

Crisis Communication

STRM 4231 001

Fall 2025

Class Meeting: T/Th 1:00 - 2:25 p.m. Meeman 112

Prof. Taylor Ackerman, APR, MA

She/Her

Office hours: Mondays, 10:30 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.

Tuesdays, 11 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Tuesdays, 2:30 - 3 p.m.

Wednesdays, 12 - 1 p.m.

Other times available by appointment! If you are wishing to meet during my office hours, please send me a text prior to arriving to confirm which office I'm in or receive a Teams link.

Email: tckerman@memphis.edu

Phone: 731-225-7656 Text only unless by appointment

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Catalog description

Explores theories and research related to public relations communication before, during, and after a crisis; examines the fundamentals of organizational communication, crisis management and strategic planning.

Textbooks, Software and Required Materials

Coombes, T. (2018). *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding (5th ed.)* Thousand Oaks, CA. SAGE Publications. ISBN: 9781544331959

Other articles and tools will be shared both in Canvas and in class; please check Canvas weekly for required reading and multimedia materials.

Classroom Format

This class includes lecture, discussions, in-class activities, and independent research. Crisis communication is a topic that is best-learned with a hands on approach, and as such we will be doing a lot of in class activities that will be counted towards your grade. In addition to individual assignments and projects, there will also be group projects and collaborative efforts. We will have a lot of in-class discussions, and you will be expected to participate and add to the conversation.

Additionally, in order to get an understanding of crisis communications in practice, we will be discussing several current events and active case studies. Keeping up with news, pertinent economic and business cases, and relevant entertainment news will be needed for in-class discussions. Plan on spending 30 minutes to an hour each week gathering information to bring to class to share with classmates and put in the perspective of crisis communication.

This class can be a lot of fun, and my hope is to keep this class more informal and full of hands-on activities and discussion. However, that will depend on active participation and effort from you. If students become disengaged with in class activities and discussions, I will have to swap to more traditional written assignments.

Please keep in mind that all course discussions should remain respectful and professional. I expect you to show respect to all ideas and viewpoints, and be able to express alternative opinions or viewpoints in a tactful manner. Crisis communication planning can involve a lot of brainstorming, research, collaborative action, problem solving, and compromise. Sometimes this will be a stressful task, however, you are meant to work together with and not against your classmates.

Remember: Remain calm, patient, and good natured.

Accessing the course website

1. Go to the University of Memphis online learning home page:
<http://memphis.instructure.com>
2. Log in using your University of Memphis username and password.
3. Click on the link for STRM 4231 enter our course

Quality of Work

All work in this course should follow AP Style, including proper spelling, grammar, and language. A large part of public relations is having a polished written concept of what you are communicating. This includes all class work and presentations. Problems in these or other areas will result in the deduction of points. Remember - we're already dealing with a crisis or issue. We don't need to make it worse with our writing!

I expect your work to be good and original, meaning it's yours. If you quote anything or get information from any other source, it should be fully cited. If you need help with writing and citing sources, please see me for resources.

Chat GPT/AI

You must obtain permission from the instructor before using ChatGPT or other AI tools to assist with assignments in this course. Once permission is granted, AI may only be used as directed. Assignment submissions may run through AI detection software. Unauthorized use may result in a failing grade or a request to resubmit an assignment. Be prepared to submit any prompts you used for assistance with your assignment as well as the original ChatGPT output and to be able to explain/show how you fact-checked and improved upon the AI's work.

Repetition of Courses and Coursework

Students may not use or submit work from a previous course, even if it is the same course being repeated, to fulfill requirements for assignments in another course. If students wish to substantially rework the original submission, or to work with the same general idea, that may be

permissible **upon discussion with and written approval** from the professor of the current course. When in doubt, ask. If I catch work that seems eerily similar to something from a previous class and you have not discussed it with me, it will be an automatic zero. All written work will be checked for policy adherence via TurnItIn.com. All creative work will be checked for policy adherence by the professor and judged against previous submissions. The only exception to this policy is the student's online portfolio and its attendant pieces (for example, the resume and logo).

Questions about Grades

If you would like to ask about a grade, let's set up a Teams or office meeting so we can talk about it with clarity. I'm often flexible about allowing students to redo an assignment they may not be satisfied with *if* they come to me about it in a timely manner and show significant improvements in the work and understanding.

I will not discuss grades or disputes via email - this must be done in a scheduled meeting or phone call setting where we can have a conversation.

Additionally, you are responsible for tracking your assignments and meeting with me early in the semester if you are concerned about your overall grade. Meeting early and often can help both parties involved find ways to improve student-instructor understanding and quality of work.

Course & Campus Resources

Students with disabilities & accommodations

If you will need accommodations through [Disability Resources](#) to meet any of the requirements of this course, please let me know as soon as possible. I'm happy to work with you to make sure you are able to be successful in this course.

Support: If at any point in the semester you are struggling with the course load or a specific assignment, please reach out to me for a meeting so we can work to get you back on track. I'm happy to help in any way I'm able, but you must be an advocate for yourself by communicating with me and making me aware of any problems. It's impossible for me to help if I don't know there's a problem.

I am happy to meet with you outside of class, hop on a Zoom call, or provide support over email. Please don't hesitate to reach out to me if you find yourself falling behind, feeling overwhelmed, or struggling.

Meeman Lab Availability: Open labs 9:30-4:30 Monday-Friday. In addition to Meeman, labs are available in the Tech Hub and the Library. We also have equipment rental available. Check your university email for details.

Campus and Community Resources: <https://www.memphis.edu/deanofstudents/crisis/>

Resources specific to physical health and wellness:

[Mental health Services](#)

[UofM Student Health Center](#)

[Sexual, domestic, and intimate partner violence resources](#)

If you are affected financially because of COVID-19:

There are many resources available through the Dean of Students including:

[Dr. Rosie Phillips Bingham Student Emergency Fund](#)

[Emergency Food Resources](#), which includes [Tiger Pantry](#)

Academic Services:

[Writing Center](#)

[Tutoring](#)

Communities & Inclusion:

[Multicultural Affairs](#)

[LGBTQ+](#)

Grading

There are 1,000 possible points in this class. At the end of the semester, your class points will be calculated and rounded up to the nearest whole number. Letter grades will be determined according to the scale below. If additional points are added or subtracted from this possible point total, the letter scale will be adjusted.

A+ = 967 – 1,000 points, **A** = 934 – 966, **A-** = 900 – 933 points

B+ = 867 – 899 points, **B** = 834 – 866 points, **B-** = 800 – 833 points

C+ = 767 – 799 points, **C** = 734 – 766 points, **C-** = 700 – 733 points

D = 667 – 600 points

F = 600 and fewer points

Grading Philosophy. A=Professional quality work that could be use with little or no modification

B=Good to excellent work and exceeds requirement, but would require revision to be used professionally

C=Satisfactory work and adequately meets requirement, but would need significant revision

D=Barely satisfies minimum requirement and below average quality

F=Unsatisfactory work and does not meet minimum requirements

Miscellaneous Policies

The instructor reserves the right to make changes as necessary to this syllabus. Course changes will be communicated in class and updated in due date/announcements on Canvas or via email.

Late Work: In strategic media deadlines are imperative. In the field, we are often creating work for clients or pitch meetings with hard deadlines. As such, try to turn everything in on time. I do recognize life happens, and as such if you have to turn something in late, the following late policy will apply with the exception of quizzes and discussions which will not be accepted late.

<24 hours late: 5% off

<48 hours late: 10% off

<One week late: 20% off

One to three weeks late: 30% off

Over three weeks late: No credit

Student Responsibility: This is college; you have to have responsibility and work ethic in order to be successful at this level of your academic career. It will be your responsibility to keep up with work, double check assignment requirements and use all the resources that are given to you within the class. I cannot chase you or beg you to participate. If you have questions, concerns or any confusion regarding any class requirement, announcement, assignment or concept it is your responsibility to reach out and ask the question in a timely manner. I have provided a number of ways to contact me and encourage you to use them. "I was confused" will not be an accepted excuse for not performing at the appropriate level (nor will it be when you enter your career.) *Please, please* clarify anything you are uncertain about.

Additionally, it will be your responsibility to stay in communication with me over the course of the semester if there is anything that is happening that is hindering your ability in my class.

I cannot extend grace or help if I don't know about something until the end of the semester.

Something we'll talk about a lot in this course is issues management and how to deal with problems or complications before they grow into a larger issue. A great place to start practicing this is in your own academic performance. If you're worried about something or could sense something becoming a larger issue, be proactive.

ASSESSMENT AND OUTCOMES

Professional Values and Competencies in STRM 4231

- Demonstrate an understanding of the multicultural history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- Demonstrate culturally proficient communication that empowers those traditionally disenfranchised in society, especially as grounded in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and ability, domestically and globally, across communication and media contexts.

- Present images and information effectively and creatively, using appropriate tools and technologies.
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.
- Apply current tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

How professional values and competencies will be met

Cognitive objectives to be mastered (ability to explain, analyze, understand, think critically)

- Understand the variety of relationships between media and their audiences, including diverse audiences.
- Be sensitive to the needs of diverse and under-represented groups in programming and creating messages.
- Understand how new technology affects the media and communication.
- Understand what's involved in preparing for and communicating during a crisis.
- Identify a variety of crisis communication strategies and their effectiveness.

Performance standards to be met (demonstrable skills, abilities, techniques, applied competencies)

- Earn a passing score on periodic tests and/or exams.
- Dissect crisis communication stories and examples in the news for effectiveness in messaging, diversity, and reducing uncertainty.
- Prepare and present a crisis communication strategy and messaging for an organization.

How assessment of student learning will be met

Awareness

- Grow awareness of the variety of crisis communication strategies.
- Recognize strategies and missteps in public crisis communication cases.
- Aware of need for diversity in crisis communication.

Understanding

- When example crisis communication cases/events are presented, students will be asked to not only identify crisis strategies utilized, but also to discuss whether or not they were effective.
- Discussion questions will be posed in class to stimulate critical thinking. Independent thinking is encouraged.

Application

- The final project will be a mock press conference, asking students to represent one organization in a fictional crisis scenario, to craft and present messages for that organization, and to participate in the press conference as both a presenter and as a journalist asking questions.
- Review current events for crisis situations and be prepared to discuss their effectiveness relevant to course concepts.

JOURNALISM AND STRATEGIC MEDIA POLICIES

Portfolio requirement

As an undergraduate student in the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media, you are required to develop and maintain an active portfolio of your work. Portfolios begin in JRSM 3900/3905. The portfolio should contain samples of coursework and/or professional experiences and should develop as you build skills. Portfolios will undergo a final, external review while you are enrolled in your capstone course.

You may use any type of web hosting for your portfolio, but it must have an independent and professional URL. You may use any content management system, but you are encouraged to use WordPress, Wix, or SquareSpace. It is also encouraged to purchase a URL if you plan to use the portfolio long term. You must keep the portfolio active for six months following graduation from the University of Memphis.

You should have a professional email address you plan to use throughout your professional life, via a common email service, such as Gmail.

All portfolios must contain the following items:

- Samples of work from courses and/or professional activities. (Example: Broadcasting students must include a video reel)
- A current résumé
- A personal profile
- Contact information/means of contact
- Professional social media links (minimum LinkedIn)

You may wish to include a blog, video reels, photograph galleries, presentations, design PDFs, audio files or writing pieces as examples of professional work. The professional work should ultimately be tailored to the career you seek after graduation. Your portfolio should show a unique blend of work.

Email

You must have your UofM email account activated. If you are using another provider, such as Google, you are required to have all UofM emails forwarded to that account. Go to the [account management website](#) for information about implementing email forwarding. You are required to check your email daily.

Electronic devices

Some classes require a tablet, laptop or a smartphone. Others do not. Instructors will set the policy for their specific classes.

AI/Chat GPT

The use of artificial intelligence software, such as Chat GPT, is prohibited in some courses and required in others in Journalism & Strategic Media. Please refer to specific guidelines for this course in the course-specific part of the syllabus.

Attendance

Class attendance is mandatory in Journalism & Strategic Media. You may be assigned a failing grade for the semester for nonattendance or habitual tardiness.

Course repetition

Majors and minors who fail to earn the minimum passing grade (C-) in a class required by your program of study in Journalism & Strategic Media after three attempts will be dropped from the program.

You may not use or submit work from a previous course, even if it is the same course being repeated, to fulfill requirements for assignments in another course. Substantially reworking the original submission, or working with the same general idea, may be permissible upon discussion and with written approval from the professor of the current course.

Academic integrity

The University of Memphis expects all students to behave honestly and follow the policies stated in the Student Code of Rights and Responsibilities. If you need more information about the University policy on academic integrity visit the [Office of Student Accountability's website](#).

In addition to University-wide policies, the Department of Journalism & Strategic Media considers making up quotes from sources, turning in substantially the same assignment for credit in two different courses or receiving any assistance from others for work assigned to be done on your own, as acts of cheating and punishable to the degree determined appropriate by the course instructor and department chair.

Punishment may include grade reductions or seeking dismissal of the student from the University.

Further, you are expected to comply with copyright and intellectual property laws and must have sufficient permission to use any copyrighted materials used in creative projects, unless otherwise informed in cases of exercises or reproduction.

Your written work may be submitted to Turnitin.com, or a similar electronic detection method, for rating originality of your ideas and to evaluate proper use and assignment of sources. All creative work may be checked for policy adherence by the professor. The only exception to this policy is your online portfolio and its attendant pieces (for example, the résumé and logo). By taking this course, you agree that all assignments may undergo this review process. The

assignment may be included as a source document in Turnitin.com's restricted access database. It is solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism in such documents. Assignments not submitted according to the instructor's procedures may be penalized or may not be accepted at all.

Online SETEs

You are encouraged to complete the SETEs evaluation of this course. If completed, once the instructor has posted final grades, you can immediately see that grade. To access evaluation forms, log in to MyMemphis; click the "Student Pages" dropdown menu and select "My Resources" and find the SETE evaluation forms; complete an evaluation for each course listed and hit the "Submit" button at the bottom of the form. Completing the SETE will only take a few minutes. Faculty take the evaluations seriously and use them to improve courses and instructional quality. Your feedback is essential and is appreciated.

Deadlines

All deadlines are firm. Because Journalism & Strategic Media is a professional program, students are expected to understand and comply with deadlines. Students needing an extension on an assignment must receive approval from the instructor. Exceptions will be made for reasonable circumstances if the student notifies the instructor prior to the due date.

You may be permitted to make up missing work if it is for an absence because of illness or other catastrophic emergency, such as a death in the family that can be documented.

AP Style and grammar

All written work in this class must follow the AP Stylebook and accepted rules of grammar and punctuation. You are responsible for learning these rules and checking your work for errors.

Disability and accommodations

If you need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability, contact Disability Resources for Students at 901-678-2880 in 110 Wilder Tower Hall to coordinate reasonable accommodations.

Diversity and inclusivity

The Department of Journalism & Strategic Media values diversity in all its forms. Some of these forms include ability, age, appearance, ethnicity, gender identity, immigration status, language, nationality, race, religion/spirituality, sex, sexuality, socio-economic status, and other personal identities and experiences. As such, students are expected to participate in fostering an inclusive environment that respects the differences of others.

Students are expected to approach their work through a diverse lens. Creating messages that resonate with diverse audiences requires an understanding of a variety of perspectives, which are carried out through multiple platforms, such as digital and traditional media outlets.

The department seeks to foster healthy and positive classroom discussions and experiences. As such, faculty and students are expected to remain respectful and professional at all times.

Weather policy

Always check with local media, the University of Memphis website regarding inclement weather.

Student support

If you are experiencing personal or academic challenges including, but not limited to food or housing issues, family needs, or other stressors, visit the Student Outreach & Support page to learn about resources that can help: <https://www.memphis.edu/deanofstudents/crisis/index.php> or contact the Dean of Students Office at 901-678-2187, or in person in Suite 359 in the University Center for assistance. You may also talk with course instructors about the challenges you are experiencing. Instructors may be able to assist in connecting you with campus or community support.