



Sam Houston State University

# Usability Report

**A Heuristic Review of the  
Master of Arts in Technical Communication  
Program at Sam Houston State University  
Website  
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## INTRODUCTION

This heuristic evaluation has been created to assist in the planning of usability improvements to the website for the Master of Arts in Technical Communication program at Sam Houston State University (referred to throughout this report as “the Website”). The intended audience for this report is the Technical Communication program faculty at Sam Houston State University, the Department Chair, and University administration with decision-making abilities with regards to the University Website. My overall goal of this review is to provide usability information from a user’s perspective that will assist with highlighting items that shine as well as items that can be helped to shine brighter.

## METHODS

The method of evaluation I used to assess the usability of the Website is Jakob Nielson's [10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design](#).

### Nielson's 10 Usability Heuristics for User Interface Design

**1. Visibility of System Status**

This principle mandates that the system (in for purposes of this report, the Website) acts in a way to inform the User that their request is in the process of being fulfilled.

**2. Match Between System and the Real World**

According to Nielson, the system should use real-world language that the User can relate to, as well as discussing information in an order that would make sense to the User.

**3. User Control and Freedom**

User control and freedom refers to the principle that a User should be able to move freely about the system with the ability to easily get back from an undesired location. This principle references the back and forward buttons in our browsers and the undo and redo buttons within applications.

**4. Consistency and Standards**

This principle places importance on platform conventions, and ensuring that Users are aware of when words are used interchangeably, or if there is more than one way to perform an action.

**5. Error Prevention**

This heuristic stresses the importance of designing a user experience that helps to keep a User from making a mistake.

**6. Recognition and Recall**

A website can be more user-friendly if it gives the user options to select from to help remember information instead of making the User have to recall that information on their own.

**7. Flexibility and Efficiency of Use**

This principle places emphasis on automations of frequent actions, which can also be referred to as Accelerators. Shortcut keys are a good example of a type of accelerator.

**8. Aesthetic and Minimalist Design**

Information is uncluttered and only information that is needed is present.

**9. Help Users Recognize, Diagnose, and Recover from Errors**

It is important to recognize the action that occurs upon the user making an error. A website should communicate to the User that an error was made, as well as its description of steps the user can take to correct the error.

**10. Help and Documentation**

It is important that help be easily reached and the search features are effective in helping the User.

## FINDINGS

The findings of my evaluation are as follows. They are organized by their corresponding heuristic principle.

### Visibility of System Status

The website does well with visibility of system status. When a link is selected, the area turns orange to show that my selection has registered and the page I've selected is in the process of loading (see **Figure 1**).

#### Program Breakdown

Category	Degree Summary
Catalog Entry	<a href="#">Master of Arts (MA)</a>
Length	36 Credit Hours
Enrollment	Fall, Spring, Summer
Costs	<a href="#">Rates Per Semester</a>
Admission Requirements	<a href="#">Application Materials</a>

**Figure 1:** When clicked on, the hyperlink turns orange to let the User know the website acknowledges the action performed by the User and the requested website is in the process of loading.

This color change is important to the User because it lets the User know their request has been received and is being processed. Without feedback, the User could be left wondering if the website is working, or if the link is current and functioning.

### Match Between System and the Real World

The Website addresses a very important question: *What is Technical Communication?* This is immensely helpful, as it is a commonly asked question. It may be possible to streamline the content of this section in a couple of different ways:

- A more specific definition of Technical Communication can be provided possibly by changing the order of items discussed in that section.
  - While it is helpful and important that students be informed about careers made possible by obtaining a MA in Technical Communication, this information could make a stronger impact by being mentioned in the second portion of the answer to “What is Technical Communication?”
  - Beginning the answer to *What is Technical Communication* by detailing the skills the program equips the student with could make a stronger

impact on helping that student decide if the program is an appropriate fit for that student's wants and/or needs.

- The section “What is Technical Communication” could potentially have a greater impact listed closer to the top of the page (if it cannot be the first section listed, it could still be helpful for it to be the second).

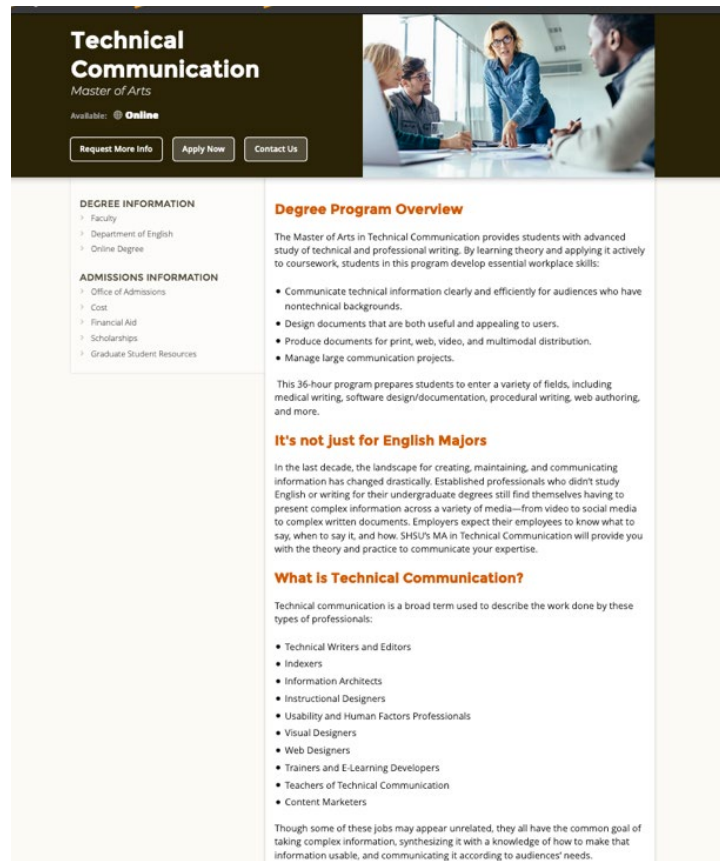


Figure 2: Screenshot showing the location of the section *What is Technical Communication?* on the website with relation to the other sections.

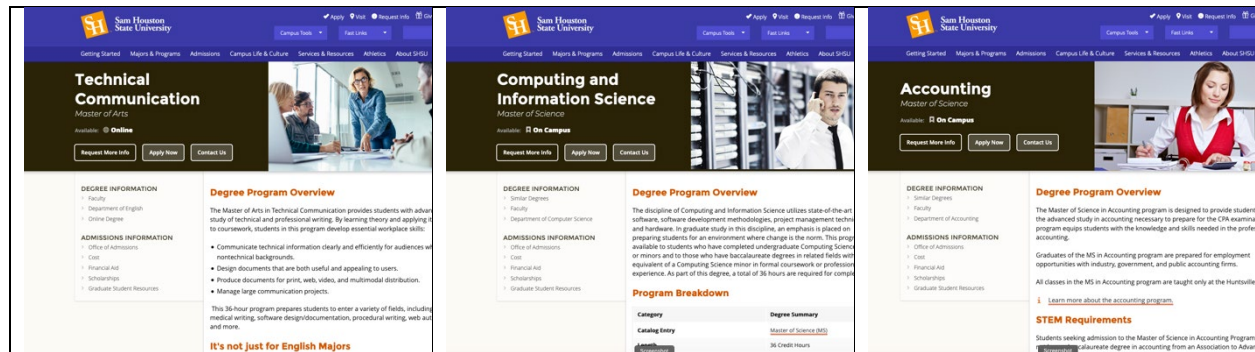
## User Control and Freedom

With regards to this principle, it appears that there are no challenges to the User's ability to navigate between the website and its respective links on the page. The ability to move appears to be in sync with the back and forward buttons of the User's browser.

## Consistency and Standards

Overall, the formatting of the website appears to be consistent and adheres to standards set by the majority of websites under the Department of English umbrella of

websites (see Figure 3). The Website also appears to be consistent with standards used in majority of Sam Houston State University websites.



**Figure 3:** Screenshots displaying the uniformity of the Master of Arts Technical Communication program website, the Master of Science for Computing and Information Science, and the Master of Science of Accounting programs' respective websites.

## Error Prevention

I appreciate that there is an abundance of information provided on this website. It could be even more helpful if there was a way for the cost link to place the User directly on the estimated cost per semester page for Graduate Students. It currently links to the undergraduate - Texas resident tuition page, which is most likely the default page for that site, but landing at this location could confuse the user into erroneously thinking those costs are applicable to the Technical Communication MA program. The same goes for the mention of application materials. It would be of better use to the User if this linked to the specific application materials tab on the Technical Communication catalog page.

## Recognition Rather Than Recall

The portion of the website that associates the subject of English with Technical Communication, *It's Not Just for English Majors*, helps to spark recognition. A communication program could easily be assumed to be similar to an English degree plan. By making the association between the two subjects but explaining the differences between the two makes understanding what the Technical Communication program entails easier for the User.

## Flexibility and Efficiency of Use

I found this heuristic to be non-applicable to this website, as there are no actions performed so frequently that necessitate automation.



## Aesthetic and Minimalist Design

A strong point of the Website is that it is relatively concise. The layout is free of clutter, and not overly decorated. The information is easily accessible with the school colors woven in to give a nice hint of school spirit.

## Help Users Recognize, Diagnose, and Recover from Errors

I did not find this heuristic to be applicable to my evaluation, as the website was fully functioning, and there were no dead links.

## Help and Documentation

The contact information to obtain more information on the Technical Communication program is prominently displayed. There is also a link that allows the User to easily contact the Office of Admissions, should they want more information on applying for the Technical Communication MA program. There is also easy access to the University-wide search, which I have always found to be useful. The search results are usually pretty accurate to help find what the User is attempting to locate.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Strengths

- The website does well with visibility of system status;
- Uniformity with websites of programs across the University;
- Additional information about the program is easily accessible.

### Areas for Improvement

- Match between system and the real world: with respect to the section that answers the question *What is Technical Communication?* the impact of the definition could potentially be improved by:
  - Changing the order of information in the definition to reflect the skills taught by the program, then discussing the types of careers an MA in Technical Communication could prepare them to obtain; and
  - Elevating the *What is Technical Communication?* section to a higher position on the Website.
- Ensure that the websites that are linked to are appropriately matched in subject matter.

## CONCLUSION

The website for the Master of Arts in Technical Communication program at Sam Houston State University is a potential student's first exposure to the program. It is a useful tool that can help a student decide to take a path that may change their lives. The information currently provide is plentiful and useful, but an update of a few items can help the information be presented more clearly and have a greater impact on the User. If you have any questions on this report, please contact Tisha Savannah at [tas082@shsu.edu](mailto:tas082@shsu.edu).