump into the middle of Web page rather than start from the beginning and follow the links to TCOM.
- Clarify where the navigation links go. Specify on the home page, at least, for Prospects, Current, Peers, there should be details, sub-categories, or explanations of what's in the frame choices – not just as a mouse over.
- Graduate admissions do not include costs or the deadline for application. However the undergraduate section includes deadlines. Graduation requirements should be set off as a separate link. Add related navigation links to HTC home, program description, and graduate course catalog.
- The terminology “tracks” is not self-explanatory. Suggest changing it to “areas of concentration.”
- “SRS”—Savannah River Site—is not defined anywhere. Too many unfamiliar terms in the site have the potential of alienating the user.
- On the schedule page, information like CRN# does not need to be listed first. It is not the most important information and makes for a more muddled table.

User Control and Freedom

- Add site map to HTC home page.
- To offer the user more control, make navigational links of each word in the unordered list that repeats in the link button frame.
- Add navigational options so the user does not rely on the back button.
- Add more internal links to the course description page to take users back to the top.
- If a user goes to the HTC home page and bypasses the SPSU links, the user does not know that this department is part of Southern Polytechnic nor can the user go to SPSU's home page, other department pages, or other information such as fees and registration.

Consistency and Standards

- Site identification is really important, as is the repetition of frames (and how the frames look), colors, and fonts. Why aren't frames used on the HTC home page?
- Make Peers and Professionals consistent with the others. The faculty bios do not have a link back to HTC.

Error Prevention

- No major errors detected. However, a link to a page that is under construction may give the user an impression of an error or lack of preparedness.

Recognition Rather than Recall

- Some of the pages could use more identification in the title or header. The buttons in the frame section should indicate where the user is. The subpages of a topic need to show the topic.
- The alt tags or dialog boxes that display only when the user places the cursor over a certain portion of the screen can be confusing.
- Using frames for navigation may not be intuitive for some users. Printing with frames may also be an issue.

Flexibility and Efficiency of Use

- While the pages tested are not set up with accelerators to speed up interaction for the expert user, given the frames navigation, the HTC pages may likely confuse the early-stage Internet novice.
- Add links to the basic information on SPSU pages like fees, calendars, dates, online registration, etc.

Aesthetic and Minimalist Design

- HTC pages are branded with flame logo and “HTC” but the pages lose a connection to SPSU. In relation to other information on the page, the flame is overpowering. SPSU was only mentioned at the bottom of pages as a link back to the SPSU home page, and the link was SMALL. Add the name and location of the school on every page. If students are looking at a lot of different schools, it might be easy to confuse one with another if pages are not marked. It would also be helpful to list the full department name, phone number, and email somewhere on each page - it doesn't have to be big—it's just nice to have access to that information.
- The color and font changes make the pages appear inconsistent.
- There could be more white space in some sections with extensive information. These portions could be divided up with progressive levels of details. The more general information appears on the top levels and, as the user drills down, more details are included.

Help Users Recognize, Diagnose, and Recover from Errors

- Additional navigation links and a TCOM home button in the Writing Program section would be a great service to users who browse in that section.

Help and Documentation

- Adding a search function (at least on the major heading pages) or an index would be helpful.
- Including technical communication professional resources and other web sites, perhaps as a link from the career options, would enhance professionalism and credibility.