206-03 Writing for the Media

Randall Patnode

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COMM 206
Writing for the Media

Fall 2014, WF 3:00-4:15
Instructor: Dr. Randall Patnode

Office: Schott 308
Office Hours: MWF 11 a.m. - 2 p.m.
& by appt.

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886-5338 (cel & text)
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What you will learn
The class is designed to give students a practical introduction to the basics of media writing. It will provide fundamental instruction and preparation for upper-level writing courses in the department. You will learn about appropriate writing form for various audiences, Associated Press style, writing in active voice, writing economically, punctuation, grammar, media conventions, and media law.

Materials to Help you Learn
1) Required textbooks: Yopp, Reaching Audiences, 6th ed; AP Stylebook (any recent edition)
2) Daily newspaper (dead-tree or digital)
3) Articles, notes, Powerpoints, exercises on Canvas

How you are Evaluated
1) Midterm and final exam (25 percent each). These will test your ability to write appropriately for the media under deadline conditions as well as your ability to properly use AP style, grammar, punctuation and spelling.
2) In-class writing exercises (20 percent). These are scheduled primarily on Fridays. Using the classroom computers, you will compose brief news stories based on a set of provided facts. Stories must be completed by the end of the class period and uploaded to Canvas. No make-ups without prior instructor approval.
3) Blogging Assignment (10 percent). Instructions will be provided in class.
4) Quizzes & Homework (20 percent). Quizzes may be announced or unannounced, covering grammar, style, punctuation. Homework will be assigned as needed.
How your written work is graded:
Your work is first evaluated for overall content, which includes such factors as an appropriate lead, completeness, use of sources and attribution, story organization, flow, transitions, etc. This is based on a total 100 points.

Points are then deducted from the content grade for mechanical errors (grammar, punctuation, and spelling), factual errors, and missed deadlines. Deductions are as follows:

- Grammar, punctuation, capitalization: -2 points
- AP style: -2 points
- Spelling: -5 points
- Factual errors: -20 points

Grammar includes subject-verb agreement, tenses, incomplete sentences (fragments) and possessives. Punctuation includes proper use of commas, hyphens, apostrophes, quotation marks, and run-on sentences. Capitalization includes words that should be capitalized but aren’t, and vice versa. AP style errors include common rules (numbers, capitalization, abbreviations, etc). Spelling errors include typos, obvious misspellings (which, with spell check, should NEVER happen), and misused but properly spelled words (“it’s” when you mean “its”; “there” when you mean “their”; “than” when you mean “then”).

Factual errors include misspelled names, proper nouns (i.e., company names, place names), wrong ages, addresses, information in quotations that was never stated, any made-up information. If you repeat an error in the same story (i.e., misspell a name), you will be charged only once.

Example: You earn a content grade of 80 for an adequate but not exceptional story, but you have three punctuation errors, one AP style error and a spelling error. Your final grade for the assignment is 80-13, for a final score of 67. As you can see, the points can pile up rather quickly. Fact errors are especially deadly.

Common notations used in feedback:
- SP = spelling error
- PV = passive voice
- Agree = incorrect subject-verb agreement
- Circle = if an abbreviation, spell it out; if spelled out, it should be abbreviated
- Wordy = used more words than necessary
- ? = unclear; not sure what you’re trying to say
- Fact = fact error
- AP = AP Style error
- TR = Transpose words or phrases

Other notations are covered in the AP Stylebook page on copy-marking symbols.
Grade Scale

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<th>Grade</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B+</th>
<th>C+</th>
<th>D+</th>
<th>F</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>93-100</td>
<td>87-89</td>
<td>77-79</td>
<td>67-69</td>
<td>0-59</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>90-92</td>
<td>83-86</td>
<td>73-76</td>
<td>63-66</td>
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<td>B-</td>
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<td>80-82</td>
<td>70-72</td>
<td>60-62</td>
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</table>

Attendance

According to the Xavier academic catalog, “In order to earn credit in any course for which he/she is registered, the student is required to attend classroom and laboratory exercises regularly and promptly. Unexcused absence from a previously announced test may incur the penalty of a failure in that particular test. Regular attendance and missed class and test procedures are determined by the individual faculty members. Students should consult the class syllabi for current policy regarding attendance, grading, procedures, etc., by individual faculty members.”

Translated, this means that I expect you to show up for all classes. I do not take official attendance, but obviously you need to be in class to complete the exercises, and completing the exercises does count. There are no make-ups for missed exercises unless you arrange with me in advance.

You MUST be in class for the midterm and final. There will be no make-ups, except for documented medical excuses and official university business. If you miss a test and you have not contacted me before the class, you will receive a zero.

Medical excuses are only accepted if you contact me BEFORE the test and then you provide a letter from a physician documenting the date(s) of the illness. Athletes and individuals who will be missing class on university business must provide written documentation of their absence BEFORE the test.

SPECIAL NOTE: The final exam for this class is scheduled (by the registrar, not me) for Friday, Dec. 19, 2-3:50. I realize this is the last day of exams, but, no, you can’t take the exam earlier. So, make your travel plans accordingly.

Participation

The educational experience thrives on student participation. I expect you to ask questions, make intelligent observations, and otherwise contribute to an energetic classroom experience. To encourage this, I may call on you to 1) describe what you encountered in the readings; 2) to offer your opinion on certain topics; 3) to provide your interpretation of material we have encountered.

Canvas

We will make use of the Canvas system for this class. Supplemental readings and grades will be posted there. If you have questions about how to use Canvas, please see me during the first or second class meeting. Otherwise, I will assume you know how to access the class materials.
Canvas is available wherever there are computers with Internet access, so there is little excuse for not being able to obtain class materials. Since I will be posting your grades on Canvas, I expect you to review them in a timely fashion. From time to time I make mistakes and post an incorrect score. I am happy to make corrections as long as you notify me in a timely fashion.

**Computer Issues**

When I was in school the most common excuse for not completing an assignment was, “The dog ate my homework.” Now it’s those hungry computers that keep eating student work. Computer crashes and glitches really do happen (they’ve happened to me). That’s why smart computer users learn the following mantra: BACKUP, BACKUP, BACKUP. You should keep at least TWO copies of your work as you are completing it: one on your main computer and another on a diskette or jump drive. You should also print out a copy of your work in progress in the event that these backups fail. This is standard procedure for people in the work world, and I expect the same of you. You will find me relatively unreceptive to these kinds of excuses. I’m also not terribly sympathetic to computer access issues. You do not need to own a computer to complete the work for this class. There are computer labs in virtually every building on campus. Should you find that old dinosaur computer your parents sent with you to college is not adequate to the task, I expect you to use the lab computers that the university provides.

**Computers and Cell Phones in Class**

We will be using the computers in class almost every day. I expect you to use them exclusively for class activities. It is impolite, disrespectful and distracting for you to be surfing or checking your email during class (unless otherwise instructed). Doing so will damage your grade. Same goes for the use of cell phones in class.

**Email**

The university provides you with a free access to email (usually your last name plus “@xavier.edu.”) I expect you to regularly check the Xavier account or have Canvas direct these emails to a place where you are likely to see them. I send a lot of email to students: reminders, follow-ups to questions in class, late-breaking media news, etc. If you don’t read your email, you may be at a disadvantage.

**Academic Honesty**

You are expected to do your own work and credit information and statements from others appropriately. You may not:

- cut and paste sentences, paragraphs or pages from documents on the web and offer them as your own.
- buy papers from the web and offer them as your own.
- paraphrase the ideas of others without acknowledging the source.
- collaborate on class work with anyone unless directed by the instructor.
- copy work from others
- allow others to copy from your work
- use work from other classes to satisfy assignments in this class

You are required to:
place inside of quotations and correctly cite any passages that are drawn from other sources, including those on the internet.  
• Acknowledge the source of any information that you have paraphrased.  
• Correctly cite the source of factual information  
• Report any instances of academic dishonesty to the instructor

Some Thoughts on Grading
• Although I apply trained, professional judgment to your class work, I realize that you may not always agree with me.  
• The process of grading is painful – for you and for me. While I always attempt to be objective, I do not always succeed. No one can be completely objective all the time.  
• Different professors grade differently. People see different things as important. That’s life.  
• You are not alone. I get evaluated all the time – by my peers, my bosses, and by you.  
• Grades are not necessarily an accurate evaluation of your work or your ability, but it is the system we use.  
• It is wise for you to explore the boundaries of your professors’ professional judgments. Learn what he or she values and then do your best to deliver.  
• In this class anyway, an “A” is available to all students. In the event that you all earn an “A” for the semester, you will all have delivered not just pretty good work, but outstanding work.

Professionalism in Class
The fact that you have chosen to attend college leads me to conclude that most of you are interested in spending your lives doing more than asking people if they would like fries with their meal. That being the case, you might want to look upon your experience here as professional training for your life in the outside world. Part of that training involves learning about expectations that will be placed on you. In this class, those expectations include (but are not limited to):

Show up for all classes. It makes little economic sense to pay thousands of dollars in tuition, fees, books and living expenses and then not take your reward -- an education. If you are unable to attend because of a serious medical or other situation, do as you would do in the outside world: call your supervisor (that’s me) before you are expected in class. Otherwise, I may worry about you.

Be on time. Employers in the outside world do not long tolerate dawdlers, and neither do I. Be punctual. Turn in your work on time. People who show up late in the outside world get docked in their pay. Students who fail to meet deadlines in this class are penalized with lower grades.

Be respectful. This applies to other students as well as your instructor. Showing respect means refraining from reading newspapers in class, talking during lectures and student presentations, leaving early or arriving late.
Take responsibility for your education. The educational experience thrives on student involvement. Do the readings and come to class ready to participate in discussions. Asking questions and offering your point of view in class is good practice for thinking on your feet and expressing yourself. Enjoy your moment on the stage. In this class, any student who attempts to express his or her opinion is a success.

Pay attention to the instructions. Assignments often have detailed instructions. Please follow them to the letter. The instructions, in part, are intended to give every student an equal chance at doing his or her best work. If the instructions are unclear, please ask for clarification. Just as in the outside world, repeated failure to follow instructions in this class results in serious consequences.

Accept challenges with grace. Much of the work you face in this class will be unfamiliar or difficult. This fact should not be taken as an excuse to whine. You are in college to learn, which means there is a great deal you do not know. Get used to it. Exams, papers, and presentations are all learning opportunities. Even from your failures I expect great things.

Accept the consequences of your actions. So you partied the night before the midterm, so you overslept, so you missed the exam. So what? You knew there would be no make-ups for the exam. You made your choice, now live with the decision. Don’t ask for a special exception, because in doing so you devalue the choices of all the other students in the class.

Write, spell, and punctuate as if your job depended on it. This course is offered by the Department of Communication Arts, so the standards of the communication profession apply to your work in this class. Your written assignments should be letter-perfect, down to the spelling, grammar, punctuation, and style. Consider this standard procedure for the outside world, where resumes with typos or other errors are routinely consigned to the trashcan.

Do your own work. You are expected to fully comply with the university’s academic honesty policy. Anything less compromises your integrity and devalues your education. Plagiarism, or taking credit for someone else’s work, is a serious offense -- both in this course and in the outside world. Copying a classmate's work, failing to attribute information to a source, or making up information will lead to your failing the assignment. The same goes for unauthorized collaboration on assignments and exams.

Your choice to continue your enrollment in this class means that you have read, understand, and will abide by all of the provisions above.