

Practical Writing
at the
University of Maine's
Surveying Engineering Technology Program
by
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The focus of the Surveying Engineering Technology program at the University of Maine is to provide students with a practical surveying education. The program is a selection of surveying, engineering, and business courses intended to provide the graduate with skills required for professional surveying practice. Based on input from our constituency (i.e., alumni, employers, and the industrial advisory committee) communication skills, especially writing, were identified as an important and necessary skill for graduates.

Traditionally, college writing assignments focused on responding to homework questions or summarizing library research projects. Technical writing courses tended to focus on gathering experimental data, analyzing it, and reporting the results in a format that only another technician would care to read or be able to understand.

While these traditional forms and styles of college writing are useful, they are not necessarily related or germane to surveying practice. As a result, the program changed the method of presenting writing assignments to students in order to better reflect the tasks of professional surveying practice.

Writing assignments now require students to respond to requests through documentation that would normally be employed in surveying practice. Instead of faculty simply asking a question, the student receives a contract or letter from a fictitious client, attorney, or neighbor that requires action through written correspondence. In other variations of writing exercises, the student receives a memo or e-mail message from the employer or supervisor that is employed to initiate a student response. A memo or e-mail from the fictitious employer usually requires immediate action on client cases or internal business matters. Regardless of the form, these exercises require clear and concise written communication that will resolve the situation

that was presented to the student.

All written responses from the student must meet ordinary and reasonable business practice standards. Student responses must be in the form of a memorandum or letter that reference job numbers, copy correspondence (cc) to others, and pass correspondence through others, where appropriate. Grading written responses encompass not only content, English, grammar, and punctuation but also include form, tact, mechanics, and style. Students are required to go beyond content and craft the tone, language, and form of the document in order to distinguish between friendly clients and disgruntled individuals; from responding to requests, to making requests.

When technical information must be reported, such as in the case of a survey report, emphasis is not only placed on substance but also on clarity, organization,

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and client (layperson) comprehension. In other words, surveying students are taught to provide clear, complete, and concise documents from the reader's perspective. Through practice, students use effective language and employ phrases commonly used in professional surveying communications. Students develop the ability to recognize and eliminate casual and ambiguous phrases in professional documents. Where appropriate, students are expected to effectively use graphics and charts within their documentation.

Teamwork is emphasized with students working in two-person teams when preparing documents. Team members are expected to discuss what the contents of the document should include. Thereafter, one team-member

prepares the document. The second team member reviews the document, much as a supervisor would normally do. When grading the assignment, the instructor awards both students the same content grade. In addition to the content grade, the instructor deducts points from the reviewer's content grade when errors in punctuation, grammar, structure, and spelling are discovered. Consequently, the reviewer has a critical task to perform. The reviewer's grade will often be lower than the writer's grade if the reviewer fails to adequately review the document. The responsibility of writing and review is shifted between team members on the various exercises such that the individual is exposed to both critical tasks of corresponding. As graduates progress toward senior management or ownership of a surveying firm, these review skills should be useful.

Obviously, the students are not the only ones learning and benefiting from these new standards and criteria for written documentation. Instructors must continuously prepare documents such as letters, memoranda, contracts, and formal requests to generate a student response. The instructor must prepare these documents with sufficient clarity so students will understand the constraints of the assignment.

Students that have practiced preparing documents under the constraints discussed will soon be entering professional surveying practice. Hopefully, both alumni and employers will be pleased with the writing skills Surveying Engineering Technology students have learned at the University of Maine.