Writing and Editing for Public Communication

JMC: 5400

Spring 2015

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Office hours: Wednesday 4:30-5:30
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Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).
I’m often available at your convenience—before or after class, any other day, in person, by email or phone. Just let me know when you need me and we can set something up.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To make students aware of the myriad choices involved in focusing a message and targeting an audience, one that depend on platform, readership and the essence of the communication.
- To help students master the mechanics of writing and sharpen their written skills, learning as they go how to eliminate redundancy and cliché and to make sure every word is fresh and vital.
- To teach students to write with concision, cohesion and coherence (along with a lot of other virtues that don’t begin with “c”).
- To progress from the micro building blocks of writing—the subject-verb relationship, the sentence, the paragraph—to make the macro edifice of the finished product as strong and compelling as possible. To stress the importance of a strong beginning, middle and end (preferably in that order).
To prepare the student for more specialized courses as well as careers in which they will use the basic principles of writing as emphasized here in more specialized formats, across fields and platforms

COURSE OVERVIEW

When representatives from the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication began exploring the potential of professional graduate courses toward an MA—Strat Comm degree, 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 initially intended to become journalists have instead found rewarding employment in these and 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. (You can tell when you're slipping into ugly, unmusical business jargon—“prioritize,” and the like—because it provides no pleasure to either the writer or reader.)

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, much like my cluttered workspace). Over the course of this semester, we will sharpen our skills by doing a lot of writing (most of which will be assigned in class rather than detailed on the syllabus) 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 likely 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 almost a 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

The Sense of Style
Author: Steven Pinker

Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace, Eleventh Edition
Author(s): Joseph M. Williams; Joseph Bizup
http://www.coursesmart.com/IR/3378757/9780205717521

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.

In particular we will be monitoring the New York Times, and the Monday media section in particular, as well as the media and marketing coverage in the Wall Street Journal. Weekly writing assignments may well play off the news of the day.

GRADING:

Class attendance and participation 35%
Weekly writing assignments (both in and outside of class) 25%
Midterm writing assignment: 15%
Final individual project: 25%
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 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 better, more polished work 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 by Sunday (at midnight) before the day of class on which they are scheduled to be discussed. Those late will be docked a letter grade per day. (A paper due Sunday that deserves an A will receive a C if I don’t get it until Tuesday, etc.)

Writing assignments not listed on the syllabus will be given (and sometimes completed) in class. Again, if there’s any reason you must be absent (and it better be a good one), let me know ahead of time rather than after the fact.
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences:
Policies and Procedures

Teaching Policies & Resources — Syllabus Insert

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 Academic Policies Handbook at http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/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, k.11).

Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet with the course instructor privately in the instructor's office to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty

All CLAS students or students taking classes offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of
Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final examination schedule for each class is announced by the Registrar generally by the fifth week of classes. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the date, time, and location of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar's web site and will be shared with instructors and students. It is the student's responsibility to know the date, time, and place of a final exam.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit with the instructor (and the course supervisor), and then with the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident (CLAS Academic Policies 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 Department of Public Safety website.

*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**

**Week one**

1/19: No class. MLK Day

**Week two**

1/26: Technological troubleshooting, exploring the syllabus, getting to know you—now get to work.

**Week three:**


**Week four:**

2/9: Writing assignment: 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. Pinker, Ch 1.

**Week five:**

2/16: Williams, Lesson 3; Pinker, Ch 2
Week six:
2/23: Style, Lesson 4, assign and discuss midterm

Week seven:
3/2: Pinker, Ch 3

Week eight:
3/9: Midterm papers due and discussed.

Week nine:
3/16: SPRING BREAK

Week ten:
3/23: Pinker, Ch 4

Week eleven:
3/30: Pinker, Ch 5; Style, Lesson 5-6

Week twelve:
4/6: Style, Lesson 7-8. Discuss final writing assignment

Week thirteen:
4/13: Style, Lesson 9; Begin Pinker, Ch 6
Week fourteen:

4/20: Style, Lesson 10-11, continue Pinker

Week fifteen:

4/27: Style, Part Five and appendices, continue and conclude Pinker

Week sixteen:

5/4: Final papers due and discussed.

NO FINAL. HAVE A GREAT SUMMER!