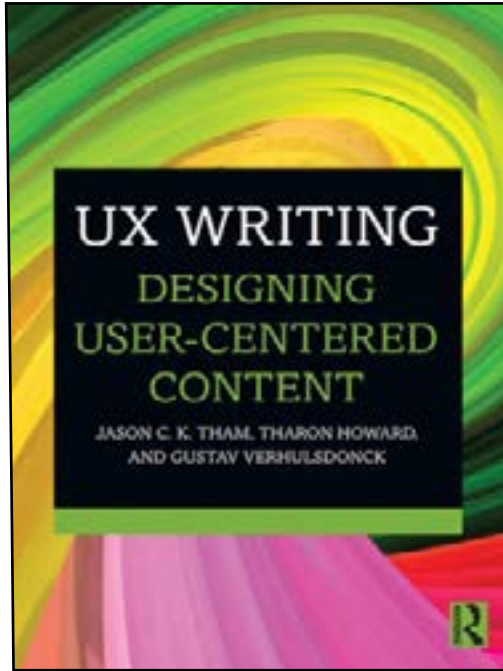


BOOK REVIEW

Book Review Editor

Timothy Ponce, *University of Texas at Arlington*



UX Writing: Designing User- Centered Content

Jason C.K. Tham
Tharon Howard
Gustav Verhulsdonck

New York, NY
Routledge
2024, 248 pp.

Reviewed by

Christopher J. Morris
York University

UX writing (writing for user experience) is a professional field of growing popularity and consequence in which technical writers apply design principles to produce content, texts, and digital applications. UX writing demands usefulness—typically defined as the sum of utility and usability. Utility refers to how well a design achieves its purpose, while usability measures the ease of a design's function.

With *UX Writing: Designing User-Centered Content*, authors Jason C.K. Tham, Tharon Howard, and Gustav Verhulsdonck provide an exigent and, crucially, useful text that is well-designed for achieving its primary purpose of helping instructors develop UX writing courses. Indeed, for me—an assistant professor in a writing department currently developing a course in writing and design for user experience—*UX Writing* is a timely, valuable resource for helping me think through applicable genres, theories, learning outcomes, assignments, and potential class activities.

At the same time, *UX Writing* is not a run-of-the-mill textbook. Tham et al. themselves describe their work as “both a textbook and a playbook,” gesturing toward its marked utility and usability both inside and outside of the classroom (p. xvi). In that case, perhaps the most useful aspect of *UX Writing* is its exceptional balance of practicality and literature review. The book provides readers with well-founded, actionable strategies for completing UX writing tasks. In contrast, many textbooks, handbooks, and related genres geared toward writing practice often avoid engaging the very research and theory that underpin many such writing strategies, to the detriment of helping readers understand the conceptual integrity of those strategies. On the other end of the spectrum, many other works in this field overemphasize prior academic discussions, without informing readers clearly as to the practical utility of conceptual developments. With its user-friendly style, however, *UX Writing* ensures that readers can use its content as well as chart the foundations and lineages of this content. This deft rhetorical aspect of the textbook helps readers better understand why certain strategies predominate in relevant discussions about UX writing.

Correspondingly, UX writing is becoming increasingly relevant in the study, teaching, and practice of technical and professional writing. In fact, my department chair recently approached me about developing a technical writing course that appeals to student interests in content creation, employers’ needs for digital content management, and the university’s goals in providing experiential education. My mind immediately went to UX writing, which requires practitioners to design collaboratively and impactfully for real-world users. Tham et al. foreground their book along similar lines. “In an age of content marketing and digital design—where users actively seek information and where marketers find it an opportunity to sell products through information services and experience design,” they write, “content-first design promises short-term as well as long-term success” (p. 7). Arguing that “UX-centric content makes for efficient design and a greater return on investment,” the authors emphasize that “UX writers ... have to know how good content can be created first so the *design meets the user’s immediate needs and wants*” (p. 7, emphases in original). What, then, might the users of Tham et al.’s textbook need and want? The authors appear to know quite well and design their text accordingly.

The intended audience—perhaps user base—for *UX Writing* consists precisely of undergraduate students in technical and professional writing courses, instructors of those courses, graduate students undertaking initial research into UX, and scholars and researchers in technical communication who want to know more about UX writing and design (p. xvi). Appropriately, *UX Writing* is therefore divided into three parts: “Perspectives,” “Processes”, and “Practices.” “Perspectives” answers questions related to the field about disciplinarity and professionalism. “Processes” details essential UX design methods that include think-aloud protocol and prototyping. Finally, “Practices” introduces readers to a variety of UX writing genres like help guides, while also explaining why and how to assemble writing portfolios. This tripartite compendium has something for everyone—students, instructors, writers, designers, and researchers.

The textbook’s sleek comprehensiveness is further reflected in the organization and

style of its individual parts. Each chapter begins with a chapter overview, in which the authors provide concise summaries of the chapter's contents. The chapter overviews are then followed by lists of learning objectives such as "Understand and define writing for user experience" (p. 3); "Recognize the significance of human-centered design principles in UX writing" (p. 43); and "Develop an understanding of a content creation framework to attract, engage, and sustain the user" (p.153). These learning objectives, among others presented in this textbook, would be critical for any course or practical implementation in UX writing. Moreover, in expert use of pedagogical scaffolding to achieve learning objectives, the authors conclude each chapter with a Chapter Checklist. These checklists deploy a systematic, instructional, and imperative writing style that facilitates reader comprehension as well as independent thinking while summarizing the chapter's main takeaways. The book's user-friendly instructional style not only functions as an effective technical writing model for students but also helps practitioners and researchers grasp complex processes quickly. *UX Writing* is certainly paradigmatic of effective technical writing as each chapter contains richly conceived charts, lists, models, illustrations, photographs, figures, and tables that convey useful information in an engaging way. Lastly, the authors diligently consider both industry and academia, workplaces and classrooms. They include in each chapter "Real World Snapshots"—insets that explicate relevant case studies. Additionally, each chapter closes with Discussion Questions, Learning Activities, and References complete with plenty of academic texts and concerns. This textbook is classic yet attractive in that regard.

UX Writing's chapter on generative artificial intelligence (AI) is especially timely in its applications. In Chapter 11, "Using Generative AI and Automating Your Content," the authors engage a reasoned, well-supported discussion of how AI can be incorporated into both college courses and industry projects. Tham et al. contend that AI's "curation and refining of text can significantly help UX writers think through their work and generate new ideas quickly using AI as a writing companion" (p. 212). To support their assessment, the authors point to the abilities of AI bots to write scripts, identify relevant keywords from texts, and to analyze feedback from user reviews (p. 212). Though they advocate that "AI and UX writing go hand in hand," Tham et al. also outline AI's limitations with respect to UX writing (p. 214). Among such limitations discussed are errors in AI-generated content as well as AI's lack of "a human dimension" (p. 213). To account for AI's limitations, *UX Writing* advocates for the HEAT model (Human experience, Ethics, Authenticity, and Trust), which guides UX writers in reviewing AI-generated content for errors, appropriate citations, and empathetic language. This chapter is particularly helpful for writers, students, and instructors currently processing ethical and effective usages of AI. Fittingly, *UX Writing* closes with a glossary of key terms—the last of which is, not surprisingly, "UX writing." Tham et al. define UX writing as being "concerned with the integrative experience between the user and product/service as it is mediated by different content" (p. 241). *UX Writing*, with its structural, conceptual, and rhetorical interlocution between textbook and playbook, presents its own integrative experience for those in academia and industry hoping to better understand UX writing as a product and service that is becoming increasingly useful.

Author Information

Christopher J. Morris is currently an assistant professor in the Writing Department at York University, where he teaches courses in technical, professional, and creative writing.