

SYLLABUS FOR COMMUNICATIONS 4931

Editing for the Mass Media

Instructor: Paul A. McGrath

Office hours: Before and after class in the Communications Department.
Can be reached at the Houston Chronicle as needed between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m.

Phone: 713-220-7674 (Chronicle), 281-374-6858 (Home) 832-418-0734 (cell)

Fax: 713-220-6806 (Chron) or 281-374-6858 (home, call first)

Email: paul.mcgrath@chron.com or superag1@yahoo.com

University Emergency hot line: 281-283-2221

Writing Center: SSB 2105, 281-283-2950

Course meeting schedule: B-3606, Monday 11:30 a.m. to 2:20 p.m.

Goal of the course: Students will learn the basics of news editing and news decision-making in a variety of situations/exercises. They will learn how these concepts apply to all forms of communication. Emphasis is on the print media, but the class will include discussion of broadcast and digital editing and point out the growing move toward a convergence of skills. The course will initially focus on headline writing and then move to story editing, including AP style. Students will also learn the basics of cutline writing and photo selection. The difficulty of the stories will increase as the semester progresses. Also during the semester, the students will be given current events quizzes and be asked to do an analysis of a newspaper/magazine/Web site as a long-term project. The project includes a written report and an oral presentation. Discussion topics will include libel, newsroom ethics, newsroom management and covering the “big story.” Guest speakers on various topics may appear for Q&A sessions.

Grading: Student grades are based primarily on the editing assignments (65 percent, the project (10 percent) and the final (20 percent) with the remaining 5 percent being the instructor’s discretion (based on student participation, improvement etc.). Grading of tests and assignments is done on a points system: an A+ is a 99, an A is a 95, an A- is a 91, etc. All assignments must be typed and presented in standard professional formats using assignment guidelines. Be sure to thoroughly edit your work — do not turn in rough drafts for grading. All work will be graded for format (please double space), content, context, style, grammar, facts, punctuation and spelling. Use of word processing to facilitate revisions is strongly advised. Do your own work; university policies regarding plagiarism will be rigidly enforced. It is the student’s responsibility to keep up with readings, assignments, tests, classes and grades. One class day will be designated as “bonus points day” and provide 3 free points on the final. Extra credit story assignments will also be available. UH-CL uses the plus / minus step grading scale.

Incompletes: A grade of “I” is given *only* in cases of documented emergency or special circumstances late in the semester, provided that you have been making satisfactory (passing) progress. A grade contract must be completed. Please contact Ann Hinojosa for “Incomplete” contracts in Student Advising.

Academic Dishonesty

We expect all class members to comply with UH-CL policies regarding scholastic dishonesty and other issues outlined in the official student rules. As a professional in any communication field, plagiarism harms the credibility of the profession as a whole. Plagiarism of any sort could result in a 0 for the assignment and other sanctions.

Absences and Late Work

Tests and class assignments may be made up with a university-excused absence only and must be arranged within three days of the absence. See the official student rules for clarification of excused absences. Late assignments will be subject to a letter-grade reduction. Students with more than three excused absences will see their overall grade penalized.

Americans with Disabilities Policy Statement

The Americans with Disabilities ACT (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation. Those who need assistance should contact a faculty adviser.

Required Texts: *Creative Editing* (Bowles and Borden), a current Associated Press Stylebook and a Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary

Suggested Texts: Texas Almanac, World Almanac, *The Editorial Eye* (by Jane T. Harrigan), *Words on Words* (Bremner), *When Words Collide* (Kessler and McDonald, a thesaurus and other resource texts. Students should consider subscriptions to trade/watchdog periodicals such as Editor and Publisher, Columbia Journalism Review and American Journalism Review.

Other reading: Evaluating the work of professional editors is one of the fastest ways to learn the skills taught in this course. Also, the 10 current events quizzes will count as an assignment grade. You should subscribe to a daily newspaper or weekly news magazine, watch the nightly news or frequently consult a reliable online news source.

THE PROJECT

Assignment: Collect at least three issues (consecutive preferred to judge consistency) of a state, national or international newspaper (other than the Chronicle or campus paper). News magazines or online news sites can be substituted. Students will write a minimum five-page analysis and do a short oral presentation. The paper should contain the student's observations about how the news entity fulfills its goals/obligations and opinions on how well it is achieving those ends.

Purpose: Students often will be asked to do a critique or market analysis as part of the job interviewing process. This assignment will help prepare students for those tasks and give insight into thought processes behind news coverage and news packaging.

Suggested areas/topics for examination: Look at the content -- headlines, stories, ads, photos, etc. Evaluate the writing, editing and news judgment. Cite specific examples. What is the newspaper's tone? Are the headlines, photos and stories lively?

What is the ratio of staff to wire copy? Look at the bylines and staff box -- are there fair numbers of women and minority staffers? Is there cultural diversity in the staff and in coverage? Does the photo/graphics content fairly represent the community?

How are the major industries/beats covered? Is there consistency? What is permitted in ad content? Does the newspaper/news magazine have a Web site? If so, how is it used to gather/present information?

Look at the layout/presentation -- Is it modular? Is the typography easy to read? Is the paper organized in a "reader friendly" fashion? Is there consistency in the presentation of information? What about the use of visuals -- photos and graphics? Color?

Also, and perhaps most importantly, what makes this newspaper different from the others? What does it offer to readers that makes it product unique?

A veteran editor once said that a news medium can be judged by the **APE** method; that is, a good product is:

Analytical: It breaks down complex subjects so that readers can understand them, provides perspective and context, provides explanation.

Practical: It does the things you would expect it to; cover the local teams, provide TV listings and weather, cover the local governments, etc.

Emotional: Does it offer content that tugs at the heartstring or tickle the funny bone along with the usual fare? Is it afraid to anger readers on occasion?

Do an analysis: Evaluate your newspaper. Is it doing a consistently good job? What would you change? Is the paper fulfilling its mission to its readers and community? To determine this, you might have to interview a news manager at the paper to see how it perceives its mission.