JOMC 711: Writing for Digital Media
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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 new demands they place on writers and content developers are the focus of this course. Of special concern are the changes these media force in terms of learning how to effectively communicate in and with them, in particular in journalistic contexts. Beyond exploring these convergences, this course also asks students to put that learning into practice and to learn by doing.

Understanding our increasingly fragmented audiences and exploring how different media behave will help students better develop content for digital formats and environments, especially those in and for journalism. Students will analyze the technical and rhetorical possibilities of online environments, including interactivity, hyperlinking, social media, transparent sourcing and non-linear storytelling. Students will also learn practical skills to help them succeed in writing for specifically online environments.

This course is about writing — clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific audiences. Fortunately, good writing is still valued online. The course is about writing in and for digital environments, with a focus on journalistic environments and contexts, and about communicating effectively in those online environments. Learning how to achieve balance and a careful, deliberate blend of these elements is a primary goal, and accomplishing it will require new skills, intuitions and sensitivities.

Course philosophy

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 or agents of the reader.
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. 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 students’ abilities to write clearly, precisely, accurately, with energy and voice, and for specific online audiences;
- teach journalism and communication students practical skills for writing and developing content for digital publishing and delivery;
- teach how to purposefully blend text, graphical content, multimedia and hypertextual, interactive elements;
- explore how trends in personal publishing and social media are forcing change in journalism and other information industries;
- give students a comprehensive resource for online journalism, one that deals with digital media as their own distinct forms of communication rather than merely adjuncts to print or broadcast.

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.
Course schedule

FOUNDATIONS

Weeks 1 & 2 – Writing Well: The Values of Communication
Objectives: Review and further develop writing skills applicable to virtually any medium. Identify weaknesses in writing and begin improving in those areas.

Week 3 – Writing Well Online
Objective: Learn how writing for online environments differs from writing for traditional print media and what should remain constant.

PRACTICE

Week 4 – Writing Well Online
Objective: Learn to adapt style and specific writing techniques for digital formats.

Week 5 – Display Copy
Objectives: Learn to write headlines, deckheads, subheads, lists and hyperlinked content. Learn to produce well-written, intuitively ordered webpages.

Week 6 – Writing for Spaces and Places
Objectives: Plan and organize written content for the web, digital spaces and digitally distributed media. Develop and use web-specific style guides.

Week 7 – Online Editing
Objectives: Learn the basics of online editing, the essential elements of web design and how to publish online.

CONTEXTS

Week 8 – Blogito Ergo Sum
Objectives: Explore the relatively new fields of personal publishing, including blogging and microblogging (or tweeting).

Week 9 – We the People, Part I
Objectives: Explore how democratic digital media are transforming journalism. Learn how to add value in this era of pro-am journalism. Also explored are social networking and its implications for information industries.

Week 10 – 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 11 – Social Media and Society
Objectives: Social media offer exciting opportunities for reporters and online writers and editors, but there are few standard practices. This module explores strategies for effective and tactical use of social media, and it considers ethical implications.

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 current 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

Members of a community

Each student in this course should recognize his or her membership in a learning community. We are partners in exploring the issues and tensions in this course, so I ask each student to contemplate his or her responsibility as a member of this community. I am a Sakai user like you but not an expert on how the software is developed. I am a WordPress user but not a blog software developer. Technical or computer-related issues or challenges, therefore, are yours to overcome, though certainly I (and your classmates) will help any way we can. We are all in this together.

In this course, 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. 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 competitive or cooperative? How well do I deal with conflict?
- 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 and questions related to the lecture material, which is presented in the study book chapters. We will also discuss current events related to online writing, design, personal publishing, 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, instead putting a focus on our regular and frequent 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, and please keep the discussion civil, collegial and professional. Also discouraged are one-line, “I agree!” posts that fail to push the discussion forward.

Setting up a blog

In the first week, you will create a blog specifically for this course. 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 containing only content related to the course. We shouldn’t have to filter or navigate to find content that is relevant.

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

You will use your blog to publish most of the assignments, putting into immediate 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 (instructions to come).
Sakai

All course materials and links will be available on the class Sakai site 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.

Contact Maggie Hutaff, program coordinator for e-learning, at hutaff@unc.edu or 919-843-9471 for in-house Sakai and technical support.

The ITS Response Center provides 24/7 assistance with Sakai requests and questions via:
- Phone: 962-HELP(4357)
- Submit a Help Request
- Live Chat (M-F 9am - 6pm)

Textbooks

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

Also recommended, but not required are:
- Associated Press Stylebook, 2012 edition
- 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. I refer to it extensively, and I point you to the guide’s website quite a bit. The entire text is available online, but the bound volume is a worthwhile investment.

Grading

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

1) Weekly projects and assignments described in the course book that you will post to your blog by midnight Sunday night (50%)
2) Moderation of weekly discussion, with the length of duty to be determined by the number of students enrolled in the course (10%)
3) Class participation and professionalism, the latter of which primarily relates to discussion but includes your interactions with everyone, including the instructor, in all contexts. 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” (30%).

4) End-of-semester revisions (10%).

NOTE: Any student who earns four (4) “Low Pass” grades in the course, either for weekly assignments or for participation (or, more accurately, lack of participation) in discussion, will automatically earn a “Low Pass” for the course. Similarly, any student who earns or receives two (2) zeroes in the course, either for weekly assignments or for a lack of participation in discussion, 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. Per the UNC Graduate School handbook, the grade scale used for graduate-level courses numbered is:

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

This grade scale does not equate 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. As UNC journalism and mass communication graduate students tell each other, “P is the first letter in Ph.D.” The vast majority of UNC graduate and professional students across disciplines receive Ps a vast majority of the time.

A metaphor: pole vaulting (or high jumping). A “low pass” means you barely cleared the bar, perhaps grazing it on the way over. You will have to boost 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 flew over the bar.

Workload

1. Weekly assignments: Detailed instructions on these are included in folders for each week. 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 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 yourselves with the quality of discussion.

For help, acquaint yourself with Google’s “Dos and Don’ts of Posting,” available at http://groups.google.com/support/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=46492. Though this document was written for Google Groups postings, much of it is applicable to our Sakai discussion.

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 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 “one ounce of prevention” for this 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, I will do the same.

**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 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 the Web**

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 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).

**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.

**Online class statement**

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.
5. 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) and UNC’s FERPA regulation (http://registrar.unc.edu/AcademicServices/PoliciesProcedures/StudentRights/COM1_042762), 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.

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