

MEJO 153: Writing and Reporting Spring 2023

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I. INTRODUCTION

This syllabus explains expectations of you as a student in MEJO 153. This document also describes the types of assignments and tests in the course and the criteria that I will use to evaluate and grade your work.

MEJO 153 concentrates on teaching you how to gather and organize information and how to write news articles, press releases, broadcast scripts and other material on deadline according to professional standards. The course emphasizes respect for and correct use of language, with stress on spelling and grammar, style consistency, accuracy and clear writing. We will also discuss bias, libel and ethical considerations. Students will use research and interviewing in their work.

This section of MEJO 153 is in person. We will meet on Zoom when we have guest speakers. For some meetings, you will work on assignments on your own during class time, and I will be available to answer questions and to offer advice and coaching.

The faculty members of the Hussman School of Journalism and Media believe that anyone interested in a career in any communications field must be able to write clear, tight copy with care and precision. The key words for any writing are full, fair and accurate.

MEJO 153 is required of all Hussman majors, regardless of whether their intended careers are in newspapers, advertising, public relations, radio or TV, strategic communication, visual communication, multimedia, social media or other communications fields. Communicators in all fields report, gather and assess information; consider audiences; write copy; and deliver the story or message.

II. PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

MEJO 153 abides by standards the communications professions follow and expect of graduates of a professional school such as the Hussman School of Journalism and Media. These skills are expected of a practitioner of journalism and public relations.

Writing ability — Grammar and spelling; ability to tell a good story well; use of quotes, anecdotes and descriptive detail; use of active voice and strong verbs; ability to write leads that are inviting and that get to the point; ability to write tightly and to organize information in logical, compelling sequence.

Reporting ability — Pursuit, digging, enterprise, diligence; ability and eagerness to see and pursue promising angles; ability to seek and obtain anecdotes, details and quotes that provide documentation and add liveliness to copy; ability to see the need for and to get all sides of the story; ability to cultivate good sources.

Speed, productivity and efficiency — Speed on deadline; speed and efficiency in completing non-deadline assignments; ability and willingness to manage more than one assignment at a time; ability and willingness to make frequent, substantive contributions to the organization.

Accuracy — Skill with basic factual information such as names, addresses, dates and figures; ability to identify and make use of the best sources, whether they are documents, references or people.

Work habits — Punctuality, reliability, readiness to go beyond the minimum requirements of the job; interest in assuming and ability to assume more than minimum responsibility; ability and willingness to anticipate and fulfill the demands of an assignment without prompting; ability to deal even-handedly with peers and supervisors, to accept constructive criticism and to offer constructive suggestions; interest in all areas of the operation; knowledge of community, regional, national and international events; regular and thorough reading of the news.

Judgment — Commitment to fairness and balance; ability to recognize and assess possible adverse consequences of actions; knowledge of, respect for and observance of the organization's policies.

The work accomplished in the writing and reporting course will be the basis for students in subsequent courses in the Hussman School, whether they are skills or conceptual courses. At the end of the course, students will be better writers and better able to gather and evaluate information.

Note: Although we adhere to professional standards in this course, the material that you write in class should NOT be posted online or given to a potential employer as examples of your writing/reporting ability. The exercises are for class use only and sometimes will not represent real events. In addition, you should not present material that has been substantially edited by a professor as your own work, as that might constitute plagiarism.

III. GENERAL COURSE REQUIREMENTS

A. Course Materials

1. Required Texts.

- Yopp and McAdams, “Reaching Audiences: A Guide to Media Writing ,” Sixth Edition. The digital edition is recommended.
- The most recent edition of the Associated Press Stylebook, either in print or digital subscription.
- The Hussman School stylebook accessible at <http://jschoolstylebook.web.unc.edu/>

2. Reference Materials. Our class is mostly open book. Use any and all resources — the textbook, stylebooks, etc. — to help you complete assignments.

B. Course Requirements

1. News Reading. In this course, you will learn to become a more critical consumer of news from a range of sources. As you begin to study journalism and media, you will find it useful to read a national newspaper like The New York Times or The Washington Post as well as a local news organization such as The Daily Tar Heel.

2. Attendance. MEJO 153 is a professional course. You are expected to assume a professional attitude as a student. Attendance is required, and punctuality is essential. There are no free cuts. Most of the work in MEJO 153 is done during class. Make-up work will be accepted only for excused absences at my discretion. To be excused, you must notify the instructor **in** advance of your intended absence.

3. Assignments and Deadlines. All writing assignments must be double-spaced, edited and submitted on time. Every effort is made to simulate realistic professional conditions in class. All assignments must meet deadlines.

If accepted at all, late papers will receive a reduced grade unless you and I agree BEFORE the assignment is due that a delay is justified. On some assignments, the grade will be an F for failure to meet the deadline. Even if an assignment is excused as late, no assignment will be accepted later than one week after its deadline.

All reading assignments must be completed before the appropriate class sessions for which they are assigned. You are responsible for all assigned readings.

4. Outside Assignments. During the course, you may be expected to gather information and write stories about events outside of regularly scheduled class sessions.

5. Research. Stories, whether news articles or persuasive pieces, need facts. You will be required to do research and interviews as your instructor indicates. You can learn what's available to help you in your research by accessing the MEJO 153 resources guide provided by Librarian Stephanie Brown at <http://guides.lib.unc.edu/mejo153>.

6. Honor Code. The University's Honor Code is in effect in MEJO 153 as in all other courses. The Honor Code (<https://catalog.unc.edu/policies-procedures/honor-code/>) forms a bond of trust among students, faculty, and administrators. The university operates under a system of self-governance, as students are responsible for governing themselves. The Honor Code embodies the ideals of academic honesty, integrity, and responsible citizenship, and governs the performance of all academic work a student conducts at the University. Acceptance of an offer of admission to the Hussman School presupposes a commitment to the principles embodied in our century-old tradition of honor and integrity.

You are expected to produce your own work in this course. There are times when professional communicators work together, however. I will explain and clarify under which circumstances such cooperation will be appropriate and acceptable in the course. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at <http://instrument.unc.edu/basicframe.html>.

You are to cite your sources appropriately and according to the assignment. The Code of Student Conduct states that expulsion or suspension can result from “(a)cademic cheating, including (but not limited to) unauthorized copying, collaboration or use of notes or books on examinations, and plagiarism (defined as the intentional representation of another person's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own).” If you have questions about citations or usage on your work, ask your instructor.

If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see me or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

C. Editing, Format and Style of Writing Assignments

1. Copy Preparation. I will provide specific details on how to format and submit your assignments. As the writer, it is your responsibility to edit all stories before turning them in. Instructors will evaluate copy as if the writer has made it ready for publication.

2. Editing and Style. Editing is part of the writing process, and good writers carefully check for style, spelling, grammar, punctuation and accuracy. Latest editions of The Hussman stylebook and The Associated Press Stylebook are the authorities on style in MEJO 153. If any of the stylebooks are in conflict on a point, the Hussman stylebook will prevail, the AP is next, then the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

You will need to become familiar with both stylebooks. Allow time to make assignments conform to style requirements. Points will be deducted from material containing deviations from the stylebooks. I will give you periodic style quizzes to help you learn the more common style rules.

3. Consideration of Audience. When you write, you must consider your readership. For each assignment, your instructor will tell you the intended audience.

IV. TESTS AND ASSIGNMENTS — THE COMPONENTS OF GRADES

A. Common Competency Exams

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media administers three exams common to all students in MEJO 153 to test the students' level of competency at certain points in the course. The week-to-week reading list for the course incorporates the material you will need to have read and the skills you should have acquired by each competency test. Dates for these exams are included on the week-by-week schedule.

- The first will test your ability to exercise sound news judgment and to write accurately. You will be asked to write a simple news story from a set of facts. You should apply news values in determining which facts and quotes to use and follow the inverted pyramid style of writing for organization. At that point in the course, you should also be familiar with AP and Hussman style. You will also be graded on spelling, punctuation, word usage and grammar.
- The second will test your mastery of points and principles covered in assigned readings in “Reaching Audiences,” class discussions and any other material from the instructor. The exam will be short-answer questions, and you will be expected to be able to discuss briefly topics such as libel, ethics in journalism, research strategies and evaluation, interviewing techniques, reporting with numbers, the need for editing standards, broadcast, public relations and digital writing, and the basic principles of good writing.
- The third — the final exam — tests your ability to write a news story from your own notes taken from an event or other assignment. You are expected to produce a well-written and well-edited story, applying in practice all the skills and principles you have learned throughout the semester. You will either select the event to be covered or your instructor will assign it.

If you have to miss an exam, it is up to the individual instructor to schedule a make-up exam. You might receive a grade of zero on the exam if you miss it without an excused absence or if you do not make arrangements in advance.

B. Quizzes: Grammar and Style

Quizzes on subjects such as language use, AP style, spelling and grammar will also be given primarily in the early weeks but also throughout the course. All style quizzes are open book.

C. Written Assignments

MEJO 153 is a skills class. You should expect to complete a writing assignment in nearly every class session.

In a typical assignment, I will give you a handout with information from which to write a news story or press release. For almost all assignments, you will have 60 to 75 minutes to write and edit your work in class. You will also be expected to do research to supplement your information-gathering. I will set guidelines for those assignments.

In addition to the in-class writing assignments, you may have some written out-of-class assignments during the course. Typical assignments could be a person-on-the-street interview based on a current event topic, an interview with a campus newsmaker, an event or a speech.

D. Usage and Grammar Test

The instructor will schedule the Usage and Grammar Test to be administered in the class. You are required to take the Usage and Grammar Test during the semester in which you are enrolled in MEJO 153. Passage of the test with a 70 or higher is required for graduation from the school. Study guides are at <http://hussman.unc.edu/ugtest>

E. Grade Percentages

The aim of the course is to make students competent in the writing skills needed for a successful communications career. Your course grade will be based on all class work, including participation in discussions; on quizzes; on your scores on the first two competency exams; your score on the final exam.

This is the way your grade will be computed:

60 percent: Writing exercises; quizzes, including those AP and Hussman style, language use and other subjects at the instructor's discretion.

10 percent: Discussion of news events, trends and controversies in journalism and public relations.

10 percent: First competency exam

10 percent: Second competency exam

10 percent: Third competency exam (final exam)

V. GRADING

A. Grading Policy

Instructors in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media are known for their high standards and their fair but rigorous grading. The following statement sets forth the school's grading standards, which are followed in evaluating work in all of its writing and reporting courses. Instructors consider each assignment as a professional editor would, applying the same professional guidelines and standards that any good editor would in accepting or rejecting stories from writers.

News and other professionals must be able to report and write and produce newsworthy, accurate, fair, complete, interesting, readable and mechanically clean stories. Thus, grades reflect a student's performance as a reporter, as a writer and as one who uses the language correctly.

In evaluating the **writing**, the instructor considers the quality of the lead, use of language, economy of expression, readability, organization of material and transition, among other factors.

In evaluating the **mechanics**, the instructor considers spelling, grammar, punctuation, conformity to AP and Hussman style, and similar factors.

In evaluating the **reporting**, the instructor considers news judgment in gathering, evaluating and selecting information used in the story, accuracy, approach to the story, choice and use of appropriate sources, and thoroughness.

B. Grading Scale

Grading in MEJO 153 is conducted on a numerical scale. Each student begins each assignment with a raw score of 100. Points are added or subtracted from that according to the standards listed below. You may determine your approximate grade standing in the course by converting your numerical grades to letter grades on your assignments according to this scale:

A = 93-100

A- = 90-92
B+ = 87-89
B = 83-86
B- = 80-82
C = 70-79, with +/- ranges the same as for B
D = 60-69
F = 0-59

Under the definitions established by UNC-Chapel Hill, students who receive the following letter grades are considered to have reached the level of attainment defining that letter. Thus, letter grades received for reporting and writing courses may be interpreted this way:

A = highest level of attainment / suitable for publication in a professional news source with minor edits

B = high level of attainment / acceptable work from an undergraduate intern at a professional news organization

C = adequate level of attainment / but not yet appropriate for submission to a professional news source

D = minimal level of attainment

F = failed; unacceptable performance

You are expected to produce acceptable work — at a C level at least. Failure to make a C- means the course must be repeated if it is a requirement for graduation.

The faculty of the Hussman School of Journalism and Media believes that it is essential for anyone planning a career in communications to demonstrate at least minimum competency in MEJO 153. Undergraduate journalism majors must pass the course with a C- to receive credit.

C. Evaluation of Writing Assignments

I will devote a great deal of time and effort to evaluating your work. In courses in which students write frequently, instructors try to return graded assignments as soon as possible, often before assigning a new writing exercise. Review your feedback immediately and thoroughly. It's an important part of your learning.

Grades are determined by plus and minus points on each assignment. Plus points may be added when the work is extraordinary, but not when the work is at an average level.

Points are deducted for each error and from work that falls below the minimum level of acceptability.

Here is a grading guide to three main areas your instructor will consider in deducting or adding points to your stories:

1. Writing

In evaluating writing, I will consider the quality of the lead, use of language, conciseness, completeness, readability, organization of material and transition, among other factors.

+5 for an exceptionally effective lead and supporting material

+5 to +10 for exceptionally effective organization and treatment of material

+2 for effective transition or introduction of material

+2 to +10 for excellence in quality of information gathered and used

-2 for ineffective or missing treatment of transition or introduction of material

-2 to -10 for ineffective organization or treatment of material, including but not limited to, wordiness; use of jargon or clichés; inclusion of unnecessary, non-newsworthy or obvious information; repetition; redundancy; inappropriate choice or use of quoted material; incorrect word choice

-5 to -10 for an ineffective lead that needs work or story that lacks supporting material for a lead

-15 to -20 for missing the lead entirely or burying it

2. Mechanics

Some otherwise good writers fail to communicate clearly because they are weak in grammar, punctuation or spelling. That is unacceptable in any communications profession, and that is why such fundamental language skills are emphasized. Points are deducted for style, spelling, grammar and punctuation errors according to this scale:

-2 for each error or inconsistency in style

-2 for excessively long or complicated sentences or paragraphs

-5 for each spelling error, and a typographical mistake (a typo) is considered a spelling error

-5 for each punctuation error, such as incorrect use of a comma, semicolon, colon or dash

-5 for each grammatical error, such as improper subject-verb agreement or noun-pronoun agreement, or misplaced modifier

-10 for a minor factual error, such as an inaccurate street address or the time element if the effect on the story is relatively insignificant

-50 for a misspelled name of a person, business, agency or institution on first reference, a misquote or other major factual error. Until the first competency exam in MEJO 153, each major factual error will result in a deduction of 25 points, not 50, from a paper's total grade. This grace period will allow you to become familiar with standards of verification and accuracy expected of communications professionals. After the first competency exam, such errors will receive the 50-point deduction. This deduction is not an arbitrary punishment. Such errors go to the heart of credibility for you and your organization. Errors can also have serious legal ramifications, such as libel lawsuits.

-10 for misspelling a person's name on second or later references (e.g., Brown on first reference, Brwon on second reference)

3. Reporting

These reporting criteria apply to stories for which you gather the information:

+ or - 5 to 10 for source selection — quality and number of sources used; appropriateness of individual sources for the topic, including the level of expertise or authority involved (students could lose points here for relying too heavily on online sources, not having a variety of sources or not including a human source)

+ or - 5 to 20 for thoroughness of story — existence of loose ends, holes or unanswered questions; development of significant angles; inclusion of needed detail; information to make story fair and complete

+ or - 5 to 15 for story backgrounding — research necessary to make the story complete or to provide needed explanations; preparation for interviews or meetings; shows understanding of the general topic

+ or - 20 for legal errors, such as libel, violation of legal right of privacy, copyright violation and others

Note: Many of these plus and minus points may be applied to the same story for recurring errors or for continual superior performance.

Seeking Help

If you need individual assistance, contact me. If you want to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability or an illness.

These are stressful and unprecedented times, and paying attention to and understanding your own wellness is key to your academic and professional success. Everyone responds to stress differently. Some people find the use of mediation and mindfulness apps like [Headspace](#) or [Calm](#) helpful.

The university has a number of counseling services available to students. These include UNC Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <https://caps.unc.edu>. To reach CAPS, please email caps@unc.edu or call 919-966-3658. CAPS is available at all hours 24/7 for urgent concerns. The CAPS office is located in the James A. Taylor Building, 3rd Floor, 320 Emergency Room Drive.

The UNC Student Affairs website also lists resources on their Student Wellness page: <https://studentwellness.unc.edu/resources/mental-wellbeing-resources>. To reach the Student Wellness team, please email studentwellness@unc.edu or call (919) 962-WELL (9355)

Diversity and Inclusion

The university's policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined on the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office's website (<https://eoc.unc.edu/our-policies/ppdhrm/>).

UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

If you need information about disabilities, visit the Department of Disability Services website at ars.unc.edu/

ACEJMC Accreditation Values

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media's accrediting body, ACEJMC, outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here: <http://hussman.unc.edu/accreditation>.

No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies, but collectively, our courses are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. The values and competencies associated with MEJO 153 include being able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientations and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in society in relation to communications;
- 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.

Week-by-Week Guide

I. Weeks 1-8: Competencies

At the end of eight weeks of classes, you should be able to demonstrate the following competencies when writing a news story based on a set of facts:

- Select appropriate information from a set of facts to write a concise summary lead;
- Organize a news story properly, accurately and completely;
- Edit the story according to AP and Hussman style;
- Use proper spelling and grammar;
- Understand ethics in communications;
- Develop interviewing techniques;
- Use quotes and attribution appropriately;
- Watch for any libelous material;
- Develop basic research skills.

Week 1 (Jan. 9-11)

Topic: Introductions

Week 2 (Jan. 18; no class on Jan. 16)

Topics: Nature of news; introduction to style

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapters 1 and 2, Appendix A

Week 3 (Jan. 23-25)

Topic: Leads

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapters 4 and 5; Appendices A, B; AP and Hussman stylebooks

Week 4 (Jan. 30-Feb. 1)

Topic: Story organization

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapters 6 and 8

Week 5 (Feb. 6-8)

Topic: Interviewing and observing

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapters 9 and 10

Week 6 (Feb. 15; no class Feb. 13)

Topic: Social media

Week 7 (Feb. 20-22)

Topic: Law and ethics for communicators

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapter 12

Week 8 (Feb. 27-March 1)

Topic: Story formats

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapter 7

Guest: Korie Dean, News & Observer reporter

Weeks 9-15: Competencies

Students should be able to demonstrate the following competencies while conceptualizing, reporting and writing an event-based news story:

- How to research, organize and write a variety of types and formats of news stories;
- Intro to public relations writing;
- Intro to broadcast writing.

Week 9 (March 6-8)

Topic: Review for Comp I exam, to be given on March 8

Week 10 (March 20-22)

Topic: Avoiding bias and stereotypes

Readings: Reaching Audiences, chapter 11

Week 11 (March 27-29)

Topic: Broadcast writing

Reading: Reaching Audiences, chapter 13

Guest: Marilyn Payne, ESPN reporter

Week 12 (April 3-5)

Topic: Public relations writing

Reading: Reaching Audiences, chapter 14

Guest: Brittany Jennings, director of public relations at Elevance Health

Week 13 (April 10-12)

Topic: Review for Comp II exam, to be given April 13

Week 14 (April 17-19)

Topic: Covering events and meetings

Week 15 (April 24-26)

Topics: Reviewing for the final exam

Monday, May 1 (4 p.m.)

Topic: Final exam