When representatives from the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication began exploring the potential of professional graduate courses in Des Moines, the response we received from the communications community was so repetitive it coalesced into a mantra:

**Stress writing.**

In an era of professional upheaval, technological revolution and rapidly evolving platforms, clear communication remains key not merely to career advancement but to human interaction. Clarity of writing reflects clarity of thought. In fact, we often discover what we think through the process of writing (and rewriting and rewriting). We sharpen our ideas by focusing and sharpening our language, finding exactly the right word that nails what we want to say rather than the two or three that circle around it or hover above it.

We think, therefore we write. Or do we write, therefore we think? However we define the process, imprecision and clutter are the chief impediments to clarity. And clarity, along with
concision and cohesion, should be the ideal for whatever we write, whether it’s a business plan, a marketing initiative, a web page, a feature article. Or an espionage thriller. (Yes, we will discuss sentence fragments.)

Journalism has long been the major of choice at the University of Iowa not only for aspiring journalists, but for many of those who aspire to a variety of careers in professional communication—from public relations to integrated marketing to non-profit, health or political communication. And many with this major who intended to become journalists have since found rewarding employment in these other fields.

This course adapts the principles and processes taught in graduate-level journalism courses at the UISJMC while minimizing the reporting element. The research that informs your work will likely take forms other than reporting and interviewing and will depend largely on your current employment and your professional aspirations.

But (and, yes, we will discuss beginning a sentence with a conjunction) whatever you write, you will find yourself facing the challenges of targeting your readership, focusing your message, and sharpening, refining and polishing it for optimal impact and effectiveness. The best writing is not only clear, it is fresh, vivid and muscular. It avoids clichés like the plague. (That’s a joke.) It opts for shorter, concrete (Anglo-Saxon) words rather than longer, abstract (Latinate) ones. It prefers the active verb voice to the passive. It engages the reader, informs and illuminates, even provides pleasure.

Writing isn’t easy, but it should appear to the reader that it was easy—that this was exactly what the writer wanted to say and the best (if not the only) way to say it. This course aspires to help students clear the clutter from their brains as well as their sentences, and to derive deep satisfaction from the clarity that results. A disorganized sentence (or paragraph or business plan) reflects a disorganized mind (or at least one that might benefit from some straightening and a little dusting). Over the course of this semester, we will sharpen our skills by doing a lot of writing and by doing some reading that will improve our writing, showing us not only how to write well but what to avoid.

And over the course of the semester, you might even find that your whole outlook on life has changed, that learning to revise your writing has revised your perspective. There’s a big difference between those who live in the active voice (“I hustled for that account and refused to be denied”) and those who live passively (“I was passed over for that promotion, which was given to someone who was considered a harder worker”). How we write is who we are.

THE WRITING
We will write something (from exercises to more ambitious assignments) every week, sometimes in class as well as during the week in between classes. Many of these assignments will be graded, some will not. (All assignments are mandatory, whether graded or not.) Some of the exercises, particularly those completed in class, will be very short—a paragraph or even a sentence. We will attempt not only to find consensus on the best way to express something, but to show the variety of choices that are available, perhaps as many choices as there are words in a sentence multiplied by the number of students in the class.

Through our writing, we will learn to distinguish right and wrong—to learn how and why subjects and verbs must agree in number (singular or plural), and nouns and pronouns must as well; why participles must never dangle (and what the heck is a participle, anyway?); why something can never be “very unique” or even “most unique;” and why the whole comprises the parts rather than the parts comprising the whole. (This sounds wrong to almost everyone, but look it up: This class comprises a half-dozen students.)

Having internalized the matters of right and wrong, recalibrating our instincts in the process so that what sounds and feels right actually is right, we will turn our attention to the subtleties of fine tuning—to the relative but crucial characteristics that make some writing worse or better (or good and better). Issues of emphasis, rhythm, word placement, sentence structure, changes of pace in sentence length (and paragraph length) will elevate discussions beyond matters of correctness (over which there is really no debate) into elements of style that reflect our individual tastes, values, personalities.

We will turn the process of writing inside out and explore every nuance along the way.

**THE READING**

This course will draw heavily from two primary textbooks:

**When Words Collide, 8th Edition**


Author(s): Kessler; McDonald


**Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, Tenth Edition**

Author(s): Joseph M. Williams; Gregory G. Colomb

http://www.coursesmart.com/IR/3378757/9780205717521

The links under each reflect a high-tech, budget alternative; each is available for online “rental” as well as hard-copy purchase.

The Williams text is more philosophical, reflecting the approach of the revered professor of English from the University of Chicago. (I received my MA in English from U of C and consider the school’s pedagogy exemplary.) Though the Kessler book covers some of the same material, it can function more as a reference resource, and a more contemporary-minded guide to applying the timeless principles so eloquently articulated in Williams to the various media through which we communicate.

We will also be reading a lot of shorter pieces assigned as the semester progresses and will be depending on students to provide examples from their workplaces (and examples of their own work) for brainstorming, discussion and workshopping.

GRADING:

Class attendance and participation 25%
Weekly writing assignments (both in and outside of class) 25%
Midterm writing assignment: 10%
Group project: 10%
Final individual project: 30%

Attendance (whether in the classroom or online) is MANDATORY, as the course will be much more interactive than lecture oriented, with written assignments as well as discussion part of the class sessions. Particularly with once-a-week classes, each week represents a significant portion of the course. If you can’t attend and have a good reason, please let me know as soon as you can (before the class you miss rather than after).

The group project will be determined early in the semester, with students’ interests and abilities factoring heavily into the choice, focus and scope. It will continue over much of the semester, providing an object lesson in real world application of the principles and values we are exploring in class. The group project might also inspire some individual writing assignments, but the grade for the group will not undermine any individual student’s final grade. (In other words, work hard and take it seriously, but don’t worry that some laggard will drag you down.)

The final project will be negotiated between each student and the professor, who hopes that you are able to adapt some suitable workplace assignment, issue, challenge or initiative to demonstrate what you’ve learned over the semester. (We’ll discuss this in detail, but I’d rather have each of you work on something meaningful to you and your career than to submit to a one-size-fits-all assignment that might be more of an academic exercise.)
Your writing assignments must meet a professional standard, which is also the grading standard. Clean copy is a baseline requirement (no typos, grammar or punctuation errors), with organization, flow, tone, clarity, cohesion, concision and focus among the elements that determine how well an assignment achieves its goal.

I’d like to share with you something from a syllabus by the late David Foster Wallace-- genius novelist, gifted teacher, suicidal depressive:

“If you are used to whipping off papers the night before they’re due, running them quickly through the computer’s Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense and having the professor accept them ‘because the ideas are good’ or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one’s ideas and the quality of those ideas’ verbal expression, and I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding.”

You can consider those standards my own (though, have no fear, I am not a suicidal depressive). His warning was addressed toward undergrads; I expect even more from communication professionals and graduate students. Yet I’d rather you make your mistakes in here than in your job. I can’t deny you a promotion or downsize your position; I can only grade (and perhaps embarrass) you.

All writing assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A paper due Thursday that deserves an A will receive a B if I don’t get it until Friday, etc.)

Writing assignments not listed on the syllabus will be given (and sometimes completed) in class. There will also be plenty of class time allotted to the group project, once we determine it.

**Administrative Home**
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

**Electronic Communication**
University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences. (*Operations Manual*, III.15.2. Scroll down to k.11.)

**Accommodations for Disabilities**
A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See [www.uiowa.edu/~sds/](http://www.uiowa.edu/~sds/) for more information.
**Academic Honesty**
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences expects all students to do their own work, as stated in the [CLAS Code of Academic Honesty](#). Instructors fail any assignment that shows evidence of plagiarism or other forms of cheating, also reporting the student's name to the College. A student reported to the College for cheating is placed on disciplinary probation; a student reported twice is suspended or expelled.

**CLAS Final Examination Policies**
Final exams may be offered only during finals week. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. Students should not ask their instructor to reschedule a final exam since the College does not permit rescheduling of a final exam once the semester has begun. Questions should be addressed to the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Curriculum.

**Making a Suggestion or a Complaint**
Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit the instructor, then the course supervisor, and then the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident. See the CLAS [Student Academic Handbook](#).

**Understanding Sexual Harassment**
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI [Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment](#) for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

**Reacting Safely to Severe Weather**
In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Public Safety [web site](#).

*These CLAS policy and procedural statements have been summarized from the web pages of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and The University of Iowa [Operations Manual](#).*

**CALENDAR**

1/19: Technological troubleshooting, exploring the syllabus, getting to know you—now get to work.

1/26: Style, Preface and Lesson One; Collide, Ch. 1.

2/2: Style, Lesson Two; Collide, Ch 2 and 3. Discuss and brainstorm major assignments (midterm, group and final).
First writing assignment due: Find a job posting (or compose one) for a position you’d like to have. Write a cover letter/personal statement selling yourself as an exceptional candidate for this position.

2/9: Style, Lesson Three; Collide, Ch. 4 and 5.
Second writing assignment due: Renaming the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication (or not)

2/16: Style, Lesson Four and Five.

2/23: Style, Lesson Six; Collide, Ch 6 and 7.

3/1: Style, Lesson Seven and Appendix I; Collide, Ch. 8.

3/8: Midterm writing assignment due and discussed, brainstorm and discuss final assignment.

3/15: No class—Spring break!

3/22: Style, Lesson Eight; Collide, Ch 9 and 10.

3/29: Style, Lesson Nine

4/5: Style, Lessons Ten and Eleven

4/12: final work sessions for group project and brainstorming sessions for final project.

4/19: Group projects due and discussed

4/26: Style, Lesson Twelve; Collide, Ch. 11 and Appendices.

5/4: Final individual projects due and discussed.

There will be no final exam.