

Virginia Commonwealth University
School of Mass Communications
Public Relations Writing – MASC 333 – Fall 2013

Instructor Details

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Office Hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

Course Details

Class home page: blackboard.vcu.edu | Facebook
Class hours: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4:00-5:15 p.m.
Classroom: Temple Building, Room 2222

Prerequisites

MASC 323 (Public Relations) is a prerequisite for this course.

Course Summary

Public relations may be defined as a strategic function that contributes to relationships between organizations and their publics. It may also be defined as communicating with publics through events, documents, and images. Regardless of the definition, public relations is based on writing and communicating well. This course will cover several standard practices of writing for public relations and will offer an understanding of the various resources for communicating well. It will also touch on other ways that public relations practitioners communicate with their publics.

Writing will be the core of nearly everything you do as a public relations professional. As such, this course is your first step toward becoming a professional public relations writer. It will build on the fact-gathering, critical thinking, research, writing and interviewing skills you developed in previous courses. You will apply those skills to writing materials commonly used in the practice of public relations such as news releases, backgrounders, speeches, copy for brochures and newsletters, advertising copy, and new/social media.

Format Standards for Written Work

Follow these guidelines in order to avoid having points deducted from writing assignments.

- All writing assignments must be uploaded on Blackboard.
- Please submit work in black ink, and use double space unless otherwise note. Use 1–inch margins, and 12–point serif typeface (Times New Roman or Courier).
- Please use page numbers if more than one page.
- Proofread all your work. Do not rely solely on spell check.
- Always keep a copy of your work.
- Use AP Style on all work.

- References are required in work that includes citations, quotes, or other people's ideas. Use APA (American Psychological Association) referencing: **<http://www.apastyle.org>**. If you reference a source, you must include a References page at the end of the document, listing your sources in proper APA format.

Grading

A total of 100 points can be earned during the semester, as follows:

- Quizzes (4 @ 5 points each)
- Take-home assignment 1 (5 points)
- Take-home assignment 2 (5 points)
- Backgrounder (10 points)
- Pitch letter (5 points)
- Print news release 1 (5 points)
- Print news release 2 (10 points)
- Feature article 1 (5 points)
- Feature article 2 (10 points)
- Speech (10 points)
- Brochure (5 points)
- Website copy (5 points)
- Social media copy (5 points)

There is no final exam for this course.

Final Grade

- 90-100 points – A
- 80-89 points – B
- 70-79 points – C
- 60-69 points – D
- Below 60 points – F

Required Texts and Other Materials

- *Public Relations Writing: Form and Style*, 10th edition, by Newsom and Haynes.
- *Associated Press Stylebook*.

Both books are available at the VCU Bookstore, Broad Street.

You will need a compatible storage media – such as a USB flash drive - on which to save all of your work and anything you download from the course Blackboard site or elsewhere.

Bring your *AP Stylebook*, your folders and storage media to every class. And of course no public relations professional would be caught dead without a notebook and a pen!

Course Calendar

The following is a draft calendar for this course. **It is subject to change at my discretion.**

Thursday, Aug. 22

- Course overview

Tuesday, Aug. 27

- What is public relations?
- Four-step process

Thursday, Aug. 29

- Clear and simple writing

*Tuesday, Sept. 3 – **Take-Home Assignment #1 Due***

- AP Style refresher
- Selecting a course topic

Thursday, Sept. 5

- Backgrounders & white papers

Tuesday, Sept. 10

- Quiz 1

Thursday, Sept. 12

- Backgrounder review

Tuesday, Sept. 17

- Headlines and quotes

*Thursday, Sept. 19 – **Backgrounder Due***

- Components of a news release

Tuesday, Sept. 24

- Guest speaker

*Thursday, Sept. 26 – **Take-Home Assignment #2 Due***

- Hard news releases

Tuesday, Oct. 1

- Quiz 2

Thursday, Oct. 3

- Writing news releases – **Print News Release Draft Due**

Tuesday, Oct. 8

- Writing news releases

Thursday, Oct. 10

- Writing news releases

Tuesday, Oct. 15

- Writing objectively – **Print News Release Final Due**

Thursday, Oct. 17

- Media pitches

Tuesday, Oct. 22

- Quiz 3

- Interviewing techniques

Thursday, Oct. 24

- Feature writing – ***Pitch Letter Due***

Tuesday, Oct. 29

- Feature writing workshop – ***Feature Article Draft Due***

Thursday, Oct. 31

- Guest speaker

****Nov 1 – Last date to withdraw with a mark of W***

Tuesday, Nov. 5

- Persuasive writing – ***Feature Article Final Due***

Thursday, Nov. 7

- Quiz 4

Tuesday, Nov. 12

- Speeches

Thursday, Nov. 14

- Brochures

Tuesday, Nov. 19

- Web Writing – ***Speech Due***

Thursday, Nov. 21

- ***No Class – Brochure Due***

Tuesday, Nov. 26

- Advertising

Thursday, Nov. 28

- ***No Class – HAPPY THANKSGIVING! ☺***

Thursday, Dec. 5

- Social Media – ***Website Copy Due, Social Media Copy Due (in class)***

Class Web Site

The class Web address is blackboard.vcu.edu. This site is part of the Blackboard course management system. When you go to that address, you will be asked for a user name and password. Your user name is the first part of your VCU e-mail address (the part that appears before the @). For instance, my VCU e-mail address is rlbriones@vcu.edu. My user name, therefore, is rlbriones. Your password is your VCU e-mail password. (If you have forgotten your password, call the VCU Help Desk at 828-2227.)

Blackboard use will be used for getting feedback on assignments and posting grades, along with sharing course announcements. I will also use a closed Facebook group as another mean of communicating with classes, sharing information, facilitating group discussions, etc., since many students already are active Facebook users and prefer to use Facebook for course information. Information about how to join the group will be provided. Students who do not or prefer not to use a Facebook group should contact the instructor with their concerns.

All materials used in this course – including PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and other items – will be posted online for your reference. A link to the posting location will be provided.

You must have – and you must USE – a VCU e-mail account for this course. If you do not already have an account, you may create one online at blackboard.vcu.edu. You may access your VCU e-mail at <http://webmail.vcu.edu>. (That page also explains how you can have your VCU email automatically forwarded to a Hotmail, Yahoo or American Online account.) After you log in, you will be able to read class announcements and online materials, download lecture notes and other resources, and send e-mail to your classmates and me. Many materials will be available to you ONLY through the site. You will want to check the Blackboard site often, probably daily. I encourage you to log in immediately to make sure your user name and password work.

Please check your VCU e-mail and Facebook by mid-day on the day of class. In the event of an emergency cancellation, this is one of the only means I have of notifying you.

Class Attendance and Participation

I require and take attendance at all class meetings. Attendance will be taken at the start of the class; if you are more than 5 minutes late, you will be counted absent. All absences are considered unexcused unless you receive approval from me to have your absence excused. You must complete the form, “Request to Have an Absence Excused,” which you will find on the course Blackboard site and should submit to me no later than the next class period; attach any documentation to your request (such as a doctor’s note if you were ill).

If you have two unexcused absences, your final grade will be lowered by 10 points. If you have three unexcused absences, you will receive an F in the course.

You will be expected to participate in class discussions, asking questions and sharing ideas. That means you need to come to class prepared: do the reading and the homework before class. It also means you participate within the bounds of what will be class norms:

- Be honest.
- Seek clarification before confusion and conflict.
- Challenge with passion, not poison.
- Be willing to change your point of view.
- Don’t walk away, literally or figuratively. Stay in the room.

You are responsible for all work missed and all material covered, even when you are absent, either excused or unexcused.

Deadlines

You would be reprimanded – or even fired – for missing a deadline in a public relations workplace. So this class will teach you not only writing skills but also the workplace skill of meeting deadlines.

All out-of-class assignments are to be submitted through Blackboard and are due at the start of the class on the date they are due unless specified otherwise. If you must be absent when work is due, you must turn in your assignment before the start of class on the due date unless you have requested and received an extension.

Late work will not be accepted.

Writing and Rewriting

Most public relations writing involves writing, editing, obtaining feedback, rewriting, resubmitting for approval and perhaps even more rewriting. A first draft is rarely the final product. I strongly recommend that you rewrite ALL of your work for inclusion in your final portfolio. In rewriting work, you should address the problems I have highlighted in my grading, but you should not hesitate to make other improvements. I won't highlight every area that could use improvement, only the most serious problem areas, so you should take a fresh look at the entire assignment as you rewrite.

Email Policy

Electronic mail or "email" is considered an official method for communication at VCU because it delivers information in a convenient, timely, cost effective, and environmentally aware manner. This policy ensures that all students have access to this important form of communication. It ensures students can be reached through a standardized channel by faculty and other staff of the University as needed. Mail sent to the VCU email address may include notification of University-related actions, including disciplinary action. Please read the policy in its entirety:
<http://www.ts.vcu.edu/kb/3407.html>

VCU Honor System: Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

The VCU honor system policy describes the responsibilities of students, faculty, and administration in upholding academic integrity, while at the same time respecting the rights of individuals to the due process offered by administrative hearings and appeals. According to his policy, "members of the academic community are required to conduct themselves in accordance with the highest standards of academic honesty and integrity." In addition, "All members of the VCU community are presumed to have an understanding of the VCU Honor System and are required to:

- Agree to be bound by the Honor System policy and its procedures;
- Report suspicion or knowledge of possible violations of the Honor System;
- Support an environment that reflects a commitment to academic integrity;
- Answer truthfully when called upon to do so regarding Honor System cases, and,
- Maintain confidentiality regarding specific information in Honor System cases.

Most importantly, "All VCU students are presumed upon enrollment to have acquainted themselves with and have an understanding of the Honor System." (The VCU Insider). The Honor System in its entirety can be reviewed on the Web at http://www.provost.vcu.edu/pdfs/Honor_system_policy.pdf or it can be found in the current issue of the VCU Insider at <http://www.students.vcu.edu/insider.html>

In this class, because coursework will be collaborative at times, particular issues of integrity arise. You should not copy or print another student's work without permission. Any material (this includes IDEAS and LANGUAGE) from another source must be credited, whether that material is quoted directly, summarized, or paraphrased. In other words, you should respect the work of others and in no way present it as their own.

Student Conduct in the Classroom

According to the Faculty Guide to Student Conduct in Instructional Settings. "The instructional program at VCU is based upon the premise that students enrolled in a class are entitled to receive instruction free from interference by other students. Accordingly, in classrooms, laboratories, studies, and other learning areas, students are expected to conduct themselves in an orderly and cooperative manner so that the faculty member can proceed with their [sic] customary instruction. Faculty members (including graduate teaching assistants) may set reasonable standards for classroom behavior in order to serve these objectives. If a student believes that the behavior of another student is disruptive, the instructor should be informed." Among other things, cell phones and beepers should be turned off while in the classroom. Also, the University Rules and Procedures prohibit anyone from having ".in his possession any firearm, other weapon, or explosive, regardless of whether a license to possess the same has been issued, without the written authorization of the President of the university..." For more information, visit the VCU Insider online at <http://www.students.vcu.edu/insider.html>

Certainly the expectation in this course is that students will attend class with punctuality, proper decorum, required course material, and studious involvement.

The VCU Insider contains additional important information about a number of other policies with which students should be familiar, including Guidelines on Prohibition of Sexual Harassment, Grade Review Procedure, and Ethics Policy on Computing. It also contains maps, phone numbers, and information about resources available to VCU students.

Students with Disabilities

SECTION 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 as amended, require that VCU provides "academic adjustments " or "reasonable accommodations" to any student who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity. To receive accommodations, students must request them by contacting the Disability Support Services Office (DSS) on the Monroe Park Campus (828-2253) or the Division for Academic Success on the MCV campus (828-9782). More information is available at the Disability Support Services webpage: <http://www.students.vcu.edu/dss/> or the Division for Academic Success webpage at www.specialservices.vcu.edu/disabilityss/.

If you have a disability that requires an academic accommodation, please schedule a meeting with me at your earliest convenience. Additionally, if your coursework requires you to work in a lab environment, you should advise me or department chairperson of

any concerns you may have regarding safety issues related to your disability. This statement applies not only to this course but also to every other course in this University.

Statement on Military Short-Term Training or Deployment

Military students may receive orders for short-term training or deployment. These students are asked to inform and present their orders to Military Student Services and to their professor(s). For further information on policies and procedures contact Military Services at 828-5993 or access the corresponding policies at <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/bulletins/about/?Default.aspx?uid=10096&iid=30704> and <http://www.pubapps.vcu.edu/BULLETINS/undergraduate/?uid=10096&iid=30773>.

Excused Absences for Students Representing the University

Students who represent the university (athletes and others) do not choose their schedules. Student athletes are required to attend games and/or meets. All student athletes should provide their schedule to the instructor at the beginning of the semester. The Intercollegiate Athletic Council (IAC) strongly encourages faculty to treat missed classes or exams (because of a scheduling conflict) as excused absences and urges faculty to work with the students to make up the work or exam.

Campus Emergency Information

What to Know and Do To Be Prepared for Emergencies at VCU:

- Sign up to receive VCU text messaging alerts (<http://www.vcu.edu/alert/notify>). Keep your information up-to-date. Within the classroom, the professor will keep his or her phone on to receive any emergency transmissions.
- Know the safe evacuation route from each of your classrooms. Emergency evacuation routes are posted in on-campus classrooms.
- Listen for and follow instructions from VCU or other designated authorities. Within the classroom, follow your professor's instructions.
- Know where to go for additional emergency information (<http://www.vcu.edu/alert>).
- Know the emergency phone number for the VCU Police (828-1234). Report suspicious activities and objects.

Important Dates

Important dates for the Fall 2013 semester are available at:

http://academiccalendars.vcu.edu/ac_fullViewAll.asp?term=Fall+2013

VCU Mobile

The VCU Mobile application is a valuable tool to get the latest VCU information on the go. The application contains helpful information including the VCU directory, events, course schedules, campus maps, athletics and general VCU news, emergency information,

library resources, Blackboard and more. To download the application on your smart phone or for more information, please visit <http://m.vcu.edu>.

Class Registration Required for Attendance

Please remember that students may only attend those classes for which they have registered. Faculty may not add students to class rosters. Therefore, if students are attending a class for which they have not registered, they must stop attending.

Withdrawal from Classes

Before withdrawing from classes, students should consult their instructor as well as other appropriate university offices. Withdrawing from classes may negatively impact a student's financial aid award and his or her semester charges. To discuss financial aid and the student bill, visit the Student Services Center at 1015 Harris Hall or contact a financial aid counselor at <http://www.enrollment.vcu.edu/finaid/contact.html>

Student Financial Responsibility

Students assume the responsibility of full payment of tuition and fees generated from their registration and all charges for housing and dining services, and other applicable miscellaneous charges.