

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

**Fall 2020**  
3 credits

**Observations for this exceptional semester**

This fall we will return to NDSU during the greatest crisis in the history of American higher education, as the president of Princeton University called it last summer. It presents us with responsibilities and opportunities. We who have decided to return to the university during these difficult times will have to try to follow sometimes extraordinarily demanding protocols in an environment that is supposed to encourage personal and intellectual connections. Those have now become risky. We'll have to do our best through times when we'll feel despondent, anxious, overwhelmed, angry and scared. That is normal during a crisis.

But we have the opportunity as well to show our courage and strength through a global challenge the likes of which we have not seen since World War II. We have never faced something called COVID-19 before. But humanity has faced many pandemics. People with courage then did their best to mitigate spread, treat the sick and carry on. They knew that while a vaccine was impossible—now is the first time in history we could hope for such a thing—a pandemic always ends eventually. We too will carry on, perhaps a little more humble facing the forces of nature, with a greater understanding of our limits and weaknesses, but also having some satisfaction knowing that we persevered without giving up or giving in.

With this in mind I hope everyone this semester will be just a little more tolerant, a little more forgiving and a little more patient. Instructors are trying to do it all—teach face to face (mask to mask?) and online at the same time. That requires a lot of technology, and more savvy to use it than most professors have had. Classroom technology was not part of our major. We anticipate problems. We'll do our best to make the class as good as it can be. In return for your patience I promise to have patience with you, realizing that some days you may be sick, tired, afraid, anxious, or maybe just not be ready to face a sea of masked people trying to avoid each other. Don't give up. Stick with me. I'm not feeling great about this either. But I'll stick with you. And we'll stick together. You are a communication major. Be a communicator. Keep a journal or blog. Take pictures. It will help you think through your feelings, and give you something tangible when someday your children ask, "What was it like to be a student during the Pandemic of 2020?" Yes, they will ask.

**Instructor:** Ross F. Collins, Ph.D., 338B14 Minard Hall; 231-7295; ross.collins@ndsu.edu; www.rosscollins.com. Instructor's vita: www.rosscollins.com/vita.html.

**Office hours:** By appointment, or just drop by.

*How best to contact the instructor:* I respond most quickly to emails.

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

Suggested texts: William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (any edition); Strunk and White, *Elements of Style* (any edition); *AP Stylebook* (most recent edition); Ross F. Collins, *Weird Ways of News*, free online textbook, [www.weirdwaysofnews.com](http://www.weirdwaysofnews.com).

### **Bulletin description**

Construction of professional quality messages for the modern media landscape. Restricted to communication professional majors and minors.

### **Course objectives**

Students in this upper-level class are expected to have achieved an advanced ability to write for many forms of media, and to write many kinds of non-fiction stories. The course aims to encourage students to perfect these abilities by reviewing common professional writing techniques, practices and guidelines, as well as introducing possibly new writing areas to explore. Students also will improve their ability to produce mass-media style articles based on gathering information from meetings, speeches and other commonly reported events. Upon completion of this class students will have:

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

### **What to expect**

The instructor believes mass communication students at this level should be writing often and preferably publishing their work frequently. To encourage this, students will either produce a story to discuss, or write, during nearly every single class period.

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

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

- 5 pts for a bylined story published in the *Spectrum*, *High Plains Reader* or other free-distribution publication (print or online). (Maximum of 15 pts.)
- 3 pts for a blog post of 300 words or more (Maximum of 9 pts.)
- 1 pt for every three tweets, social media posts or other brief work (Maximum of 5 pts.).

To claim extra credit, submit online link or hard copy. Warning: one point *deducted* for each grammar or spelling error! Yes, that means zero points for one error in a short post. Professionals don’t make mistakes. *Note: to receive credit, work must be submitted on or before the last day of the semester, Friday, Dec. 13.*

### **Class management**

The university has instituted the “Hy-Flex” teaching model this fall due to pandemic restrictions. This means students will have the option of attending a face-to-face (well, mask-to-mask) class, or the

option of following the class online from elsewhere. Students may decide to move to online or class-based instruction at any time without notifying the instructor. Class-based requirements will be as stated by university pandemic regulations.

The class will be managed through the university's Blackboard web-based class management system. Students normally will be asked to submit both in-class and out-of-class assignments through Blackboard.

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

### **Evaluation**

Students will be evaluated based on writing assignments as specified below. Some writing assignments will be completed during class time. Because ability to write within time constraints will be a factor in assessing this work, missed in-class assignments can't be made up. See attendance policy below.

### **Grading**

#### ***How work will be graded***

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

Tentative point totals are as indicated. These may change somewhat during the semester based on the number of assignments eventually completed. Grammar, spelling, AP style and mechanics will be included in the grade, even for in-class assignments, as this is the standard expected of working professionals in communication industries. However, students may use any online or published reference during class.

Note: no midterm exam will be required. A final exam based on essay questions and grammar quizzes (see below) will be given during the final exam period. Quality of writing will be considered as part of the final exam grade. Students will not have access to grammar references for the final exam, but will be expected to know the rules at a near-professional level.

**Wednesday** in-class writing exercises: 10 pts each, about 150 pts total.

**Friday** you're-the-teacher writing assignments (see below): 5 pts each, about 75 pts. total; students whose presentation is selected will receive an extra 15 points, so 20 points total for that week.

**Longer** out-of-class writing assignments: 25 pts each, about 250 pts total.

**Quizzes** or other possible assignments: 25 pts.

**Final exam:** 100 pts.

**Total:** about 615 pts. (Tentative total points may change slightly depending on number of assignments completed during the semester.)

Letter grade percentages:

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

### **Class attendance**

Attendance is expected based on university general attendance policy. The “HyFlex” model does not require face-to-face attendance, but does require either classroom or online attendance. See university policies. While the instructor does not grade on class attendance, writing or other in-class activities cannot be made up, as noted above. The instructor realizes students may need to miss a class now and then for a variety of reasons. To offer students some flexibility, he will grant **two** “class PTO days.” Points missed for assignments done in class during that day, if any, will be dropped from final grade calculation. The instructor recommends students keep these free days available in case of emergencies, but students may choose to use them for any reason. Beyond these free days, missed in-class assignments *can't be made up*, unless the student can show acceptable written documentation of military service or health emergency. Students who skip in-class assignments have, as an alternative, the possibility of making up missed points through extra-credit activities as described above.

Note: In case of conflict, university pandemic regulations may supersede class rules.

### **Tentative class schedule fall 2020**

#### ***General class procedures.***

**Mondays:** The instructor will present the week’s writing topic, and discuss out-of-class work due for the coming week or two. Out-of-class writing assignments usually will be in the range of 1,000-2,000 words.

**Wednesdays:** the instructor will assign an in-class writing assignment, due at the end of the 50-minute class. Assignments will be selected from topics as listed below, or from topics based on class interest.

**Fridays:** Grammar, usage and mechanics. On Fridays you’re the teacher. As this is an advanced-level class, students should be at the point of becoming professionals. That means they should be able to lead and teach other staff. Based on topics from *Working With Words* (or elsewhere) assigned the Monday before, students will explain the topic in writing (400-500 words) using their own words as preparation for teaching the lesson to a class with presumption of a middle school reading level. A student or two will be called to present their writing to the class, and discussion will follow. The class will create a possible quiz based on the day’s lesson. Some of these may become part of the final exam based on class preferences. Pandemic regulations using the Hy-Flex model will require students to present possibly using Blackboard Collaborate; this will be worked out as needed.

Topics listed below will include out-of-class assignments due the Monday after the class topic discussion unless otherwise indicated. Wednesday and Friday topics will be chosen from the list below. Some out-of-class assignment dates may change depending on availability of events to cover.

#### Week One (August 24-28)

Introduction. Writing personal essays. Review *Working With Words*, Introduction and Chapter 1, writing basics.

#### Week Two (August 31-Sept. 4)

Ross’s Durable Dozen. Writing the how-to article. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 6, grammar basics.

Week Three (Sept. 7-11; no class Monday, Labor Day)

Writing the how-to article, cont. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 2, tight writing.

Week Four (Sept. 14-18)

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

Week Five (Sept. 21-25)

Writing to persuade. Review biased term list in *Working With Words*, pp. 314-329.

Week Six: (Sept. 28-Oct. 2)

Review *Working With Words* Chapter 3, writing news. Check out *Weird Ways of News* Chapter 4 for a less formal viewpoint. Note: Wednesday and Friday classes will not meet this week as instructor will be presiding at an American Journalism Historians Association convention; an out-of-class exercise will be assigned.

Week Seven (Oct. 5-9)

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

Week Eight (Oct. 12-16)

Sensitivity to readers. Review *Working With Words* Chapter 4, writing for broadcast.

Week Nine (Oct. 19-23)

Frames. Skim *Working With Words*, pp. 370-386, hyphenated word list.

Week 10 (Oct. 26-30)

Writing humor. Skim *Working With Words*, pp. 387-391, to identify slight differences in U.S. versus Canada/British spelling.

Week 11 (Nov. 2-6)

Writing a memoir. Review *Working With Words*, Chapter 5, online media.

Week 12 (Nov. 9-13; no class Monday, Veterans Day observed)

Writing strong leads.

Week 13 (Nov. 16-20)

Writing a descriptive article: travel.

Week 14 (Nov. 23-27; Wednesday-Friday is Thanksgiving break, no class)

Begin writing based on multiple interviews (at least three); topic to be assigned. Note: this is the class capstone project worth 40 pts.

Effective endings. Grammar/ in-class writing topics cont.

Week 15 (Nov. 30-Dec. 4)

Grammar/in-class writing topics cont. Draft of capstone writing project due (recommended but not required).

Week 16 (Dec. 7-11, “Dead Week”; Friday is last day of class)  
Wrap-up; grammar/in-class writing topics cont. Capstone writing project due.

Final exam period: 8 a.m. Wednesday, Dec. 16.

**Topic list for Wednesday in-class assignments.**

Writing tweets. See Chapter 2, *Working With Words*, Tight Writing).

Writing a letter to the editor.

Writing a blog post.

Writing based on a cluster.

Rewriting for a general audience.

Class visit to the student union. Describe in writing based on careful observation of details.

Another class visit to the student union. Compile a list of at least 10 things that might make a good mass-media style story based on observations of people and things, and on conversations people are having.

Consider an opinion on a controversial subject that you hold strongly. Write an argument in favor of that opinion based on logic and facts.

Consider another opinion on a controversial subject you hold strongly. Write an argument in favor of that opinion based on emotional appeals.

Now take the other side: consider your opinion on a controversial subject, and write a fact-based, logical argument for *the other viewpoint*.

Write a 400-500-word story about yourself *without* using a form of the verb “to be” (is, are, was were, will be). (Review Verbs, *Working With Words* pp. 182-188)

Write about the things you hate or your “pet peeves.” (Don’t use the cliché “pet peeve.”) Try to persuade readers.

Write about the things you love or are passionate about. Try to persuade readers.

Go to the following website: <http://www.be-a-better-writer.com/cliches.html>. From the list of clichés, write a story choosing at least five. Then substitute to avoid clichés.

Rewrite to explain a story full of numbers and statistics (See p. 17, *Working With Words*, clutter for writers)

Fact-checking: verify the facts of a story (story will be provided).

Rewrite for eighth-grade level readability (See page 25, *Working With Words*)

Write a 400- 500-word story about yourself using as many of expressions in the word clutter/cliché list (pages 32-67 of *Working With Words*) as you can. Then edit to avoid the clutter.

Rewrite a press release for broadcast.

**Topics for Friday classes**

(All page numbers refer to *Working With Words*.)

Clutter for writers.

Which/that.

Use of very.

Words often confused (see pp. 128-129).

Rules that aren’t rules anymore: hopefully (p. 137), splitting infinitives (p. 122), gendered nouns (p. 156), can vs. may (p. 174), shall vs. will (p. 189), sequence of tense rule (pp. 194-195).

Rules that may not be rules in the future, but still are today: singular pronouns (he/she and not they; okay in informal speech, (see p. 211), apostrophes (“New Year’s/Years Day), singular teams and groups (the team lost **its** last two games),

phrases vs. clauses (see pp. 141-144), fragments, comma-splices, other sentence errors.

Restrictive vs. non-restrictive (see p. 145).  
Passive voice: no, but sometimes yes (see pp. 177-180, and 196-197).  
Who and whom. Does it matter anymore? (See p. 154-155.)  
The sequence of tenses: from past to future (see pp. 191-195).  
Verb moods (see pp. 199-203).  
Parallel sentence structure (see pp. 212-213).  
Using hyphenated words as modifiers (see p. 221).  
Lie vs. lay: time to give up? (See p. 238.)  
Language and a new millennium (see pp. 297-305).  
Sexism, stereotyping and bias (see pp. 306-313).  
Biased term list, pp. 314-329: Do you disagree with the authors regarding the bias or inappropriate nature of some of these terms? Which?  
Commas: the devil in the (sometimes disputed) details (see pp. 333-339).  
How to use quotes—and when not to (see pp. 339-346).  
Using colons, dashes, hyphens and other fancy fillips —when you must, when to give it a rest (see pp. 350-355, and pp. 366-370).

### **University official notices**

#### **COVID Pandemic**

The instructor asks students to comply with all classroom requirements set by the university to help contain the COVID pandemic.

#### **Academic honesty**

The academic community is operated on the basis of honesty, integrity, and fair play. NDSU Policy 335, Code of Academic Responsibility and Conduct, applies to cases in which cheating, plagiarism, or other academic misconduct have occurred in an instructional context. Students found guilty of academic misconduct are subject to penalties, up to and possibly including suspension and/or expulsion. Student academic misconduct records are maintained by the Office of Registration and Records. Informational resources about academic honesty for students and instructional staff members can be found at [www.ndsu.edu/academichonesty](http://www.ndsu.edu/academichonesty). According to NDSU Policy 333 ([www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/policy/333.pdf](http://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/policy/333.pdf)), attendance in classes is expected.

#### **Veterans and military service**

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

#### **Americans with Disabilities Act for students with special needs**

Any students with disabilities or other special needs, who need special accommodations in this course, are invited to share these concerns or requests with the instructor and contact the Disability Services Office ([www.ndsu.edu/disabilityservices](http://www.ndsu.edu/disabilityservices)) as soon as possible.

#### **Safe Zone statement**

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