

## **Introduction to Media Writing**

COMM 200

Three credits; spring 2014

Section 1 (course No. 7385): 10-10:50 a.m., MWF, QBB 116

Section 2 (course No. 8178): 11-11:50 a.m., MWF, QBB 116

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### **NDSU BULLETIN DESCRIPTION**

Introduction to writing in the styles and forms required in journalism, advertising, broadcasting, and public relations. Mass communication majors must earn a grade of B or better. Prereq: COMM 112, ENGL 120.

### **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

Students are expected to become familiar with the conventions of journalistic writing and the elements of journalistic style. To a large degree, journalistic writing is formulaic and follows certain established conventions. This is not a creative writing course. Instead, the goal is to develop a concise writing style that conveys information clearly to readers. The course concentrates on developing writing and reporting techniques for the print media, primarily daily newspapers. We start with the fundamentals of good news writing, building little by little until students are able to craft effective news stories anchored with solid lead paragraphs. Emphasis is placed on developing news stories that present facts logically with clarity, conciseness and coherence.

Exercises focus on:

- developing familiarity with the style of writing used by the Associated Press and the contents of the “Associated Press Stylebook.”
- the elements of good writing, including spelling, grammar, diction, syntax, style, precision, clarity, pacing, and transitions.
- various techniques to write the lead-in (first few paragraph of the story) and organize the body and conclusion of the story.
- the nature of news and journalistic storytelling.
- news judgment.
- developing and handling news sources (finding the right news sources and preparing for and conducting interviews).
- handling quotes and attribution.
- special techniques and concepts that journalists employ because of their special relationship to the audience (e.g., objectivity and a detached point of view) and government (e.g., the adversarial, or watchdog, role of the press).

The writing and newsgathering exercises will primarily apply to print media. More advanced COMM department writing courses address multi-media techniques used by news websites.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

1. "Writing and Reporting News" (seventh edition), by Carole Rich. Boston: Wadsworth.
2. "The Associated Press Stylebook" (2013 edition), edited by Christian, Jacobsen and Minthorn. New York: The Associated Press.

## COURSE GRADING

Grades for the semester are figured this way:

■ Tests	45 percent
■ In- and out-of-class exercises/assignments	50 percent
■ Attendance	5 percent

## GRADING SCALE

Grades will be assigned in the following manner:

- A: 90-100 percent
- B: 80-89 percent
- C: 70-79 percent
- D: 60-69 percent
- F: below 60 percent

## WRITING EXERCISES AND ASSIGNMENTS

Generally, exercises and assignments carry more weight for course grading as we move along in the semester. Students will receive both group and individual feedback from the instructor.

Assignments are graded on all the elements that make a story acceptable in a real newsroom: accuracy, fairness, clarity, conciseness, good writing quality, news style, correct grammar and spelling, good story organization and lead-in, reader interest, thoroughness, etc. Grades assigned to stories will reflect the following criteria:

- A—A story that a good publication would print proudly. No major changes required. A story skillfully done by the writer.
- B—A story that would merit publication but needs more than minor, routine editing.
- C—A story that needs a thorough rewrite but has the makings of a story fit for publication.
- D—Unusable story containing major flaws (inaccurate or misleading elements, confusing or unintelligible presentation of facts, etc.)
- F—A story that would do a publication more harm than good. A libelous story, or a story with the facts significantly wrong or distorted.

## ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION

Assignments should be submitted to the instructor via **hard copy only**. Assignments submitted via email or Blackboard platforms will not be accepted unless prior arrangements have been made with the instructor or if an excused absence prevents the student from attending class on the day an assignment is due.

## ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

There is not an assignment schedule because the class sessions require great flexibility. The pace of the course depends on how quickly students in class master reporting and newswriting concepts and techniques. Writing assignments will consist of in-class and out-of-class

assignments, as well as group and individual assignments.

During the session we will write stories related to several traditional news beats: police (e.g., robbery, car accident, fire, etc.), general assignments (advance stories, speeches, obituaries, news release rewrites), politics, city council/county commissioners, education, courts, business/finance, sports. We will have assignments that touch on public relations, broadcasting and advertising writing if possible at the end of the course.

### **ASSIGNMENT REWRITE POLICY**

Most (but not all) out-of-class writing assignments given in COMM 200 will be conducted in two parts – a first draft phase and a rewrite phase. Students will receive a graded copy of their first draft and, if they choose, may attempt to rewrite the story for a better grade. The higher of the two grades will be used in calculating the student's final grade.

When submitting a rewritten assignment, students should staple (no paper clips) the new version of the story to the top of their old version and turn in both versions together.

### **LATE ASSIGNMENT POLICY**

Assignments will be accepted up to 24 hours after a deadline. Any late assignments will be automatically deducted two letter grades (20 percentage points). Assignments will not be accepted more than 24 hours late. In-class assignments will not be accepted late no matter the circumstance.

### **ATTENDANCE/TARDINESS POLICY**

**STUDENT RESPONSIBILITY** (from NDSU policy 333): Students are responsible for informing course instructors of absences. If absences are known (e.g., university sanctioned activity), course instructors shall be informed with written notification as far in advance as possible (preferably a two-week notice). Where advance notification is not possible (e.g., illness, family emergency, etc.), students should contact their course instructor as soon as possible about the absence. When a student misses class for any reason, the student is expected to make arrangements with the course instructor to follow the course instructor's policy in making up any missed assignments, if permitted.

For COMM 200, if you are not present in the class to do an assignment or to learn of an assignment, you will receive a zero on the assignment unless you provide an acceptable excuse, in writing, for your absence (generally limited to university-excused absences and absences excused by a doctor's note).

The nature of the in- and out-of-class assignments in this class makes it difficult to schedule make-ups. Students who have official, written excuses for absences may be allowed to make up missed coursework or assignments without penalty, depending on the nature of the assignment. Usually if you miss an assignment because of an excused absence, there will be no makeup and no penalty (grades will be pro-rated accordingly). For example, if you miss a test and are excused for the absence, your total test score for the course will be based on five rather than six tests.

Late test make-ups for unexcused absences will not be facilitated; however, students may take tests early if they know they will be gone on the day of a test. If students miss hearing about an out-of-class assignment due to an unexcused absence, it is the STUDENT'S responsibility to contact the instructor and receive the assignment. In any event, a student will not be penalized for assignments missed if the instructor excuses the student for the absence.

Attendance will be taken daily. Excused absences will not count against a student's attendance grade. Attendance grades will be assigned using the following criteria:

0-1 unexcused absences in the semester: 100

2 unexcused absences: 90

3 unexcused absences: 80

4 unexcused absences: 70

5 unexcused absences: 60

6-plus unexcused absences: 0

Two significant gaps in attendance (more than 10 minutes late to class, or leaving more than 10 minutes early) will constitute one unexcused absence.

## **READING SCHEDULE**

The following reading schedule should be used as a guideline only and is subject to change. More readings may be assigned throughout the semester. Any additions or changes to readings will be announced in class.

### **Week 1 (Jan. 15-17)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 1, "Changing Concepts of News."

Handout: "Fundamentals of Newswriting Style."

### **Week 2 (Jan. 22-24) NO CLASS Jan. 20, Martin Luther King Day**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 2, "The Basic News Story;" Ch. 7, "Leads and Nut Grafts."

AP Stylebook entries: "abbreviations and acronyms," "directions and regions," "titles."

### **Week 3 (Jan. 27-31)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 8, "Story Organization."

Handout: "Attribution Guidelines."

AP Stylebook entries: "company/companies," "corporation," "incorporated," "quotations in the news."

### **Week 4 (Feb. 3-7)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 18, "Speeches, News Conferences and Meetings;" Ch. 20, "Crime and Punishment."

AP Stylebook entries: "accused," "arrest," "allege," "burglary/larceny/robbery/theft," "indict."

### **Week 5 (Feb. 10-14)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 17, "Profiles and Obituaries."

AP Stylebook entries: "courtesy titles," "composition titles," "days of the week," "months."

### **Week 6 (Feb. 19-21) NO CLASS Feb. 17, President's Day**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 21, "Disasters, Weather and Tragedies."

AP Stylebook entries: "dimensions," "distances," "prefixes," "weights."

### **Week 7 (Feb. 24-28)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 9, "Story Forms;" Ch. 10, "Storytelling and Feature Techniques."

AP Stylebook section: "Punctuation guide."

**Week 8 (March 3-7)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 13, “Public Relations Writing.”

AP Stylebook entries: “essential clauses/nonessential clauses,” “essential phrases/nonessential phrases.”

**Week 9 (March 10-14)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 5, “Sources and Online Research;” Ch. 14, “Media Law.”

AP Stylebook entries: “academic degrees,” “academic department,” “academic titles.”

**Week 10 (March 24-26) NO CLASS March 28, Midwest Journalism Conference**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 3, “Convergent and Mobile Media;” Ch. 12, “Online Journalism.”

AP Stylebook entries: “temperatures,” “women.”

**Week 11 (March 31-April 4)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 6, “Interviewing Techniques.”

**Week 12 (April 7-11)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 16, “Multicultural Sensitivity;” Ch. 19, “Government and Statistical Stories.”

AP Stylebook entries: “animals,” “collective nouns,” “following,” “religious references.”

**Week 13 (April 14-16) NO CLASS April 18, Easter Break**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 4, “Social Media.”

AP Stylebook entries: “plurals,” “state names.”

**Week 14 (April 23-25) NO CLASS April 21, Easter Break**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 15, “Media Ethics.”

Handout, “AP Style Guidelines.”

AP Stylebook entry: “anonymous sources.”

**Week 15 (April 28-May 2)**

Writing and Reporting News: Ch. 11, “Broadcast News Writing.”

**Week 16 (May 5-9) DEAD WEEK**

No required readings.

**Week 17 (May 12-16) FINALS WEEK**

No required readings.

Writing and Reporting News Chapter 22, “Media Jobs and Internships,” will not be required reading this semester.

**TEST SCHEDULE**

This schedule is subject to change; changes will be announced in class. Each test counts equally toward the student’s final grade. Test 6 will be cumulative; other tests will cover only the readings assigned since the previous test.

Test 1: Jan. 31 (On readings Weeks 1-3)

Test 2: Feb. 21 (On readings Weeks 4-6)

Test 3: March 7 (On readings Weeks 7-8)

Test 4: April 2 (On readings Weeks 9-11)

Test 5: April 16 (On readings Weeks 12-13)

Test 6: Finals week, May 12-16 (On readings Weeks 14-17 and all previous readings)

The section 1 (10 a.m. class) final is scheduled for 8 a.m. Wednesday, May 14

The section 2 (11 a.m. class) final is scheduled for 1 p.m. Monday, May 12

## **ACADEMIC HONESTY STATEMENT**

The academic community is operated on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play. NDSU Policy 335: Code of Academic Responsibility and Conduct applies to cases in which cheating, plagiarism, or other academic misconduct have occurred in an instructional context. Students found guilty of academic misconduct are subject to penalties, up to and possibly including suspension and/or expulsion. Student academic misconduct records are maintained by the Office of Registration and Records. Informational resources about academic honesty for students and instructional staff members can be found at [www.ndsu.edu/academichonesty](http://www.ndsu.edu/academichonesty).

## **ABOUT USE OF COMPUTERS/CELL PHONES IN CLASS**

You are expected to use the computer assigned to you in class for work on assignments during class sessions. Use of your computer for email and general Internet/Web browsing, chatting and the like is discouraged. Turn off your cell phone and other personal electronic communication devices before the class session begins.

## **DEAD WEEK POLICY** (adopted by NDSU Faculty Senate on February 14, 2005)

Only one exam or quiz per course may be given during the last two weeks of the semester (prorated accordingly for variable length courses), which includes finals week. Exceptions include summer classes, self-paced/correspondence courses, make-up exams, courses in which laboratory is incorporated with a lecture, one-credit courses, and quizzes that account for less than 5% of the students' overall grade. If a professor chooses to give an exam during the last week of classes, he/she is expected to make some instructional use of the final examination time.

## **AMERICAN WITH DISABILITIES ACT STATEMENT**

Any students with disabilities or other special needs, who need special accommodations in this course are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructor and contact the Disability Services Office as soon as possible.

## **VETERANS STATEMENT**

Veterans and student soldiers with special circumstances or who are activated are encouraged to notify the instructor in advance.

## **GENERAL ADVICE**

Think of yourself as an aspiring “wordsmith.” Become a master of — not a victim of — grammar and style rules. Learning the rules of grammar and developing a polished newswriting style is not something anyone learns overnight. All writers (including the great novelists) never reach a point of perfection. All writers, no matter how good, need an editor and are continually fine-tuning their technique and style.

Effective news writing is not only tied to news. Writing clearly and concisely will help you in all aspects of your academic and professional careers. Newswriting is like a puzzle, where you use the fewest amount of words to convey the most amount of information. Solving that puzzle requires both attention to detail and an ability to keep an eye on the overall work you are presenting.

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