To: Donnie Johnson Sackey, Associate Chair, Department of Rhetoric & Writing

From: Grace

Date: June 27th, 2025

Subject: Benchmarking Peer Departments to Improve the UT Department of Rhetoric & Writing Website

1. Introduction

Purpose of Memo:

This memo is a benchmarking analysis that will give the UT Austin Department of Rhetoric and Writing's website an idea of how it can effectively adopt different communication tactics and design strategies by looking at other peer academic departments like the University of Louisville and Michigan State University. Through evaluating structure, mission presentation, values, and offerings to the public, this report can provide many recommendations that would upgrade UT Austin's Department of Rhetoric and Writing web presence for prospective students and potential donors.

Selected Peer Departments:
Academic Department #1: University of Louisville
https://artsandsciences.louisville.edu/academics-programs/academic-departments/english

BA: English (Professional and Public Writing Track)

PhD: Rhetoric and Composition

Academic Department #2: Michigan State University https://wrac.msu.edu/

BA: Professional and Public Writing

PhD: Rhetoric and Writing

2. Departmental Identity & Mission

The University of Louisville's Department of English highlights a range of concentrations like professional and public writing. The website clearly states the appeal of becoming part of the English Department by saying that this is the place where you can "master the art of communication and critical thinking that shapes leaders, drives democracy, and transforms ideas into impact across every field." It lays out helpful links that can assist you in exploring your future in the department. The site is easy to peruse and has a

casual tone that appeals to a wide audience. The page doesn't clearly state the mission statement, however the "About" section discusses what you can expect if you decide to immerse yourself in the department.

The Michigan State Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures, clearly communicates that this is the "heart of and home for writing" and the university. The page is easy to navigate and overtly explains its identity in every section. The website has a lot of useful and appealing information like what programs they offer, videos detailing the student experience, and featured stories. It uses messages like "sharing one's ideas with the world" and "with attention to the importance of writing and communication" that clearly state its values.

UT's Department of Rhetoric and Writing does a good job of offering important information but it severely lacks in showcasing a mission statement and values. Prospective students don't get that "why" they should be there from the website compared to other schools. Its "identity" is more centered around coursework and advising rather than values, themes, and priorities.

I think that the University of Louisville's major strength is its descriptive language to suggest its identity, but lacks a clear mission statement. I think that Michigan State's biggest strength is its accessibility and transparent identity shown through values and messages. UT could benefit from adopting MSU's identity through transparent values and themes, maybe by adding a mission statement to its department homepage.

3. Website Navigation & Usability

The University of Louisville's department website is clean and easy to navigate. It uses links to applications, exploration of different programs within the department, and recent news stories from the department. This allows the user to have a straightforward experience on the website without getting lost or confused.

The MSU website has a lot of clarity. It is not over the top and refrains from shoving too much information in the faces of the site users. Each academic program has a neat landing page with helpful links. The menu bar is also helpful and well organized.

The UT department homepage is quite informative, but could use some cleaning up and more efforts to become more streamlined. I found that the website uses more clicks to get where you want to go

compared to the other universities. It is not as student-focused, rather it appeals more towards the institution. I think the homepage can benefit from being more user-friendly and straightforward like the University of Louisville and MSU.

4. Design & Rhetorical Strategies

The University of Louisville's English Department's homepage design and layout is very clean and neat. The department's landing page is visually minimal and simple and allows the audience to have an easy navigation experience. What the page lacks I think, is more of a visual storytelling aspect. The page can look a bit wordy, so I think the department would benefit from implementing more visual components. Louisville's tone is active and very informative, but lacks emotionally charged language that could help establish a connection with the user. Louisville could benefit from balancing language that is welcoming, professional, but also personal.

The MSU is also neat, clean, and even more easy to navigate. The page uses a more strategic approach to the use of images and videos that appeal more to the audience by being able to listen to real stories and experiences through the program. The language that MSU uses, establishes a tone that welcomes the audience by centering the page around student voices and experiences. The department homepage feels personal, accessible, and interactive, which appeals to the audience more.

The UT Austin Department of Rhetoric and Writing is visually pleasing, but severely lacks personality and visual engagement. It has important links, but that is about all there is to it. The homepage could really benefit from implementing student voices, feature stories, and other visual components like MSU. UT could also benefit from a more active tone like Louisville since its current tone leans more into the professional language that focuses more on academic structure than personal connection.

5. Audience Engagement & Donor Visibility

Louisville's homepage is more focused on centering around prospective students but has little to no information that is targeted towards alumni and donors. I think that the page could benefit from a section that targets those audiences in addition to prospective students to enhance audience engagement and interaction.

MSU's site does an amazing job of speaking to multiple audiences. It includes sections that are tailored towards prospective students, faculty, alumni, and donors. All of these audiences reached, allows for a more public-facing homepage that increases audience engagement and interaction.

UT Austin's homepage could definitely benefit from tailoring its content to different audiences. Currently, it does not really appeal to anyone besides prospective students, and even then, there is no personal appealing language or outreach content. There is no strong language centered around alumni or potential donors at all. To increase audience engagement, UT Austin should consider implementing alumni and donor profiles, maybe some research highlights, student stories, and a clear donation link.

6. Summary of Key Recommendations

1. **Feature concise and neatly worded department mission statement** that reels in the audience to let them know why they should study here.
2. **Implement visual storytelling aspects** that highlight current student and alumni voices to establish a personal connection with the audience.
3. **Workshop tone and language** to a more welcoming and student-centered to increase audience engagement and interaction
4. **Add donor and alumni representation** like success stories and donation links to increase outreach potential.

7. Reflection (Optional but Encouraged)

Through this benchmarking analysis, I learn about all of the important components that you can implement in a homepage to increase success. Strategic communication has the power to directly influence the identity of a specific organization or group. By analyzing how peer universities like the University of Louisville and Michigan State University frame their content and organize their website, I learned how even the most subtle rhetorical, visual, and language choices can influence how a program is viewed by multiple audiences like donors, alumni, faculty, and prospective students.

8. References/Works Cited

https://wrac.msu.edu/?s=donate

https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/rhetoric/

https://artsandsciences.louisville.edu/academics-programs/academic-departments/english