Using Haikus, Limericks, and Other Poetic Forms to Summarize Human Factors Literature
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Feature at a Glance (Abstract)

In a human-computer interaction class at the University of Michigan, to familiarize students with the literature, the first assignment is for students to summarize an article from the primary journals on the topic as a poem. This novel approval helps students think more deeply about what they read. For example, in summarizing an article on how younger and older adults use pens to interact with handheld computers, one student wrote, “Handhelds and geezers, they are not bad with the pen, except for tapping.”

A Class Homework Assignment: Some Background

Once a year, since the early 1980s, I have taught Human Factors in Computer Systems (Industrial and Operations Engineering (IOE) 436) at the University of Michigan. This 3-credit class typically attracts 40-45 students, mostly seniors in industrial and operations engineering who have already completed the introductory human factors lecture and laboratory courses.

First, some basic details. IOE 436 has four expected objectives. The first is to convince students that designing computer hardware and software to be easy to use is as important as other aspects of computer system design (being converted to the "human factors religion"). The second is to teach how to design and evaluate computer systems for ease of use utilizing (a) human performance experiments, (b) analytic models and methods, (c) rapid prototyping, and (d) the research literature. The third and fourth objectives are to teach students to learn on their own and to improve their oral and written presentation skills.

When students graduate, there is a reasonable chance they will either be the human factors expert on a team, or after a few years, a project team leader. In those roles, they will be spend time looking for information on the usability of alternative interfaces or interface characteristics, methods to conduct an evaluation, or similar topics. To find that information, they will be examining the human-computer interaction literature (course objective 2d).

But how can students learn about a body of literature consisting of journal articles and proceedings that emphasize methods and data? After all, the reading experience of
engineering students is almost solely textbooks that present equations in a ready-to-use format. Thoughtlessly typing words into Google provides a dump of everything. What they will need in the future are the most important, high quality (reviewed) articles, and they will need them quickly. Where should they look?

Accordingly, the first day of class students are given an assignment to skim seven primary journals in human-computer interaction (ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, Behaviour and Information Technology, Human-Computer Interaction, Interacting with Computers, International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction, International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, and the Journal of Usability Studies). They also examine the ACM SIGCHI Proceedings. To keep the assignment current, only issues from the last 3 years of these publications were considered.

The effort to complete this assignment was minimal: Students did not need to go to the library, as all publications are online (University of Michigan eLibrary) and free for students.

Students were asked to summarize one article from the publications listed and provide five key words from each journal. Many students would just cut and paste material, without absorbing what the journals contain. So far, there is nothing unusual or noteworthy.

To get students to think more deeply about what they read and demonstrate their creativity, students are required to provide an additional summary of the article they read in the form of a short poem in iambic pentameter, a limerick, or a haiku. When this assignment is announced in class, there is a collective groan. Nonetheless, students complete the assignment as required and find it to be an interesting and enjoyable challenge.

Following are a sample of the better submissions from students (with their permission) from the winter 2008 semester. Only a few of the students were able to capture the essence of what was done and the conclusions in so few words. The most popular format was a modified haiku, probably because that form is short and has the fewest structural constraints.

**Submissions From IOE 436, Winter 2008.**


Haiku by Michael Grondin
User scrolls mouse through:  
Widget expands to right size  
User can click on.


Haiku by David Marvicsin

Handhelds and geezers  
They are not bad with the pen  
Except for tapping


Haiku by Heetal Patel

Girls seek privacy  
Texts and IMs are not good  
Mobile phones are gold


Haiku by Rober Edgar

Mouse-click anxiety testing  
Link of stress and computer  
No apparent link


Limerick by Ibrahim Shamsi

The three professors from Amsterdam
Couldn’t read the text and said DAMN
They tried their best
And so conducted a test
And concluded ‘just move the screen, man’


Haiku by Nicole Roels

Small screen or large screen
Try this and that; size changing
Choose a big display

My impression is the poetry achieved its purpose. To whit:

So I can say in conclusion,
Firmly and without delusion,
Poetic means,
As strange as it seems,
Helps with conceptual fusion.

**Author Biography**

Paul Green is a Research Professor in the Human Factors Division at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute and an Adjunct Associate Professor of Industrial and Operations Engineering. He conducts research on driver workload and teaches the human-computer interaction and automotive human factors classes. He also teaches the human factors engineering short course, a course for those in industry, now in its 49th year. Paul is President-Elect of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society.

**Key words**

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Haiku
Teaching
Learning
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