Intro to Strategic Writing
STRM 3210-001
Spring 2026

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Catalog Description

Bridges information-based reporter with strategic writing. Students will learn how to use research, ethics, and critical thinking to develop their storytelling to fit the goals and objectives of each writing tool (e.g., media pitch, fact sheet, news release) while considering their client's needs and intended publics.

Prerequisites

None

Textbooks, Software and Required Materials

There are no required textbooks. Course readings and other resources will be available on Canvas.

Recommended

The Associated Press Stylebook 2024 (or earlier). New York: Basic Books
*You can also access The AP Stylebook as an online publication or through an app. Get details about these options online at apstylebook.com

Class Format

This class meets in person twice a week. Information is presented through lectures, multimedia, writing workshops, and group activities both in class and utilizing online platforms. Regular attendance and participation are expected and will affect your grade. We will complete some exercises and activities in class that are pertinent to learning the material. These exercises and activities cannot be "made up." If you miss that class, you will miss the exercises and activities. If you miss class, it is your responsibility to communicate with classmates and me about missed information and questions about assignments.

Accessing the course website

1. Go to the University of Memphis Canvas login page: https://memphis.instructure.com
2. Log in using your University of Memphis username and password.
3. On the Dashboard, click on the course card for STRM 3210-001 Intro to Strategic Writing.

Class discussions, as well as any written assignments, online or in-person, should remain professional and show respect to all people regardless of background, sex, race, age, or any other factor. Disrespectful or hateful speech will not be tolerated in my classroom, and I reserve the right to ask any student to leave if they violate this policy. Public relations and strategic communications are about creating and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. Our classroom is no different.

PROFESSIONAL WRITING STANDARDS AND AI USE

In this course, you are learning to write strategically, clearly, ethically, and for real audiences. Your work must meet professional expectations for accuracy, timeliness, respect for the audience, and proper attribution.

Writing practice comes first

You must do your own writing. You may not use generative AI (ChatGPT, Claude, Co-Pilot, Gemini, etc.) for coursework unless an assignment explicitly tells you to use it. If AI use is not assigned, using it to generate, rewrite, summarize, or otherwise "fix" your work counts as unauthorized assistance and will be reflected in your grade. (*Note: Using Grammarly or Microsoft Word to check your spelling and grammar is acceptable. Using Grammarly's new generative AI feature or Microsoft Co-Pilot to rewrite your entire assignment is not.*)

When AI use is assigned

At times, we will practice how professionals use AI tools in strategic communication workflows (e.g., brainstorming, outlining, drafting components of fact sheets or news releases, audience segmentation, pitch variations). When AI is assigned:

You must treat AI output as unverified. It can sound confident and still be wrong.

You are responsible for the final product, including accuracy, tone/voice, and ethics.

You must complete an "AI Use & Verification Appendix" for the assignment, using the template provided on Canvas.

Bottom line

Learning to write means practicing the full process yourself. If AI use isn't specifically assigned, don't use it. If it *is* assigned, use it transparently and verify everything.

LATE WORK AND FLEXIBILITY POLICY

Assignments are due on the posted deadline to keep our class activities, feedback, and skill-building on track. That said, I know that life happens. If you anticipate a situation that may affect your ability to meet deadlines, contact me as early as possible so we can discuss options. Late work is accepted up to 3 days (72 hours) after the deadline, with a 10% penalty per day. After three days, the assignment earns no credit. In class writing workshops, assignments, and other activities cannot be made up for any reason; absence means you miss those points and the practice.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND AUTHORSHIP

You should submit work that reflects your own thinking, judgment, and writing, and give appropriate credit when you draw on outside sources. Any use of generative AI must follow the course policy: when AI is prescribed, you are responsible for the final product, including accuracy, sourcing, and voice alignment. Misrepresenting AI-generated or copied text as your own, submitting fabricated citations or evidence, or using AI to produce work you cannot explain and defend violates academic integrity and professional standards. When in doubt, cite, disclose, or ask.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

This is a general guideline for assignments. More details will be provided on Canvas. All work should be turned in as a Word document via Canvas by the deadline specified in the assignment, unless otherwise noted. Please be sure to read all assignments and prompts thoroughly and respond to all parts of the assignments. It is common for assignments to have more than one element.

This course features learning about and practicing different aspects of writing for advertising and public relations (strategic media). Concepts such as content marketing, target audiences, AP style, and media relations will be covered. You will write a variety of pieces and begin to develop a portfolio of work.

You'll be creating work for a local nonprofit that will be announced in class, giving you an opportunity to experience how to cater your work to a client's needs and requests. The best of student work will be published by our nonprofit partner on their websites, social media pages, and in other formats.

Writing projects. The biggest part of your grade in this class will be independent writing projects. These projects may include, but are not limited to, a creative brief, media pitches, news releases, fact sheets, blogs, social media posts, and usage guides for our nonprofit partner explaining how to best use the tools/strategies you are learning about and providing.

Quizzes. You will take quizzes throughout the semester to test your understanding of course concepts. Additionally, there is a final comprehensive "exam." Quizzes are delivered via Canvas with a 45-minute time limit. You have two attempts at each quiz. Your highest score will count as your grade. You are welcome to use your notes on the quiz, but working with another student is prohibited.

Individual assignments. Other assignments of varying nature will be posted on Canvas. These independent assignments will allow you to demonstrate understanding of course concepts and present individual client ideas.

In-class activities. To reinforce learning outcomes and reduce the burden of out-of-class work, you will have several in-class activities and discussions. These activities will often be scheduled in advance, though a graded in-class activity may occur without advance notice. You must be present and participate in these activities to receive a grade for them. Bonus point opportunities will be available throughout the semester that can help you if you must miss a class, but please note that you will not be permitted to complete an in-class activity if you are absent from class

that day, regardless of the reason. This is not a punishment. It is simply not possible for you to "make up" the activity based on what we will be doing. Attending class regularly is the best way to ensure success in this class. There are online sections of 3210 available if regular attendance is not possible for you.

Grading

There is a total of 1,000 points available this semester. Points-to-letter grade conversion is:

967 – 1,000 points = A+
934 – 966 points = A
900 – 933 points = A-
867 – 899 points = B+
834 – 866 points = B
800 – 833 points = B-
767 – 799 points = C+
734 – 766 points = C
700 – 733 points = C-
667 – 600 points = D
599 and below points = F

Individual assignments: 150 points
Quizzes: 200 points
In-class activities & discussion: 200 points
Writing projects: 450 points

CONTACTING ME

The best and quickest way to contact me is via email (ksmarks@memphis.edu). I will respond to your email within 24 – 48 hours. You can also visit my office hours or schedule an in-person or Teams meeting. If you have a problem, do not let it snowball. Contact me ASAP.

SEMESTER SCHEDULE

This schedule is subject to change. Any updates will be provided via email and Canvas announcements.

Please come to class having read and reviewed all resources posted on Canvas and be ready to actively engage in discussion.

Week 1, Jan. 19 – 25 (Tuesday start, Monday, Jan. 18, is MLK Day)
Welcome to strategic media!
Activities & Assignments:
- Syllabus quiz
- Introduction activity (in-class Tuesday)

Week 2, Jan. 26 – Feb. 1
AP style + ethical AI
Activities & Assignments:
- Client assessment

- AP style in-class activity

Week 3, Feb. 2 – 8
Wrapping up strategic media
Activities & Assignments:
- Tenets of strategic media
- Quiz 1 – Strategic media and AP rules

Week 4, Feb. 9 – 15
Paid media and copywriting
Activities & Assignments:
- Newsletter paragraph (writing project)
- Buyer persona in-class activity

Week 5, Feb. 16 – 22
Creative briefs
Activities & Assignments:
- AIDA in-class activity
- Quiz 2 – Paid media
- Creative brief (writing project)

Week 6, Feb. 23 – March 1
Journalist relationships
Activities & Assignments:
- Media relationships in-class activity
- Media pitch (writing project)

Week 7, March 2 – 8
Earned media
Activities & Assignments:
- News release (writing project)
- It's like a puzzle – in-class activity

Week 8, March 9 – 15
Spring Break

Week 9, March 16 – 22
Creating an earned strategy
Activities & Assignments:
- Earned media guide (writing project)
- Quiz 3 – Earned media

Week 10, March 23 – 29
Shared media
Activities & Assignments:
- Brand voice and style guide (writing project)
- Social media scavenger hunt in-class activity

Week 11, March 30 – April 5
Social media post creation
Activities & Assignments:
- Social media posts
- Quiz 4 – Shared media

Week 12, April 6 – 12
Digital media collaboration & content marketing
Activities & Assignments:
- Examples, debate + blog pitch in-class activity
- Partnerships and UGC in-class discussion
- Digital guide (writing project)

Week 13, April 13 – 19
Owned media
Activities & Assignments:
- Blog (writing project)

Week 14, April 20 – 26
Strategic storytelling
Activities & Assignments:
- Publish with purpose in-class activity
- Fact sheet (writing project)

Week 15, April 27 – 29 (Wednesday)
Wrapping Up – last day of classes is Wednesday, April 29
Activities & Assignments
- Final comprehensive quiz (emphasis on owned media)
- Reflection

ASSESSMENT AND OUTCOMES

Professional Values and Competencies in STRM 3210
- Apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and the press, both globally and in the United States.
- 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.
- Apply critical thinking skills in conducting research and evaluating information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.
- 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 how public relations writing tactics can tell stories and build relationships across a variety of disciplines and careers.
- Recognize the importance of understanding the diversity (gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) of stakeholder groups and audience to develop content for public relations products
- Structure messages on the appropriate channels to reach a diverse target audience.
- Explain how the writer's purpose, intended audience, and requirements of the medium affect style and content.
- Recognize legal and ethical problems associated with public relations writing, including within the freedoms of speech and the press.
- Recognize potential problems and solutions in media relations.
- Understand the differences between writing for various media.
- Evaluate their own and others' public relations writing for accuracy, clarity, grammatical correctness, and appropriate use of AP style, as well as suitability for the specified medium.
- Understand that their own role as a content creator influences culture, norms, and discourse.

Performance standards to be met (demonstrable skills, abilities, techniques, applied competencies)
- Earn a passing score on written assignments, quizzes, and engagement exercises.
- Define an organization's stakeholders and target audiences and the channels that can be used to communicate and engage with them.
- Identify appropriate multimedia components to accompany public relations writing based on medium, platform, and target audience.
- Name and illustrate common legal and ethical problems associated with public relations writing.
- Write a press release, fact sheet, media pitch, and email, in addition to participating in a Twitter chat, drafting a personal bio, and completing the necessary engagement exercises (quizzes, introductions, and reflection pieces).
- Apply Associated Press guidelines to written public relations materials.
- Proofread and edit their own work and the work of others.
- Create public relations products using appropriate software and hardware, ensuring that products are formatted correctly for selected media channels.

How assessment of student learning will be met
Awareness

- Learn the important role of writing in public relations, including journalistic news values, AP style, and the various forms of writing for different media.
- Associate successful outcomes with the importance of understanding the diversity and cultural differences of an organization's stakeholders and target audience when developing public relations content.
- Give examples of the ethical and legal problems associated with public relations writing.

Understanding
- Understand how to be strategic in public relations writing.
- Recognize how the diversity and cultural differences of an organization's stakeholders and target audience inform the development of public relations content.
- Examine potential ethical and legal problems associated with public relations writing.
- Understand how to proofread their own and others' writing for clarity, grammatical correctness, and appropriate use of AP style.
- Identify which public relations products are appropriate based on the platform and how to create specific public relations products.

Application
- Write a press release, fact sheet, media pitch, and email, in addition to participating in a Twitter chat, drafting a personal bio, and completing the necessary engagement exercises (quizzes, introductions, and reflection pieces).
- Proofread and edit their own work and the work of others for clarity, grammatical correctness, and appropriate use of AP style.
- Create public relations products using appropriate software and hardware, ensuring that products are formatted correctly for selected media channels.