

JOMC 711: WRITING FOR DIGITAL MEDIA

Syllabus, Fall 2013

Master's Program in Technology &
Communication

School of Journalism & Mass
Communication
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Course Description



Fundamentally, **this course is about writing** – clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific audiences. Fortunately, good writing is still valued in digital spaces, and it is still rare, as well. More specifically, the course is about writing in and for digital spaces, with a focus on journalistic contexts. Learning how best to do this will require new skills and sensitivities.

In part, the course is a reaction to the ways in which digital media combine and converge skill sets, tools and technologies, and how they converge or blur the traditional roles of producer and consumer, publisher and reader, message sender and message receiver. These evolutionary convergences place new demands on us as writers and content developers. In exploring these convergences, the course asks students to put their learning into practice and, therefore, to **learn by doing**.

Understanding our increasingly fragmented audiences and exploring how different media behave – their unique limits and possibilities – will help students better develop content in digital spaces. Students will analyze the technical and rhetorical possibilities of, among other things, interactivity, hyperlinking, spatial orientation, transparent sourcing, and non-linear storytelling. In short, the course aims to help writers make the transition from print writing, or **writing for surfaces**, to digital writing, or writing in and for digital places and spaces.

Course Introduction

The point-of-view taken in this course is that we all are content creators and writers who may or may not be part of a larger content development and management team. We are principally writers, therefore, though at times the

point-of-view is that of a site editor, someone charged with maintaining consistent editorial, graphic design and management policies for a website or group of sites. As editors, we are surrogates for and agents of the reader. Housed in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the course is oriented in and by the practices of journalism broadly defined.

Whether we are content creators or site editors, we recognize that first and foremost we are storytellers. Throughout history humans have taught, learned, entertained and communicated with stories, and this has held constant across media. Stories transmit information and transfer experience. This course, therefore, emphasizes digital storytelling and upholds the value of narrative, and it takes a journalistic approach to information gathering, writing, editing and publishing online.

Specifically, this course aims to

- further develop students' **abilities to write** clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific online audiences.
- teach communication professionals **practical skills** for writing and developing content for digital spaces.
- teach how to **purposefully blend** text, graphical content, multimedia and hypertextual, interactive elements.
- explore how trends in digital publishing, social media and mobile media are **forcing dramatic, even violent change** in information industries.
- give students a comprehensive resource for writing for digital media, one that acknowledges digital media as having their own distinct limits and capacities rather than treating them as merely adjuncts to print or broadcast.

Architecturally, the course is divided into three sections: Foundations, a section devoted the fundamentals of writing well and the elements of good journalism; Practice, a section that breaks down the individual skill sets, questions and considerations important when planning and creating content; and Contexts, which looks at digital publishing, including blogging; social media and social media management; and strategic communication.

In a virtual classroom such as ours, the roles of student and teacher are not binary. Our roles lie instead on a continuum. Given the backgrounds, experiences and skills each MATC student brings to the course, often the distance between these points or roles will be slight, even nonexistent. If the previous decade of the course is any guide, you will learn far more from your colleagues in the class than any one instructor could ever hope to teach.

Course Schedule Overview

FOUNDATIONS

Weeks 1 & 2 - Writing for Digital Media I

Objectives: Develop writing skills applicable to any medium. Identify weaknesses in writing and begin improving in those areas. (Chapter 1)

Week 3 - Editing for Digital Media I

Objective: Learn the editorial roles and responsibilities of digital editors, including some that are new to digital realms, such as search engine optimization. (Chapter 3)

Week 4 - Comparing Digital and Analog

Objective: Learn how writing for online environments differs from writing for traditional print media, and what should remain constant. (Chapter 2)

PRACTICE

Week 5 - Writing for Digital Media II: Tools & Techniques

Objective: Introduce specific digital tools and techniques that leverage the capacities of digital environments, including layering, or arraying content to permit drilling, skipping, surfing and scanning; chunking; headline writing; hyperlinking; and using lists. This module covers how to convert big, intimidating text blocks into smaller, more varied digital content, and the more important lessons learned studying web and iPad tablet user patterns. (Chapter 4)

Week 6 - Editing for Digital Media II: Voice & Style

Objective: Develop a writing style (including voice and tone) and a visual style. We also look at some principles of planning and mapping websites and webpages, principles that are applicable to other digital environments, as well. And we discuss usability and why even a little usability testing can be of great value. (Chapter 5)

Week 7 - Designing Digital Spaces

Objectives: Learn the basics of online editing, the essential elements of web design and how to publish online. (Chapter 6)

Week 8 - Writing for Digital Media III: Blogging

Objectives: Explore the world of bloggers and their blogs, including the rhetorical limits and capacities of the blog format. Also covered are ethics, how to handle corrections and live blogging. (Chapter 7)

CONTEXTS

Week 9 - We the People: The Sharing Culture

Objectives: Explore how democratic digital media are transforming formerly command-and-control traditional media industries, such as journalism and public relations. Learn what news organizations are doing to engage readers into a conversation and to build and maintain community online. (Chapter 8)

Week 10 - Social Media & Social Media Management

Objectives: Learn the rhetorical limits and capacities of social media, social networks and more informal digital writing spaces. Begin thinking strategically about social media and their deployment in service to our message and in service to our audience(s). (New chapter, chapter 9)

Week 11 - Long-form Online Writing

Objective: Explore the resurgent interest and startup activity in the area of long-form writing, including long-form journalism, e-books, Kindle Singles, and the like. Also a week to continue our discussions of social media and social media management.

Week 12 - Re-thinking Strategic Communication for Digital Spaces

Objectives: Learn practical skills for communicating effectively in digital spaces from a public relations perspective and for the purposes of marketing, broadly considered. Learn how to develop a strategic plan to achieve long-term communication goals. (New chapter, Chapter 10)

Week 13 - Digital Media and the Law

Objectives: Digital media have introduced unprecedented tensions in the law. This chapter covers those relating to copyright and intellectual property law, and in the areas of libel law and privacy law. Also considered are the rights of access to information implied by the First Amendment to the U.S.

Constitution and the rights of expression explicit in the First Amendment. (Chapter 11)

Week 14 - Reflection, Contemplation and Closure

Objectives: Contemplate the future. Reflect on learning experiences. Complete revisions. Wrap up loose ends. Say our goodbyes.

Members of a community

Related to the notion of being learners, each student in this course should recognize his or her membership in and obligations to a learning community. We are partners in exploring the issues and tensions in this course, so I ask each member to contemplate his or her responsibility to this community. I gently remind everyone that I am a (relatively new) Sakai user like you but by

no means an expert on how the software is developed or how to fix it when it breaks. Technical questions should go to UNC's systems support staff (help.unc.edu). Similarly, I am a WordPress blog user and not a blog software developer. Technical or computer-related issues or challenges, therefore, are ultimately yours to overcome, though certainly I (and your classmates) will help any way I (and we) can. We are all in this together.

It is easy to lose sight of the fact that we all are human beings with busy lives outside the class. We should treat one another with dignity and respect, therefore. For the vast majority of students, this does not even need to be said. Every once in a while, however, someone forgets this and does some damage. We do not have the benefit of body language or face-to-face contact, the absence of which serves to de-humanize us to some extent, so we have to work a bit harder at understanding **and** at being understood. The interface of the computer removes almost all traces of us as embodied people, removing or ignoring our voice, appearance, gestures and, to a large extent, even our personalities. We perceive only what is typed on the screen.

In discussion, periodically ask yourself:

- Have I made an effort to initiate dialogue? To give information? To seek it? To elaborate? To summarize? To clarify? To seek consensus?
- Am I being encouraging? Sympathetic? Do I show interest? Am I competitive or cooperative? How well am I dealing with disagreement or even conflict?
- Am I meeting the minimum requirements for participation in others' learning?
- Is there evidence of critical thinking and reflection in my postings and comments?

Weekly discussions

Each week we will discuss issues and questions related to the lecture material, which is presented principally in the book, *Writing for Digital Media*. We will also discuss current events related to digital writing and publishing, design, social media and technology. Discussion questions and prompts will be posted on Sakai each week, and the subsequent discussions are **critical** to our online learning experience. We do not have the benefit of real-time, synchronous classroom lectures and discussion, putting a huge burden on our regular and frequent participation online. Your involvement is vital, and it is, therefore, a significant part of your grade. Students will be asked to moderate discussion, as well, further underlining the fact that we are all in this together.

Your posts can and should include thoughts and opinions, probing questions, additional research and information about the topic, pointers to helpful resources, devil's advocate positions – anything that meaningfully advances

the discussion. Hopefully it is unnecessary to mention, but please do not use discussion for anything other than class-related discussion and assignments, and please keep the discussion civil, collegial and professional. Also **really discouraged** are one-line, “I agree!”-like posts that fail to move us forward, but that still have to be clicked to be read. They are a distraction.

Setting up a blog

In the first week you will set up a blog specifically for this course, and you will begin with Twitter if you haven’t already. If you have never used a blog or set one up, have no fear: It is easy, even for computer novices, which is a big reason blogs have proliferated. Even if you already have a blog, it is strongly recommended that you **dedicate a new one to this course**; your classmates and your professor can then rely on this blog to publish only content related to the course. We shouldn’t have to filter or navigate to find content that is relevant. The Twitter account, however, can be a pre-existing one.

The JoMC 711- and School-recommended blog software is WordPress, available for free download at <http://wordpress.com/>. WordPress is open source software, providing great latitude in experimenting with code, features and content. Feel free to use other blogging software with which you may be more comfortable and familiar, such as Google’s Blogger.com.

You will use your blog, a hypertextual environment, to publish most of the assignments, putting into immediate practice the skills and techniques we are discussing. The blogs also provide a kind of de facto diary or narrative for the learning experiences this course will create, making them useful beyond the semester. The important thing now is to set up your blog and to send me the URL. I will create and publish a blogroll listing everyone’s URL. As a class, we should all take the steps necessary to follow one another on Twitter, as well.

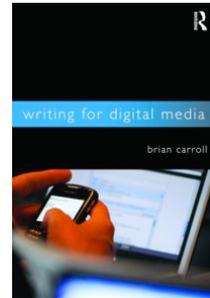
Sakai

UNC’s Information Technology Services offers computing assistance. Contact the Information Technology Response Center in the Undergraduate Library. Walk-in hours are 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., or submit a help request (“remedy ticket”) on the web: <http://help.unc.edu/1383>. Telephone: 962-HELP -- 24 hours per day/7 days per week. The ITRC Web site: <http://help.unc.edu/>.

The Textbook

The textbook I wrote specifically for this course. *Writing for Digital Media* provides the formal lecture material I would otherwise present in a real-world classroom. (In fact, that is how the book began, as a series of lecture notes for the first iteration of this course back in Spring 2003.) Because we do not

meet in real time, I documented the lecture material and aggregated it into a single volume for your (and my) convenience, as well as to synchronize our learning experiences. This eventually resulted in the Routledge-published book, in 2010, which past students have credited as a handy resource long after the course is over. The book is about to go into a second edition, so I will supplement the book with revised material, including wholly new chapters. You are eligible to get this material prior to its publication next year when you purchase the 2010 edition, new or used, print or as an e-book.



Grading

How is your grade determined? There are four components totaling 100 points:

- 1) Weekly projects and assignments described in the course book that you will post to your blog by midnight Sunday night (50 points)
- 2) Moderation of weekly discussion, with the length of duty to be determined by the number of students enrolled in the course (10 points)
- 3) Class participation and professionalism, the latter of which primarily relates to discussion but includes your interactions with everyone, including the instructor, in any and all situations. Participation refers primarily to our weekly discussions. Students are required to post a minimum of **five meaningful posts per week**, with “meaningful” by definition excluding one-line posts. Fewer than five substantial posts results in a weekly participation mark of “LP,” unless the total is zero, in which case the weekly mark is “F” (30 points)
- 4) End-of-semester revisions (10 points).

NOTE: Any student who earns four (4) “Low Pass” grades in the course, either on weekly assignments or for participation (or, more accurately, lack of participation) in discussion, or any combination of the two, will automatically earn a “Low Pass” for the course. Similarly, any student who earns or receives two (2) zeroes in the course, either on weekly assignments or for a lack of participation in discussion or for a combination of the two, will automatically earn a “Low Pass” for the course. Zeroes are typically ‘earned’ by failing to submit a weekly assignment or by not participating in discussion for a week or more.

A word about the University of North Carolina graduate school grading system: It is different from the traditional A/B/C/D +/- system by which most of us were measured as undergraduates. From the UNC Graduate School handbook (available in full as a .pdf document at

<http://gradschool.unc.edu/handbook/pdf/handbook.pdf>), the grade scale used for courses numbered 100 or above is:

- HP for High Pass
- P for Pass
- LP for Low Pass
- F for Fail
- IN for work incomplete
- AB for absent from final examination.

This grade scale **does not equate at all** with the A/B/C/D scale. Hs are very, very rare throughout UNC's Graduate School. They are not the equivalent of As, nor are Ps the equivalent of Bs or Cs. **It is a different system.** A grade of P in no way communicates deficiency, therefore. Please zen with this concept. The vast majority of UNC graduate and professional students across disciplines receive Ps a vast majority of the time.



Bubka

A metaphor: Pole vaulting (or high jumping). A “low pass” means you cleared the bar, but not by much, perhaps grazing it on the way over. The bar bounced a few times, but stayed up. So you will have to ratchet up your performance to clear the bar as it is moved up in the progression of the course. A “pass” means you comfortably cleared the bar. Gear up for the next jump. A “high pass” wows the crowd -- you soared over the bar! You're Sergei

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergey_Bubka)!

Required texts

Writing for Digital Media, by Brian Carroll (London: Routledge, 2010)

Also **recommended**, but not required are:

- Associated Press Stylebook, 2013 edition
<https://www.apstylebook.com/apbookstore/invoice.php?pid=978-0-917360-54-1>
- Bill Kovach's and Tim Rosenstiel's *The Elements of Journalism*, from Three Rivers Press
- Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability*, from New Riders Publishing
- Patrick Lynch's and Sarah Horton's *Web Style Guide 3* from Yale University Press. The entire text is available online, but the bound volume is a worthwhile investment.
- Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots & Leaves*, from Gotham Books, on punctuation and writing.

Work load

1. Weekly assignments: Detailed instructions on these are included in a separate document available behind “Course Documents” on Sakai. Weekly assignments are due by midnight Sunday nights so that we are ready to re-set Monday morning for the next topic.
2. Leading discussion: When it is your week to lead class discussion, make sure you have done all of the assigned readings for that week and that you understand the material. **This will mean reading ahead.** The assigned readings are posted on Blackboard behind the “Readings” button, sorted by week. Discussion leaders are responsible for coming up with questions to generate and sustain discussion on that week’s topics. Facilitate online discussion by interacting and intervening enough to keep the discussion moving forward. Don’t worry about how many posts are being made; concern yourselves with the quality of discussion. I have included a “Discussion Guidelines” document in the “Course Documents” section of our Sakai course website.
3. Class participation and professionalism: Imagine that we share a pristine and beautiful swimming pool. Your instructor will serve as a lifeguard looking for danger, but we all have to work to keep the water clean and the pool safe and fun. **Go out of your way to be nice.** More specifically, you are expected to make at least five substantive posts per week to the discussion board thread(s) for the week, or one each business day. This is a minimum, and it is a quantity that does not count posts such as, “I agree” or “Good point,” as mentioned earlier. We need substance.



“It’s too much! I can’t keep up! Information overload!” These are familiar refrains. The “one ounce of prevention” for this predictable problem is to allocate a fixed amount of time each week to read the discussion threads and blogs, to make posts and to participate in the discussion. As the instructor, this is precisely how I manage my workload and participation. (This is a part-time job on top of my full-time faculty appointment here at Berry College, one that includes direction of our Honors program. I do feel your pain!) I devote four to six hours per week to reading the discussions and interacting.

When those hours have been exhausted, without guilt I log off and go do something else. This advice just might keep you sane and your family intact.

Honor Code

The UNC honor system and code are in effect for JoMC 711. Please take some time to acquaint yourself with these if you have not already. They are available in full at <http://honor.unc.edu/>. In brief, the Honor Code is the heart

of integrity at Carolina. It says that all students shall “Refrain from lying, cheating, or stealing,” but the Honor Code means much more. It is the guiding force behind the students’ responsible exercise of freedom, the foundation of student self-governance at UNC, which subscribes to the view that members of the UNC community should be responsible for upholding the values that have been agreed upon by the entire community. A written Honor Code is an affirmation of our commitment to high standards of conduct inside and outside of the classroom.

Plagiarism and the Web

From the UNC Writing Center:

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/plagiarism.html>

To avoid plagiarizing, remember that the same rules apply to information found on the Web as to information found in print sources:

- When you take ideas or quote from a source, you must paraphrase accurately and give credit by appropriately citing to the original source.
- If you take a sentence or phrase directly from a source, you must indicate it by using quotation marks around the direct quote and citing the original source.
- Because of paging and other issues, citing online sources can be confusing. For more information on how to cite Web-based sources, see the Citing Information tutorial (<http://www.lib.unc.edu/instruct/citations/>) or contact a reference librarian (<http://www.lib.unc.edu/ask.html>). A number of newer citation sources, such as the 7th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, go into detail on the best way to accurately cite electronic sources.

Academic integrity: Because academic integrity is the foundation of college life, academic dishonesty will result in automatic failure on the assignment in question. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: cheating, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, fabrication, submitting the same work in multiple courses, and aiding and abetting. For definitions of these terms, please consult the instructor.

NC Statute 14-118.2

Acts of academic dishonesty, including plagiarism, are illegal in the state of North Carolina. Section 14-118.2 of the North Carolina Statutes covers plagiarism:

§ 14-118.2. Assisting, etc., in obtaining academic credit by fraudulent means.

(a) It shall be unlawful for any person, firm, corporation or association to assist any student, or advertise, offer or attempt to assist any student, in obtaining or in attempting to obtain, by fraudulent means, any academic credit, grade or test score, or any diploma, certificate or other instrument purporting to confer any literary, scientific, professional, technical or other degree in any course of study in any university, college, academy or other educational institution. The activity prohibited by this subsection includes, but is not limited to, preparing or advertising, offering, or attempting to prepare a term paper, thesis, or dissertation for another; impersonating or advertising, offering or attempting to impersonate another in taking or attempting to take an examination; and the giving or changing of a grade or test score or offering to give or change a grade or test score in exchange for an article of value or money.

Online class statement (UNC-required verbiage)

By enrolling as a student in this course, you agree to abide by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill policies related to the Acceptable Use of online resources. Please consult the Acceptable Use Policy (<http://help.unc.edu/1672>) on topics such as copyright, net-etiquette and privacy protection.

As part of this course you may be asked to participate in online discussions or other online activities that may include personal information about you or other students in the course. Please be respectful of the rights and protection of other participants under the UNC Chapel Hill Information Security Policies (http://its.unc.edu/ITS/about_its/its_policies/index.htm) when participating in online classes.

When using online resources offered by organizations not affiliated with UNC Chapel Hill, such as Google or Youtube, please note that the Terms and Conditions of these companies and not the University's Terms and Conditions apply. These third parties may offer different degrees of privacy protection and access rights to online content. You should be well aware of this when posting content to sites not managed by UNC Chapel Hill.

When links to sites outside of the unc.edu (<http://unc.edu>) domain are inserted in class discussions, please be mindful that clicking on sites not affiliated with UNC-Chapel Hill may pose a risk for your computer due to the possible presence of malware on such sites.

Need Help?

If you have special needs or challenges of any kind, including learning disabilities, please let me know. I want to make sure on the front end that we

prevent or at least address any problems you might anticipate having with the course.

UNC Email and Onyen

If you don't yet have an e-mail account, those on campus can create one at any UNC computer lab, by visiting the ATN (Academic Technology and Networks) Help Desk at 300 Wilson Library, or by visiting Onyen Services online at https://onyen.unc.edu/cgi-bin/unc_id/services.

Finally, I believe we are here for a good time, not a long time, so let's have some fun!

