Writing and Editing for Public Communication Workshop (019:226:EXA/EXW)

John and Mary Pappajohn Education Center, Room 218

Thursdays, 5:30-8:00

Professor: Don McLeese

Office: #110, Pappajohn

515-235-4650 (office)

515-440-1151 (home)

515-770-3894 (cell)

donald-mcleese@uiowa.edu

Office hours: Thursday 4:30-5:30,

Online Monday, Wednesday 5:30-6:30

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 OVERVIEW

Though this is the third time I’ve taught this advanced writing course with this particular focus (Strat Comm rather than advanced journalism), it is the first time that this is officially a foundation course for an approved degree program rather than a pilot course operating on a wing and a prayer.

So, welcome!

When representatives from the University of Iowa School of Journalism and Mass Communication began exploring the potential of professional graduate courses in Des Moines (and online), 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 (Linate) 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 a dozen or so 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

Now that we are officially a degree program targeting professionals toiling in the field of communications (and those who aspire to be), I have changed the textbooks to tighten the focus. The first and second books are new to this semester’s syllabus, while the third is a holdover that you will likely find illuminating and frustrating in equal measure. The first two will provide an
equal playing field (where some of you come to this course with more experience than others); the third will elevate your game.

**Working With Words (8th ed)**


Brooks, et al, Bedford St. Martin


**Strategic Writing (3rd ed)**


Marsh et al.

Pearson

http://www.mypearsonstore.com/bookstore/strategic-writing-9780205031979

**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, whether through online “rental” or ebook purchase. I am what we in media circles term “platform agnostic,” which means it makes no difference to me whether you absorb the material through print, online digits, audiobook (should you find one), whatever. But my experience thus far in these courses suggests that those who used the old-fashioned, hard-copy, print book (where you can underline, take notes and locate page numbers most easily) have been the most satisfied, and that some who have started with digital have shifted to print. (And some haven’t, makes no difference to me, caveat emptor.)

The Williams text is the most philosophical, and the one that most distinguishes this course as graduate level. It reflects 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). Where the other texts are more nuts-and-bolts, applicable specifically to professional communication, the timeless principles so eloquently articulated in Williams transcend the various media through which we communicate.
By comparison, WWW is more nuts-and-bolts, a kind of owner’s manual for language to keep in your glove compartment. And SW focuses most specifically on the kinds of professional, strategic communication you might well have to generate in your careers.

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 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 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.

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 privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.
Academic Honesty

All CLAS students 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 around the fifth week of the semester by the Registrar. 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 dates and times of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar's website.

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.
(I will note that because this course doesn’t involve going outside to an Iowa City classroom and conditions might be different in Des Moines, it is conceivable that we could have class on days that the university has cancelled. Or not. Just check to make sure.)

**CALENDAR**

(Note: the Des Moines campus will this year be enforcing the UIowa prohibition against having food and drink in the classroom. Because I think two and a half hours without either constitutes cruel and unusual punishment, I’ve decided to institute a longer, and—at least at the start of the semester—more regular break. Until we change my mind, each class session will be divided into two hour-long sessions, with a half-hour break—from 6:30-7—in between. Consider this a dinner break if you’d like. If we collectively decide that the break not be so long and that it disrupts flow, we’ll revisit.)

1/24: Technological troubleshooting, exploring the syllabus, getting to know you—now get to work.

1/31: Style, Preface and Part One

2/7: SW, Section I; WWW, Preface—Part I, 1-2
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.

2/14: Style, Lessons Three and Four; WWW, Part I, 3-4

2/21: Style, Lesson Five and Six, WWW, Part I, 5-7

2/28: SW, Intro and Section I; WWW, Part I, 8.

3/7: Style, Lesson Seven and Appendix I; WWW, Part 2; SW, Section II (through Media Kit, pg 76)

3/14: SW, rest of Section II; Midterm writing assignment discussed and workshopped

3/21: **No class—Spring break!**

3/28: Midterm writing assignment due and discussed.

4/4: Style, Lesson Eight and Nine; WWW, Part III, 11-12

4/11: Style, Lessons Ten and Eleven; SW, Section III

4/18: Style, Lesson Twelve; WWW Part III, 13—Part IV
4/25: SW, Section IV

5/2: SW, Section V and appendices

5/9: Final individual projects due and discussed.

There will be no final exam.