

Below is a message from Minwei Lu. She was in Prof. McIntyre's Honors VP course during the fall of 2003. Last week she dropped by my office to say hello, and we discussed her experiences with technical writing and VP. I asked her if she would be willing to put her experiences with the program in writing. Below is her message. I think you'll find it interesting.

Cindy Raisor
Lecturer in English

On Jan 24, 2005, at 12:28 PM, Minwei Lu wrote:

What I thought about visual physics and intergrated instruction in technical writing

I remember the first day of PHYS218 class. I felt apprehensive about the writing component of this course because none of my previous science classes had such a requirement, and I was a little dismayed at the extra amount of time I foresaw I would have to put in due to this requirement. As the semester progressed, however, I gradually began to grasp why exactly was our lab structured so and what the addition of technical writing component aimed to accomplish. I became more appreciative. By virtue of having to writing lab reports, we were forced to think more deeply about the physics concepts and the equations used in calculations involved in the experiment. This allowed us to have a more insightful understanding of labs and of the lectures they accompany. After all, we had to explain what our results showed-this meant making the link between the theoretical and the empirical; it also meant knowing the experiment inside out. In particular, I remember an experiment we did late in the semester, in which we were to measure the moment of inertia of a disk. We obtained the data, but my preliminary calculations with these measurements seem to indicate a linear trend, which deviated significantly from values obtained theoretically. Since I knew these were experiments many before us had performed, it was unlikely I was making new discovery; a more probable scenario would be I made a mistake somewhere. So I reviewed the entire procedure, the physics principles upon which the procedure was based, and the equations used. By the time I found what was throwing the numbers off, I could have told another person in detail why's and how's of the experiment, and this was all because we had to write an analysis, and to do that well, we must know what we were doing or, in this instance, why results appeared the way they did.

But the technical writing component was much broader than that. Our lab reports all followed the IEEE format, and they must have satisfy requirements such as good organization, smooth transition, succinctness, clarity, and so on. In the first case, these reports we wrote were a good preparation especially for those who might later choose to do research and publish in scientific journals. In the second case, requirements such as good organization and succinctness are characteristics that any good technical writing should have regardless. So, in short, I learned and benefited a lot by going through the lab and the technical writing training, and I believe that integration of lab and technical writing was key

Last semester I took another course having the lab component. And I attribute my lab grade, which was among one of the highest in class, to my experience and learning in PHYS218. I think visual physics and the integrated instruction in technical writing was a really good idea, and my experience was very rewarding.

Minwei Lu
Class of '07