

MEJO 711: Writing for Digital Media

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Instructor

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Course overview

Digital media combine and converge skill sets, tools and technologies. They also blur the traditional roles of producer and consumer, publisher and reader, message sender and message receiver.

These transformations and the demands that they place on writers and editors are the focus of this course. Understanding our increasingly fragmented audiences and exploring how different media behave will help you develop content for digital formats. You will analyze the technical and rhetorical possibilities of online environments, including interactivity, hyperlinking, social media and nontraditional storytelling. You will also learn practical skills to help you succeed in writing for digital media.

This course is about writing — clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific audiences. Good writing is valued on screen just as it is on paper. Effective writing is, as an editor at the Los Angeles Times website once said, about putting the right words in the right order.

Course philosophy

The point of view taken in this course is that we all may 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 agents for the reader as well as the writer.

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. Stories transmit information and transfer experience.

This course emphasizes digital storytelling. This emphasis values a journalistic approach to information gathering, writing, editing and publishing online. Journalism, in other words, serves the journalist and non-journalist alike, especially online, where the democracy of production and publishing are even threatening the relevance of such distinctions.

Specifically, this course aims to:

- Further develop your abilities to write clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific digital audiences
- Teach you practical skills for writing and developing content for digital publishing and delivery
- Teach you how to purposefully blend text, graphical content, multimedia and links
- Explore how trends in personal publishing and social media are transforming journalism and public relations

The course is divided into three sections:

- Foundations, a section devoted the fundamentals of writing well and the elements of journalism
- Practice, a section that breaks down the individual skill sets, questions and considerations important when planning and creating content for digital environments and online publications
- Contexts, a section that looks at personal publishing, citizen journalism, social media and society, and business communication and its environments

Resources

- “Writing and Editing for Digital Media,” second edition, by Brian Carroll (accompanying web resources available at <http://www.routledgetextbooks.com/textbooks/9780415729796/resources.php>)
- Associated Press Stylebook, 2016 edition (available at <https://www.apstylebook.com>)
- Need To Know, the daily email newsletter of the American Press Institute (subscribe at <http://www.americanpressinstitute.org>)

Course schedule

Foundations

Weeks 1 & 2 – The Values of Writing Well

Objectives: Review and further develop writing skills applicable to any medium. Identify weaknesses in writing and begin improving in those areas.

Week 3 –Writing Well Online

Objective: Learn how writing for digital environments differs from writing for traditional print media and what remains constant.

Practice

Week 4 – Writing Well Online

Objective: Learn to adapt style and specific writing techniques for digital formats.

Week 5 – Social Media and Society

Objectives: Social media offers exciting opportunities for digital writers and editors. This module explores strategies for effective and tactical use of social media, and it considers ethical implications.

Week 6 – Display Copy

Objectives: Learn to write headlines, subheads, captions and lists.

Week 7 – Writing for Spaces and Places

Objectives: Plan and curate written content for digital spaces.

Week 8 – Online Public Relations

Objectives: Learn how PR is changing in the digital era

Contexts

Week 9 – Blogito Ergo Sum

Objectives: Explore the fields of personal publishing, including blogging.

Week 10 – We the People, Part I

Objectives: Explore how democratic digital media are transforming communications. Learn how to add value in this era of pro-am journalism. Also explored are social networking and its implications for information industries.

Week 11 – We the People, Part II: News as Conversation

Objectives: Learn what news organizations are doing to engage readers into a conversation and to build and maintain community online.

Week 12 – Writing for Spaces in Business

Objectives: Explore how businesses and institutions are embracing online information spaces and how they are using them to communicate both internally and externally.

Week 13 – The Future of Digital Storytelling

Objectives: Much of the media landscape and ecosystem would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. What does the future hold, and not just for media, but for journalism and its goal — a self-governing democracy?

Week 14 – Reflection, Contemplation and Closure

Objectives: Contemplate learning experiences. Complete revisions. Wrap up loose ends. Say our goodbyes.

Members of a community

Students in this course should recognize their membership in a learning community. We are partners exploring issues in a digital environment.

In this course, we do not have the benefit of body language or face-to-face contact. So we have to work a bit harder at understanding and at being understood. We perceive only what is typed on the screen.

A suggestion mainly for discussion but also when posting to your blogs, periodically ask yourself:

- Have I made an effort to initiate dialogue? To give information? To seek information? To elaborate? To summarize? To clarify? To seek consensus?
- Am I being encouraging? Sympathetic? Do I show interest?
- Am I meeting the 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 related to the readings. The readings will come from the textbook, links to articles on Sakai and updates from the API newsletter.

Discussion questions will be posted on Sakai each week, and the discussions are critical to your learning experience. We do not have the benefit of real-time, synchronous classroom lectures and discussion, instead putting a focus on our regular participation online. Your involvement is vital, and it is, therefore, a significant part of your grade.

Submit your reactions to the questions and post new questions, thoughts and ideas. These posts can and should include thoughts and opinions, additional research and information about the topic, helpful websites, journal and newspaper articles and other related sources from which the class might benefit.

Please do not use the forums for anything other than class-related discussion and assignments. One-line, "I agree!" or "Me too!" posts fail to push the discussion forward.

Sakai

All course materials and links will be available on the class Sakai site (<https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/site/711cert16>, also accessible by logging in to the main Sakai portal at <http://sakai.unc.edu>).

Folders for each week contain a list of items to be read/viewed during that time. You also will find details of assignments due and links to weekly discussion questions. We will use the Sakai forums for discussions.

The “Help” tab in your left-side Sakai navigation (<https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/help/main>) offers Sakai tutorials, how-to videos, FAQs and other resources for learning the platform. The ITS Response Center provides 24/7 assistance with Sakai requests and questions via:

- Phone: 919-962-HELP (919-962-4357)
- Submit a help request (submit at <http://help.unc.edu/help/olhr>)
- Live chat (Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.; access at <https://help.unc.edu/live-chat>)

Please inform me of any Sakai problems, so I can assist in resolving them as I am able and so I know ahead of time about any technical problem that could keep you from submitting your work on time.

Setting up a blog

In the first week of class, you will create a blog specifically for this course. If you have never used a blog or created one, have no fear. It is easy. Even if you already have a blog or personal website, please create a new one for this course.

The recommended blog platform is WordPress (available for free at <http://web.unc.edu>). WordPress is open-source software, providing great latitude in experimenting with code, features and content. It also has user-friendly templates.

You will use your blog to publish most of the assignments, putting into practice the skills and techniques we will be discussing. The blogs also provide a kind of diary 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 add the URL to the Class Blogroll folder in Sakai. You'll find instructions on how to do that on our course site on Sakai, in the Week 1 overview.

Grading

Here are the four components used to determine your grade for the course:

- Weekly projects and assignments described in the course book that you will post to your blog by midnight Sunday night (50%)
- Moderation of weekly discussion, with the length of duty to be determined by the number of students enrolled in the course (10%)
- Class participation and professionalism (40%)
 - Participation refers primarily to our weekly discussions. Students are required to post a minimum of five meaningful posts per week, with “meaningful” excluding one-line posts. Fewer than five substantial posts

results in a weekly participation mark of “L” or “Low Pass,” unless the total is zero, in which case the weekly mark is “F”

- Professionalism primarily relates to discussion but includes your interactions with everyone, including the instructor, in all contexts.

A word about UNC-Chapel Hill’s graduate grading system: It is different from the traditional A/B/C/D +/- system you are probably familiar with. Per the UNC Graduate School handbook, the grade scale used for graduate-level courses is:

- H for high pass
- P for pass
- L for low pass
- F for fail
- IN for work incomplete

This grade scale does not equate with the A/B/C/D scale. An H is very rare throughout UNC’s graduate-level programs. It is not the equivalent of an A, nor is a P the equivalent a B or C. It is a different system. A grade of P in no way communicates deficiency. As UNC-Chapel Hill graduate students say, “P is the first letter to get to Ph.D.”

Workload

- Weekly assignments: Detailed instructions on these are on Sakai. Weekly assignments are due by 11:59 p.m. Sunday nights so that we are ready to re-set Monday morning for the next topic. Late work will not be accepted.
- 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 Sakai 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 yourself with the quality of discussion.
- 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 Sakai discussions for the week, or one each business day.

“It’s too much! I can’t keep up! Information overload!” These are familiar refrains. The “ounce of prevention” for this problem is to allocate a fixed amount of time each

week to read the discussion threads, to make posts and to participate in the discussion. As the instructor, I will do the same.

Honor Code

The UNC honor system and code are in effect for MEJO 711. They are available in full at <http://honor.unc.edu>.

In brief, the Honor Code is the heart of integrity at UNC-Chapel Hill. 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.

Plagiarism and digital media

Students increasingly use the web to do research. With a wealth of information available, including everything from pre-written essays to scientific papers, the potential for plagiarism is enormous. Keep in mind that as easy as it is for students to find and copy information from the web, it is just as easy for instructors to find the same information.

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 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.
- Citing digital 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>).

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.

Online class statement

1. By enrolling as a student in this course, you agree to abide by UNC-Chapel Hill policies related to the Acceptable Use of online resources. Please consult the Acceptable Use Policy (<http://its.unc.edu/about-us/how-we-operate>) on topics such as copyright and privacy protection.
2. 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 apply. These third parties may offer different degrees of privacy protection and access rights to digital content. You should be aware of this when posting content to sites not managed by UNC-Chapel Hill.
3. When links to sites outside of the 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.
4. Online courses may at times require Web-based assignments that are public in nature and may be viewed by third parties online. This is especially true in social media and blogging platforms. Be mindful of the information you choose to share publicly as part of your assignments. Under the Federal Family Education Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) a student's education records are protected from disclosure to third parties. However, FERPA protection does not extend to material shared publicly by students.

Need help?

If you have special needs or challenges of any kind, including learning disabilities, please let me know.

Core values and competencies

This course covers the following competencies required by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication:

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Think critically, creatively and independently.
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.
- • Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.
- • Contribute to knowledge appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.