

SAMPLE SYLLABUS
CONTEMPORARY JOURNALISM: Public Relations Writing
FALL 2008

Instructor: Dr. James Simon www.faculty.fairfield.edu/jsimon
Class meets: Monday, 330 – 445p, Thursday, 330 – 445p, CNS301
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Office hours: T W 1-3. (I am here before and after class, plus many additional hours; just call first.)

Welcome to Contemporary Journalism: Public Relations Writing. This intermediate course will allow you to build on the writing skills you learned in the introductory News Writing course and introduce you to public relations writing and ethical questions related to that field. This semester, the course also contains a service learning component in which you will apply those writing and PR skills to help a non-profit organization.

In this process, you will gain the skills and experience needed to do well in a competitive internship or entry-level job in journalism or related fields. You will emerge with a more sophisticated sense of how journalists succeed -- and fail – in providing citizens with the information they need to make informed choices in our democracy.

By the end of the course, you will:

- Deepen your understanding of reporting basics like ethics, story design and quotations
- Gain exposure to such story types and journalism essentials as news releases, press conferences, speeches
- Take those journalistic tools and apply them in a public relations setting.
- Better understand the interplay between reporter and public relations practitioner
- Use the service learning experience to integrate these skills with a service experience, thereby giving you insight into their broader applicability
- Develop your own web page and post at least two stories

Prerequisites: ENW220 News Writing or permission of instructor; college-level skills in spelling, punctuation, grammar, writing and typing (projected 40 wpm). Familiarity with computer word processing.

Required Materials:

- ❖ Itule, B. D. & Anderson, D. A. (2007). News writing and reporting for today's media. (7th Ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- ❖ Bivins, T.H. (2008). Public relations writing. (6th ed). McGraw Hill
- ❖ Goldstein, N. (Ed.) AP Stylebook & Libel Manual.
- ❖ Wickham, K.W. (2002). Math tools for journalists. Oak Park, IL: Marion Street Press.
- ❖ one ream of inexpensive paper for downloading readings and making copies of your draft stories

Recommended: any pocket dictionary

Reflective Essays. For major stories, you will include a cover memo that gives you a chance to step back from the story and discuss your intent. In three to four paragraphs, discuss:

- ✓ The names of specific classmates, friends, others who have read this story and what they contributed to this version
- ✓ What textbook/classroom lessons have been relevant (or misleading).
- ✓ How the story compared to others you may have done.
- ✓ What went right, what went wrong. What was easy, challenging, surprising.
- ✓ What lessons you learned. What skills you still need to sharpen.
- ✓ Were my comments on the draft useful?

Grading Summary.

Two original stories in print and multimedia formats @ 10 pts	20 points
Two AP quizzes @ 5 pts	10 points
Press kit and press release	15 points
Web page	5 points
Two tests @ 10 pts	20 points
Service learning experience	20 points
Class participation	10 points

There is no formal mid-term exam, final exam or term paper. Most students like this arrangement. But in return, you are expected to put extra time into this course throughout the 14 weeks of class.

Late assignments. Deadlines are important in journalism and public relations, Students will suffer a loss of 10 points for each day an assignment is late, up to a maximum 20 points. After two days, the professor has the right not to accept a late story.

Grading guide. Here is the standard I use in grading your writing:

“A” – Outstanding achievement. Material is publishable as is. No significant style errors. Shows superior command of facts, judgment, organization and writing. On some level, extra-ordinary.

“B” – Superior; better than average. Handled assignment very well. Very few style errors. Copy only needs a bit of rewriting and polishing before it could be published.

“C” – Acceptable; average job. Not a story someone would read unless the information was really needed. Several style errors. Some basic organizational or writing problems. Needs significant rewriting.

“D” – Minimal achievement but passing. Poor piece. Lacks fundamental judgment and/or writing skills. Frequent style errors. Important facts omitted.

“F” – Failure of news writing assignment. This rarely occurs because constant rewriting and revision will catch most grievous errors.

Academic Honesty. Academic honesty is the foundation of academic life. You must do all of the work that you submit as your own and for which you receive credit. Anything less constitutes academic dishonesty. As the Fairfield Student Handbook states: “Any violation of academic integrity wounds the entire community and undermines the trust upon which the discovery and communication of knowledge depends.”

Examples of academic dishonesty in this class include, but are not limited to,:

- Stealing answers off a classmate’s test or quiz
- Submitting someone else’s writing or reporting as your own. Such plagiarism may consist of a single word, a block of background from an Internet source, or an entire story. We will discuss the ground rules in class.
- Fabricating an interview or eyewitness account or failing to observe journalism conventions for handling quoted material (to be discussed in class).
- Destruction or alteration of another student’s work.
- Libeling an individual or committing an indefensible ethical violation.
- Failing to tell a source that you are using their information for a class story that has the potential to be published
- Providing so much assistance to a classmate that the classmate’s work reflects your effort as much as his/her work.
- Asking me to comment on a story without my knowing you will submit the story for another class and use my comments to better your grade.

One of the most common violations of academic honesty is plagiarism. Plagiarism is the appropriation of ideas, data, work, or language of others and submitting them as one’s own to satisfy the requirements of a course. Plagiarism constitutes theft and deceit.

A student who commits academic dishonesty may be penalized with failure of the assignment or failure of the course. All violations must be reported in writing to the CAS dean’s office. The student also may be reprimanded or suspended from the University.

Dr. Simon adds: Let me underscore: do not pass off someone else’s work as your own. It will be especially obvious in this class if you have a friend write your major news stories, then find yourself unable to write in class on your own. But I feel it is desirable to have a roommate or friend read your news story and make suggestions for improving it before you submit it to me. But they cannot do the actual writing.

Fairfield’s Writing Center (second floor, Donnarumma) is a free service in which student tutors are given training, then help students like you with their writing. Check ‘em out. (If you enjoy writing or want some practice in informal teaching, it’s also a good place to work. See Dr. Boquet, English Department)

Writing for The Mirror. I encourage you to submit appropriate class stories to the Mirror for possible publication. As an inducement, I will add two-thirds of a letter grade

to the grade of any story that is published. (Example: a B grade goes to an A-). The final, in-depth story should be a good candidate.

Attendance. Skipping class is like skipping a day of work. If you can't manage your time, then journalism isn't a good career option for you.

I am very old-fashioned about attendance; I take it every period based on the theory that you learn more when you are in class. Your final grade in the course will drop two percentage points starting with the third cut (e.g., a 90 will drop to an 88). Save your cuts for when you are sick or have an emergency, medical or academic. The only exception will be made the lingering illnesses or family emergencies that force you to miss consecutive classes. For your grade, I also take into account your being chronically late to class. For my sake and the sake of your classmates, please be on time.

If you are going to miss a class, I expect you to call or e-mail ahead of class and tell me not to expect you there. We then can make arrangements for you to make up the work missed.

Class participation. Participating in class is a given; you are expected to come to class well prepared to take an active part in discussions. If you repeatedly are unprepared for class, I reserve the right to adjust your final grade. You also are required to take part in any on-line threaded discussions we might have.

Gathering Information for news stories.

1) We will be discussing, at length, the ground rules for gathering information and when you should go "off the record" with a source. Unfortunately, many students in this class violate the rules by telling a source the story "is just for class," and then the angry source sees their name in The Mirror.

Therefore, you must introduce yourself to all sources by saying you are working on a news story for class that **may** get printed in The Mirror. (My advice: say you are "working on a story for The Mirror on Subject X.") The source will take you – and the issue – more seriously.

Again, you must alert sources from the start that their remarks may wind up in the paper. If the source is reluctant to talk to you, use your persuasive skills (and tips we will learn) to get them to cooperate. But under no circumstances should you say the story is just for class; too many students make such a statement, get the story published in the Mirror for extra credit, and then face an angry source.

2) Sources routinely ask to see a story before it is published. This is widely frowned upon in journalism. Do not agree to show anyone the story before publication. Instead, offer to call them back and double check their own quotes and any information they gave you. This will result in a stronger, more accurate story and avoid any ethical dilemma. Obviously, if you agree to call back a source and double check the information, you must do so.

If you violate these rules -- by telling a source their remarks won't be used in the newspaper or by agreeing to let them see a story before publication -- it is grounds for receiving a failing grade on the story.

Portfolio meetings. Instead of a formal portfolio meeting, we will meet individually at the end of the semester to review your work and compute your grade. You will write a reflective essay that will be the basis of the discussion.

Deadly errors. Imagine a Mirror profile on your roommate that misspells her/his name in the first sentence: would you believe the rest of the story? News stories lose all credibility when the reader notices a glaring error and starts to wonder how many other problems there are within the story. Therefore, misspelling the name of a principal actor in a story will result in your receiving a failing grade on the story. **THIS HAPPENS AT LEAST TWICE A SEMESTER; DON'T LET IT HAPPEN TO YOU.**

E-mail. Today's journalists rely on computer communication, and so will you. For this class, you need to use your StagWeb e-mail address and to get in the habit of checking it regularly, preferably every day. Some class assignments may be made via e-mail. I check my e-mail throughout the day; it is the best way to communicate with me. Don't hesitate to call me in my office or stop by during office hours if you have a more immediate need.

Cells phones are an obvious distraction to any class. Please turn your phone off when entering class. In the rare instance when you expect a call that is truly emergency in nature, please inform the instructor before class begins.

A final thought. One research study showed a strong correlation between how quickly a professor learns a student's name and what grade the professor gives the student in a course. While I will endeavor to get to know all of you as quickly as possible, I urge you to meet with me during office hours to speed up the process. You are spending a small fortune to attend Fairfield; access to your professors is one of the major advantages of coming here, and I urge you to avail yourselves of it

Reaction Papers on the readings (Thank you, Fr. Mayzik)

When you have an assignment to read a chapter, an article, a book for class, you have an opportunity to be informed, enlightened, inspired, transformed, stimulated—even agitated or angered by the information and ideas presented to you by the author. There is also the chance that you might also be bored—which could be the author’s fault, or yours.

What you get out of your reading has a lot to do with you, and with the attitude you bring to it. If it is merely an assignment, you will rush through it, more intent on getting through it than **letting it get to you**. If you see it as an opportunity to learn something, and you dive into even the most convoluted, dense prose with a patient, open-minded attitude, you may be delighted and surprised by what it has to offer to you (and to your life!).

For that to happen (for someone’s written ideas and thoughts to touch your life) you need to do two things:

1. You must read the material thoroughly and patiently, asking yourself at various points along the way: ‘Do I understand what this author is saying?’. Can you explain the thoughts and ideas, the major concepts and terms, in your own words? The author probably spent a great deal of time working on that chapter—so there must be something of substance in the contents.

2. Once you know what the author is saying, you need to take a second (and more important) step: you need to **ask yourself what you think about the author’s thoughts and ideas**. This is the time to wrestle with the truth of those ideas. It is a time of reflection, meditation, and ultimately some judgment: you take those ideas within and touch them to what you know, and make at least a temporary judgment. Your reaction might be “Wow! That’s amazing, I never saw the connections before.” Or, “Gosh and be golly, that’s phat, man!” Or, you may conclude that the author’s ideas are false, or stupid, or wrong, or silly: “That’s crap, totally, what an idiot!” Whatever your judgment, **it’s the whole point of the reading**.

The READING EVALUATIONS are meant to help you take both steps in your approach to the assigned readings. Use a single sheet of paper.

I) **The FIRST part of the evaluation** allows you to identify three **MAIN THEMES, CONCEPTS, IDEAS and TERMS** of the reading, and to explain them. (Although it is not the primary purpose of the evaluation, this helps me to know if, at least, you have read the material.)

II) **The SECOND part of the evaluation** asks you to write about your reaction to those themes, concepts and terms: **“WHAT DO YOU THINK?”** These are your reflections, and I encourage you to try to make connections within them.

DON’T simply write how amazed or impressed you are, or how stupid or boring you thought it was: “Gosh, I can’t believe how much goes into the process of making a movie. It has really opened my eyes, wow.” INSTEAD, try to make some comparisons to other knowledge, other experiences: “ Reading about the energy levels of color made me think about the colors used at McDonald’s—vivid oranges and yellows. It’s very different from the colors that are on the walls of my favorite restaurant, Tommy’s. I wonder why they did that?” DON’T give me a critique of the author’s writing style: “This chapter was repetitious and boring...”.

I will respond to your reflections, which you can read when I return them to you. Naturally, I will be most interested in this part of the reading evaluation (“WHAT DO YOU THINK?”), and it will have a large part in evaluating your understanding of the material.

You need not re-write the entire assignment, trying to squeeze millions of lines onto the reading evaluation page.. Just a little warning: I take these reading evaluations SERIOUSLY when it comes to considering your grade. You can be sure that your grade will be significantly downgraded if you do not hand in the evaluations (on time!) or appear to be treating them lightly with cursory comments and little thought or depth. (A “good” on your work will be good for your final grade.) Your work should reflect a thorough reading of the text, and a thoughtful reaction to its contents. Feel free to use back side of the summary sheets if you run out of space, but I recommend just filling one side of a page, single spaced.

Tentative Schedule

Part One: Beyond The Basics In News Writing

- Week 1** Course introduction. Review newsworthiness, ledes, organizing and developing stories.
Itule/Anderson, Chs 2, 4, 5, 6, 8
- Week 2** Review quotes, interviews, CAR, ethics, the law
Out-of-classroom press conference, public relations.
Itule/Anderson, Chs 7, 10, 11, 26, 27
- Week 3** Press conferences, By the Numbers, Writing from News
Releases. Original Story 1.
Itule/Anderson, Chs 12, 18
Bivins Ch 6
- Week 4** Broadcast writing, Multimedia Journalism,
Itule/Anderson, Chs 16, 17
- Week 5** Original Story 2. In-Depth and Investigative Reporting.
Itule/Anderson, Ch 24
- Week 6** Test 1
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Part Two: Interplay Between Reporter, Public Relations

- Week 7** Writing for public relations. Planning and research. Choosing
the right message and medium
Bivins, Chs 1, 2, 3
- Week 8** The dance. Competing interests vs. shared interests. Media
relations and placement
Bivins Ch 4

Week 9

Week 10

Week 11

Week 12

Week 13

Week 14