

# Professional Writing and Communication

University of North Dakota School of Law  
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## SYLLABUS

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1. **GOALS:** The purpose of this course is to teach professional writing and communications for broad audiences, as opposed to writing and communications aimed at judges, juries, or opposing counsel. So, instead of learning brief writing or transactional drafting, we will explore writing for blogs, client newsletters, bar journals, op-ed pages, and other mass-audience formats. The emphasis will be on learning a journalistic style of writing that is adaptable to a variety of contexts. We will also work on non-courtroom oral communications, including giving a continuing-education presentation to non-specialist lawyers, giving a presentation to a lay audience, and being interviewed for radio and television.

At the end of the course, you should be able to use journalistic style in your writing and quickly compose text that is clear, simple, and engaging. Additionally, you should be able to give effective oral presentations with and without slides. Finally, you should have the ability to deal effectively with the news media, including giving interviews for print, radio, and television.

2. **SKILLS REQUIREMENT:** This class is a Level 1 skills course and thus fulfills the Upper-Level Skills Requirement for the J.D. degree.

3. **COURSE WEBSITE:** Various materials and links will be on the course website. Go to [ericejohnson.com](http://ericejohnson.com) and find the link on the upper left. The direct URL is: [http://www.ericejohnson.com/courses/pwc\\_14/](http://www.ericejohnson.com/courses/pwc_14/)

4. **REQUIRED MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT:**

Students must bring a wireless-network-enabled laptop to each class. A wireless-network-enabled tablet with a separate physical keyboard is also acceptable.

There are three required books for this course, all of which must be brought to every class session:

*The Associated Press Stylebook 2013 (Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law)*

by Associated Press

Publisher: Basic Books; Forty-sixth Edition (July 30, 2013)

ISBN-13: 978-0465082995

ISBN-10: 0465082998

*The Elements of Style*

by William Strunk Jr., E. B. White

Publisher: Longman; 4th edition (August 2, 1999)

ISBN-10: 020530902X

ISBN-13: 978-0205309023

*On Writing Well, 30th Anniversary Edition: The Classic Guide to Writing  
Nonfiction*

by William Zinsser

Publisher: Harper Perennial; 30 Anv Rep edition (May 9, 2006)

ISBN-10: 0060891548

Additional reading materials may be made available via links from the course website, handed out in class, or placed on reserve in the library.

## 5. METHOD AND MECHANICS:

### **Basics:**

This course will be taught laboratory style, with exercises, in-class assignments, and out-of-class assignments. We will also have discussions and some lecturing.

Reading assignments and out-of-class assignments will be posted to the chart of assignments. The main page of the course website has a link to the chart of assignments. Detailed instructions on the assignments and explanations of how they are to be completed will not be posted, but instead explained in class.

Weekly, there will be one out-of-class assignment and one in-class assignment. Assignments must be turned in on time as specified. Most of the time, you will be required to turn in assignments electronically by e-mail.

Since this course covers non-written communications, some assignments will not involve the production of written product, but will involve oral communication, such as giving a presentation or an interview. These will ordinarily be recorded. Depending on how the class evolves, I may also give you a non-written assignment that requires producing and editing an audio production or video production.

In addition to the in-class assignments, we will also have exercises of varying kinds, including worksheets, group exercises, etc.

### **In-class critique:**

Your work will be presented and critiqued in class. The in-class critique of your work is not done to embarrass or judge you. Rather, it is so everyone in the class can learn from everyone else. Moreover, as a practicing lawyer, you will have to write and speak in public. So now is the time to be bold, gather your confidence, and learn how to take constructive criticism with poise and grace.

### **Progressive nature of instruction:**

This course will build progressively through the semester. Everything you learn in terms of style, grammar, punctuation, and technique in one class should be applied in all subsequent classes. Because of this, attendance and diligence throughout the semester are exceedingly important.

### **Length of assignments and quality standards:**

For the most part, the assignments in this course will be short or very short. Correspondingly, the standard expected of your work is extremely high. You should endeavor to make the most of every sentence and to not misuse a single word or misplace a single punctuation mark. I expect that you will pay particular attention to faithfully applying what has been covered in all previous classes.

## **6. GRADING:**

### **6-1. Course grade:**

Your course grade will primarily be based on your assignments grade, which is discussed in the following section.

Class participation and attendance may also have an effect on your course grade, as discussed further below.

### **6-2. Assignments grade:**

Your assignments grade will be based on your performance on in-class and out-of-class assignments. (Note that an "assignment" is distinguished from an "exercise.")

I will evaluate your assignments based on your application of the techniques and rules we have learned in class, as well as on virtues of clarity, interest, and faithfulness to the rules of grammar, punctuation, and style found in the AP Stylebook.

If you do not complete an assignment, whether because of absence from class, tardiness, or any other reason, you will not receive credit for it.

If you believe you have extenuating circumstances such that you should be permitted to make-up a missed assignment, you may discuss the issue with me, and I will consider whether you should be permitted to do so. I will allow myself the discretion to grant you permission to make-up no more than three assignments (whether in-class, out-of-class, or a combination). If you believe you have extenuating circumstances such that you should be permitted to make-up more than three assignments, I will consider consulting with the Dean of Students or the Dean on whether the circumstances indeed warrant allowing you to make-up the assignments. In such a case, I would expect you to make your case to the Dean of Students or the Dean. I will not under any circumstance allow more than three make-up assignments without involving the Dean of Students or the Dean.

### **6-3. Class participation:**

Class participation will also count in calculating your grade.

**How class-participation will affect the course grade:** After I have calculated your assignments grade, I plan to add or subtract from some students' assignments grades on the basis of class participation, with the result forming the course grade. Such

adjustments will ordinarily be no more than one step, such as from a B to a B+ or from an A to an A-.

**Reasons for a positive effect of class participation on the course grade may include:** habitual preparedness and engagement, volunteering in discussions, excellence in contributions to discussions, strong performance on exercises, and other conduct that contributes positively to the educational process.

**Reasons for a negative effect of class participation on the overall course grade may include:** exhibiting poor performance in the classroom, being unprepared for class, disruptive behavior (including, but not limited to, a pattern of appearing distracted by a computer or phone), and other conduct that detracts from the educational process.

Positive and negatives effects may, of course, offset.

#### **6-4. Attendance:**

Attend all class sessions. Attendance is particularly important in this class for two reasons. First, there is no final. You will be evaluated, instead, on your assignments. Your in-class assignments can only be completed in class, and you are unlikely to understand your out-of-class assignments without being in class to hear them explained. Second, this is a three-credit class that meets one a week. Missing a single class is equivalent to missing three regular class sessions.

A late arrival or early departure may be counted, in my discretion, as an absence or partial absence.

Note that non-attendance can severely adversely affect your grade. Note the following:

- (a) You may miss one class session for any reason without incurring a grading penalty.
- (b) If you miss a total of two class sessions, your course grade will be lowered by one step (such as from a B+ to a B).
- (c) If you miss a total of three class sessions, your course grade will be lowered by three steps (such as from a B+ to a C+).
- (d) If you miss four class sessions, I will ask the Dean that you be administratively withdrawn.
- (e) In the event a request for administrative withdrawal were denied, your course grade would be lowered an additional three steps for every absence.
- (f) Notwithstanding the foregoing, if you miss more than one class, and you believe that you have extenuating circumstances justifying leniency in the grade penalty, you may discuss the issue with me, and I will consider consulting with the Dean of Students or the Dean on whether circumstances warrant ameliorating or not applying the grade penalty. In such a case, I would expect you to make your case to the Dean of Students or the Dean. I will not under any circumstance waive the grade penalty for attendance without involving the Dean of Students or the Dean.

Note that the grade penalty for attendance is a separate issue from the effect of missed assignments on your assignment grade. (See the discussion in § 6-2.)

## **7. COMMUNICATIONS AND OFFICE HOURS:**

**7-1.** My e-mail address is eric.johnson@email.und.edu. Please note that I do not answer or discuss substantive questions (e.g., about what has been taught in class) through e-mail. Moreover, perhaps unlike many students, I do not read e-mail on an hour-by-hour basis. I may not respond at all to certain e-mailed questions, including those asking for information that is clearly answered in this syllabus. If you miss class, please ask other students for information you may have missed, such as how to complete assignments. Any e-mail communications you do have with me should be prepared in a professional manner, including the use of a meaningful subject line.

**7-2.** My temporary office this year, during the School of Law building project, is Dakota Hall, Room 120. It is located far from the main campus, and I don't recommend you go all the way over there just to drop by. I might not be there, and then you would find yourself in the middle of nowhere for no reason. I will post open "office" hours - on my website at ericejohnson.com. (I put "office" in quotes, because I may hold them somewhere more convenient than my actual office.) Notwithstanding the difficulties caused by the building project, I *do* want to meet with students. In addition to or as an alternative to availing yourself of office hours, please do not hesitate to e-mail me to make an appointment to talk (and when you do, it helps if you include some suggested times that work for you).

**7-3.** At least once during the year, I hope you will take advantage office hours, an appointment, or some other opportunity just to chat - even if you have no questions and nothing to discuss. That's not a requirement, just a request. But it would be nice to be able spend some informal time with everyone.

## **8. IN THE CLASSROOM:**

### **8-1. Classroom Conduct Rules:**

- (a) Do nothing that might disrupt class or distract your fellow students.
- (b) Do not eat in class. Do not chew gum audibly or with your mouth open.
- (c) Refrain from any use of a digital device where such use could reasonably disrupt class or distract fellow students. All digital devices must be operated without audio volume. Screens must not display any distracting content, including, but not limited to, distracting images, indecent content, moving images (video), and animation or flashing graphics.
- (d) You may use digital devices (including, without limitation, computers, phones, and tablets) in class; however, from the time of class's scheduled beginning until class ends: (1) You may not engage in any digitally enabled network communications with anyone else in class, including, but not limited to, e-mail and text messaging. (2) You may not engage in any web publication or any live-updating/realtime digitally enabled network communications with anyone at all, including, but not limited to, live chat, IM, Facebook (including, but not limited to, Facebook groups), Twitter, and Google Plus. The prohibitions of this subparagraph

(d) are not limited by context and apply without regard to whether the activity in question can be characterized as disruptive or distracting. Any violation of the policy in this subparagraph (d) will presumptively result in a lowered course grade. The prohibitions of this subparagraph (d) do not apply if and when you are absent from class, nor do they apply to communications with University information-technology staff for technical-support purposes.

**8-2.** Expect to be called on frequently. This class will be very interactive. If you cannot participate fully for a particular class, for whatever reason (and there's no need to tell me why), please tell me before class, in person, so that I can avoid calling on you. Reasonable requests of this sort are entirely understandable and will not adversely affect your grade.

**8-3.** No one is permitted to make an audio or video recording of class without my express, written permission. I may on occasion make audio recordings of portions of class. If I do, this will be for my own use and will not be made available for absent students.

**8-4. Students with Special Needs and Disabilities:** If you have medical information to share with me in advance of and in case of any prospective emergency, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please e-mail me or make an appointment with me to discuss. If you plan to request a disability accommodation, please contact the Dean of Students office, and be aware that you are expected to register with UND's Disability Support Services.

## **9. ABSENCES AND TARDINESS:**

**9-1.** I take the view that punctual attendance in class is an essential component of the educational experience. In addition, the General Rules of the School of Law's Academic Program provide, "Regular and punctual class attendance is required."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, attendance is particularly important in this class. (See § 6-4.) Absences and tardiness may severely adversely affect your grade. (See § 6-4.)

**9-2.** Attendance will usually be taken by means of a grid sheet with boxes to initial for individual days, with attendance indicated by the student's initialing the appropriate box. It will be your responsibility to make sure you have initialed in the box for the day. You may only initial your box for the instant date. You may not mark the sheet on behalf of another person, even if that person is in attendance, and you may not permit another person to mark the sheet on your behalf. You may not make any mark indicating your attendance for any other date other than the instant date, even if you were or will be in attendance on that date. Any failure to comply with these rules is a violation of the School of Law's Honor Code and will be dealt with accordingly.

**9-3.** Of course, none of the foregoing supersedes the School of Law's or the University's policies.

**10. REVISIONS TO THIS SYLLABUS:** This syllabus may be amended or revised, and if it is, the most recent syllabus will be posted to the class website.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://law.und.edu/students/policy-manual/general-rules.cfm>

## 11. COURSE COVERAGE:

The aim of this course is to make you a better writer and communicator. In pursuit of that aim, the rules and techniques I will teach you are not set in advance, but will depend on what I see as needs in the course of evaluating your assignments. For the same reasons, the assignments themselves are not set in advance for the semester. They will, however, include at least the following:

- blog posts
- an op-ed
- a client newsletter
- a bar journal piece
- a slideshow presentation
- a radio interview
- a television interview

**12. FEEDBACK:** If you have feedback for me – suggestions, ideas, commendations, or criticisms – please do not hesitate to tell me in person or by e-mail. If sending something to me anonymously would make you feel more comfortable, then I invite you to do just that.

I hope you enjoy the course!

- EEJ