Desktop Publishing: An Online Distance Learning Course

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This online educational course in Desktop Publishing: The Basics of Design delivers course content to distance learners as a partial fulfillment of the MFA in Computer Graphics Design at Rochester Institute of Technology. The course is divided into three sections: Elements of Graphic Design, Principles of Graphic Design, and Typography. Elements of Graphic Design covers the use of color, line, shape, size, space, texture, and value. Principles of Graphic Design covers balance, contrast, emphasis, rhythm, and unity. The third section covers serif, sans-serif, display, and script typefaces, and parts of a letterform. Each section contains lecture material, as well as three printed examples and a small animation to visually illustrate the topic.

The course is designed to be completed in a 10-week academic quarter. Although much of remote learning is self-paced, a syllabus was created to provide project due dates. There are no tests, but there are four assignments. Three of the four assignments are developmental exercises arranged to correspond with the lecture material and are to be completed in two weeks.

The fourth assignment is a self-initiated project that allows students to explore their own design ideas. As a companion to the assignments, there are six corresponding design examples.

Projects can be turned in for grading via postal service, the Web, or a dedicated server where files can be uploaded by the student and downloaded by the instructor. Student-to-student and student-to-instructor interaction is important and could be handled in a variety of ways, from email or whiteboards to digital audio or video programs.

The class is designed to be software- and hardware-independent. A lot of graphic design is completed with programs such as QuarkXPress and Adobe Pagemaker. Because these software packages are very expensive, it would be unfair to require students to purchase them to complete their assignments. Microsoft Word and ClarisWorks allow students to integrate text and graphics fairly well, so students are not required to purchase additional software.

The Web site was designed with sensitivity to the different computer platforms and internet browsers. Color choices were particularly important, because of different operating systems, browsers, and computer platforms display color in different ways. Colors were chosen based on Coloring Web Graphics, by Lynda Weinman.

The site was created with third-generation Web-site design techniques developed by David Siegel. Third-generation site design uses typographic and design techniques that allow the designer to control the placement of the visual elements. Invisible tables were used to give the appearance of a two-column grid and permit better integration of type and image. Another technique incorporated the use of a white or black single-pixel gif files to create indentations and align text and graphics.

Based on student evaluation, this course has a lot of utility as a distance learning class. Administering a class on the Web mitigates the problem of time and distance for many students.