

COMM 310, Advanced Writing
Department of Communication
North Dakota State University, Fargo

Fall 2017

3 credits

Note: This course is offered online for the fall 2017 semester.

Instructor: Ross F. Collins, Ph.D., 338 Minard Hall; 701-231-7295;
ross.collins@ndsu.edu; www.rossfcollins.com. Instructor's vita:
www.rossfcollins.com/vita.html.

Office hours: 10-11:50 Mondays and Wednesdays.

Required text: Brooks, Pinson and Wilson, *Working With Words. A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors*, 9th ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017).

Suggested texts: William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (any edition); Strunk and White, *Elements of Style* (any edition); *AP Stylebook* (most recent edition). These standard works should be in the libraries of all professional writers.

Bulletin description

Construction of professional-quality messages for the modern media landscape. Prereq: B or better in COMM 200. Restricted to communication professional majors and minors.

Course objectives

Students in this upper-level class are expected to have achieved an advanced ability to write for many forms of media, and to write many kinds of non-fiction stories. The course aims to encourage students to perfect these abilities by reviewing common professional writing topics, practices and guidelines, as well as introducing possibly new writing areas to explore. Upon completion of this class students will have:

- advanced ability to produce grammatically correct, readable and compelling stories for a wide variety of audiences and mass media outlets;
- advanced ability to write competent stories quickly but accurately based on deadlines reflecting professional expectations;
- near-mastery of common English grammar, word usage and mechanics;
- flexibility to explore professional disagreement regarding developments in English grammar and usage, and adaptability to changing styles and rules.

What to expect

The instructor believes mass communication students at the advanced level should be writing nearly every day, and preferably publishing their work frequently. To encourage this, students in this online class will produce a variety of written work each week.

Beyond class, we acknowledge that “publishing” as we know it today means not only a story in a newspaper or magazine. It also means an online story for a commercial or nonprofit media outlet. It also means a blog, a tweet, a Facebook post, an Instagram upload, or a variety of other ways professionals can reach readers today. Even Snapchat. Well, maybe not Snapchat.

To encourage publications in these venues, the instructor will offer extra credit:

- 10 pts. for a bylined story in the *Forum* or other daily newspaper. (50 pts. for *New York Times*! Good luck with that. Maximum of 50 pts.)
- 5 pts. for a bylined story published in the *Spectrum*, *High Plains Reader* or other weekly or free-distribution publication (print or online). (Maximum of 20 pts.)
- 3 pts. for a blog post of 300 words or more. (Maximum of 15 pts.)
- 1 pt. for every three tweets, social media posts or other brief work. (Maximum of 10 pts.)

To claim extra credit, submit hard copy, scanned work or a link to instructor. Warning: one point *deducted* for each grammar or spelling error! Professionals don't make mistakes.

Class management

The class will be managed through the university's Blackboard web-based class management system. Students will be asked to submit class assignments through Blackboard. Emailed assignments normally will not be accepted.

Students are asked to check the Blackboard announcement page on Mondays and Wednesdays, and from time to time throughout the week, for class updates.

Evaluation

Students will be graded based on writing assignments as specified below. The class is not self-paced; deadlines will be indicated. Some of them will be tight; that is, you'll need to submit the assignment the day it's assigned. Because ability to write within time constraints will be a factor in assessing the work, missed assignments can't be made up (see below for class PTO policy).

Grading

How work will be graded

Students will be submitting up to three written assignments of varying lengths each week. I may not be able to offer extensive evaluations and feedback for every one of these. In some cases I may give full or nearly full credit for reasonably competent work, but will not give the work careful scrutiny. However, I will choose each week to take a careful look and provide extensive feedback for the majority of assignments, and always for longer assignments. Students can't predict which of their assignments will be among these, so need to do their best work for every submission.

Tentative point totals are as indicated. These may change slightly during the semester based on the number of assignments eventually completed. Correct grammar, spelling, AP style and mechanics will be evaluated for every grade, as this is the minimum standard expected of working professionals in communication industries. Students are encouraged to use any online or published grammar reference to help produce mechanically perfect papers. Note the required textbook above offers extensive basic instruction in these areas, and should be part of every serious media writer's library. Sections for study are indicated in the tentative schedule below; material from these will be part of the final exam. So take a look, please.

No midterm exam will be required. An open-book (but time-limited) final exam based on essay questions and grammar quizzes (see below) will be available to online students during the final exam period. Quality of writing will be considered as part of the final exam grade.

Quick exercises (due same day assigned): 10 pts each, about 120 pts total.

You're-the-teacher writing assignments (see below): 10 pts each, about 120 pts total, plus and extra 20 pts for the online presentation (once or twice a semester).

Longer writing assignments: 20 pts each, about 240 pts total.

Quizzes: 5 pts each, about 60 pts.

Final exam: 100 pts.

Total: about 660 pts.

Letter grade percentages:

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

Late assignments: Class PTO policy

The instructor realizes students may sometimes miss a deadline for good reason. Or maybe not for good reason. In the "real world," a missed deadline is a serious matter. In this class, I'll cut you some slack. Submit **a maximum of two** written exercises late (up to one week) for any reason, and I'll accept as on-time submission. Think of it has your "class PTO" days. But note: beyond these

two, assignments not submitted by deadlines **will not be accepted**, and can't be made up, unless you can show acceptable written documentation of military service or health emergency (and it better be good). Students who skip assignments have, as an alternative, the possibility of making up some missed points through extra-credit activities as described above. Maybe try the *New York Times* first, best bang for the buck (but don't use that cliché).

Tentative class schedule Fall Semester 2017

General class procedures.

Mondays or Tuesdays

The instructor will present the week's writing topic and longer assignment, **due usually the following Monday**. Longer writing assignments usually will be in the range of 1,500-2,500 words. The weekly grammar quiz also will be presented Monday.

Wednesdays or Thursdays

The instructor will assign a rapid writing assignment, due at the end of that day. Topics based on the list below. (Yes, grammar/spelling/mechanics still matter. They always matter when you're a professional writer.)

Fridays

Special topics: grammar, usage and mechanics. This segment of the class asks you to be the teacher! As this is an upper-level class, students should be at the point of becoming near-professionals. That means they will be expected to lead and teach others in their careers as professional communicators. Your colleagues will rely on you as the expert! Seriously. To prepare for this, based on topics from *Working With Words* (or elsewhere), **each Friday** you'll be asked to prepare an online lesson for an audience of your peers, due the **following Thursday**. One of these submissions—either written lectures, PowerPoints, Prezi, or whatever you think will capture attention—will be posted each Friday to Blackboard for the rest of the class to study. Based on the presentation, a five-question **quiz** will be posted on the following Monday or Tuesday. The quizzes will be graded, as will the instructional presentation. If the majority of students don't earn a perfect grade on the quiz, we'll consider the presentation to have failed, and the presenter will receive an F for his or her presentation.

While everyone submits each week's lesson, I'll choose the week's presenter at random from the class list. Because more than 15 students are enrolled, a few weeks will have to feature two presentations. Everyone will see his or her lesson

presented on the class Blackboard site at least one time during the semester. But—surprise!— you won't know if this is your week until you see your work posted. So do your best every week. (And note: you *may* be asked to present twice, and will be graded both times. So just because you've already presented once doesn't mean you can relax!)

How will topics be chosen? That's the good part: it's your choice! That is, your vote as a class. Based on the list below, each Thursday I'll present three or so choices for the next week. The class will vote and submit as a Blackboard assignment (worth 1 pt. extra credit). I'll assign topics based on the vote. The lesson will be due the next Thursday, giving you a little less than a week to prepare.

Longer writing assignments will be assigned as indicated in the tentative schedule below. Note: while the schedule is a guide, it may change, so it's best not to work too far ahead. These longer assignments will usually be due on Mondays, giving you a week to do the work.

Reminder: topics listed week by week below will become the longer assignments due Mondays or Tuesdays. Wednesday or Thursday assignments will be assigned on that day based on the list below. Friday teaching topics will be chosen from the list below based on class preference.

Tentative schedule

Week One (August 21-25)

Introduction. Writing criticism. Review *Working With Words*, Introduction and Chapter 1, writing basics. Watch warmup grammar video.

Week Two (August 28-Sept. 1)

Writing humor. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 6, grammar basics.

Week Three (Sept. 4-8; note Sept. 4 is Labor Day)

Writing personal essays. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 13, finding the right word. Skim over the alphabetical list of misused/confused words (pp. 237-295) for words you think you may misuse.

Week Four (Sept. 11-15)

Writing based on a speech or meeting assignment one. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 2, tight writing.

Week Five (Sept. 18-22)

Writing based on interviews, assignment one. Review *Working With Words* Chapter 3, writing news.

Week Six: (Sept. 25-29)

Writing based on interviews, cont. Review biased term list in *Working With Words*, pp. 314-329.

Week Seven (Oct. 2-6)

Writing a personal memoir. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 15, spelling, because—surprise!—you may be given a spelling test as part of a job interview. Skim commonly misspelled word list.

Week Eight (Oct. 9-13)

Writing based on a press conference (this assignment may change, depending on availability of a press conference to cover). Review *Working With Words* Chapter 4, writing for broadcast.

Week Nine (Oct. 16-20)

Writing based on interviews, assignment two. Skim *Working With Words*, pp. 370-386, hyphenated word list.

Week 10 (Oct. 23-27)

Writing based on interviews, assignment two, cont.

Week 11 (Oct. 30-Nov. 3)

Writing technical material. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 5, online media.

Week 12 (Nov. 6-10; note Nov. 10 is Veterans Day)

Writing based on a speech or meeting, assignment two.

Week 13 (Nov. 13-17)

Writing based on a speech or meeting, assignment two, cont.

Week 14 (Nov. 20-24; note Nov. 23-24 is Thanksgiving break)

Writing a travel story. Going to England (wow!) or Canada? Check out U.S. versus English spelling in *Working With Words*, pp. 387-391.

Week 15 (Nov. 27-Dec. 1)

Writing based on a research study.

Week 16 (Dec. 4-8)

Wrap-up, last week of class. Review for final exam.

Final exam week is Dec. 12-16.

Topics for Wednesdays or Thursdays

On Wednesdays or Thursdays we have an opportunity to write based on an assignment from the topic list below. To test our ability to write quickly under deadline pressure, the assignment will be due the same day it's assigned. Note: topics that don't appear on the list may be assigned. Feel free to suggest a topic!

- Write tweets. See Chapter 2, *Working With Words*, Tight Writing).
- Write a letter to the editor.
- Write a blog post.
- Write based on an idea cluster.
- Rewrite for a different audience.
- Write instructions based on something you know how to do.
- Visit to the student union, a coffee shop, bar or mall. Describe in writing what you see based on careful observation of details.
- Compile a list of at least 10 things that might make a good mass-media style story based on observations of people and things, and on conversations people are having. Describe who you would interview (person or position) first.
- Consider an opinion on a controversial subject that you hold strongly. Write an argument in favor of that opinion based on logic and facts.
- Consider another opinion on a controversial subject you hold strongly. Write an argument in favor of that opinion based on emotional appeals.
- Now take the other side: consider your opinion on a controversial subject, and write a fact-based, logical argument for *the other viewpoint*.
- Write a 400-500-word story about yourself *without* using a form of the verb "to be" (is, are, was were, will be). (Review Verbs, *Working With Words* pp. 182-188)
- Write about a thing you hate, your "pet peeve." (Don't use the cliché "pet peeve.") Try to persuade readers.
- Write about the things you love or are passionate about. Try to persuade readers.
- Go to the following website: <http://www.be-a-better-writer.com/cliches.html> From the list of clichés, write a story choosing at least five. Then substitute to avoid clichés.
- Rewrite to explain a story full of numbers and statistics (See p. 17, *Working With Words*, clutter for writers)
- Fact-checking: verify the facts of a story, and/or whether it is plagiarized (story will be provided).
- Rewrite for eighth-grade level readability (See page 25, *Working With Words*)
- Write a 400- 500-word story about yourself using as many of expressions in the word clutter/cliché list (pages 32-67 of *Working With Words*) as you can. Then edit to avoid the clutter.
- Rewrite a press release or article for broadcast.
- Write an exit interview letter.
- Write a cover letter for your dream job.
- Write an ending.

Topics for Friday student presentations

(All page numbers refer to *Working With Words*. Also search online resources for more information.)

- Clutter for writers.
- Which/that.
- Use of *very*.
- Words often confused (see pp. 128-129).
- Rules that aren't rules anymore: hopefully (p. 137), splitting infinitives (p. 122), gendered nouns (p. 156), can vs. may (p. 174), shall vs. will (p. 189).
- Rules that may not be rules in the future, but still are today: singular pronouns (he/she and not they; okay in informal speech, (see p. 211), apostrophes ("New Year's/Years Day), singular teams and groups (the team lost **its** last two games). Refer to new AP guidelines for use of he/she/they.
- Phrases vs. clauses (see pp. 141-144), fragments, comma-splices, other sentence errors.
- Restrictive vs. non-restrictive (see p. 145).
- Passive voice: no, but sometimes yes (see pp. 177-180, and 196-197).
- Who and whom. Does it matter anymore? (See p. 154-155.)
- The sequence of tenses: from past to future (see pp. 191-195).
- Verb moods (see pp. 199-203).
- Parallel sentence structure (see pp. 212-213).
- Using hyphenated words as modifiers (see p. 221).
- Lie vs. lay: time to give up? (See p. 238.)
- Language and a new millennium (see pp. 297-305).
- Sexism and stereotyping (see pp. 306-313).
- Biased term list, pp. 314-329: do you disagree with the authors regarding the bias or inappropriate nature of some of these terms? Which do you disagree with and why?
- Commas: the devil in the (sometimes disputed) details (see pp. 333-339).
- How to use quotes—and when not to (see pp. 339-346).
- Using colons, dashes, hyphens and other fancy fillips — when you should, when to give it a rest (see pp. 350-355, and pp. 366-370).

University academic honesty policy

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.

Veterans and military service

Veterans and student service members with special circumstances or who are activated are encouraged to notify the instructor as soon as possible, and are encouraged to provide activation orders.

Americans with Disabilities Act for students with special needs

Students with disabilities or other special needs who require special accommodations in this course are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructor, and contact the disabilities office (www.ndsu.edu/disabilityservices) as soon as possible.

Safe Zone statement

As a member of the Safe Zone Ally community network of trained faculty at North Dakota State University, the instructor is committed to promoting an inviting and inclusive environment that is emotionally and physically safe for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) students.