

# COMM 322 PUBLIC RELATIONS WRITING

Fall 2009 Syllabus

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## CONTACT INFORMATION

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**Virtual Office Hours:** Wednesdays, 6:00 pm-7:00 pm; Saturdays, 1:00 pm-2:00 pm

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**Phone:** 208.866.5552

## COURSE DESCRIPTION & OBJECTIVES

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Our focus in this class is to move beyond a simple understanding of the role of a public relations practitioner to how to do the work required of a public relations practitioner. The bulk of this work involves writing; in a number of formats and for a number of audiences. We will explore the process of writing, practice writing a number of different public relations documents, and we will investigate the process necessary to understand which public relations documents to use in which situations. At the end of this course, you will produce an Information Kit that will showcase the types of writing we will work on throughout the course. By the end of the course, you should be able to:

- Understand the role of an ethical public relations practitioner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Comprehend the scope of activities necessary for successful public relations
- Craft a variety of written messages
- Plan out which written messages are necessary given specific contextual factors
- Feel confident in writing clean, coherent, concise messages

## COURSE MATERIALS

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### Required Text:

Smith, R. D. (2003). *Becoming a public relations writer*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

### Readings Online:

Farsetta, D. and Price, D. (2006). *Fake TV News: Widespread and Undisclosed*. Retrieved February 13, 2009 from <http://www.prwatch.org/fakenews/execsummary>

Gale, M. K. (2007). *Public Relations in Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Establishing Public Relations Programs in Nonprofit Settings*. MA thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 5-25.

Kappel, D.J. (2003). So...You Want a Brochure. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 48(2), 43-44.

Levy, R.N. (2002). Writing Features: Avoid Seven Deadly Sins. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 47(2), 23-24.

Murphy, T. (2004, July 16). The State of PR—A Tale of Two Professions. Message posted to [http://www.globalprblogweek.com/archives/the\\_state\\_of\\_pr\\_a\\_ta.php](http://www.globalprblogweek.com/archives/the_state_of_pr_a_ta.php)

Obston, A. (2004). The eight words you can't say in a press release. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 49(3), 9-11.

## **COURSE FORMAT**

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The course objectives are met entirely over the Internet. This is an exciting opportunity for you to interpret and internalize information on your own time, and in a space that is comfortable for you. By removing many of the constraints of time and location, this course has the potential to fit your unique needs in a way that many traditional courses are not equipped to do. Over the course of this class, students will read the text, interpret and analyze the text through discussion questions, visit websites, write papers, observe interactions, and much more.

The online format is probably new for many of you, and you should expect to take some time to get used to the format, above and beyond the time you might usually spend on a class.

I am committed to the endeavor of teaching, whether that is online or in a classroom atmosphere. I believe that I can meet my goals for teaching this course and you can meet your goals in taking this course, even though this will not occur in a traditional classroom setting. Through my personal experience with distance learning and online courses, and previous teaching experience, I have found that the more contact students make (both with their peers and with their instructors) the more successful they are in the course. Thus, it will be my goal throughout this course to encourage you to interact and to engage in this course as fully as possible.

Please note that while we will not meet face to face and while I am also working full-time in addition to my teaching responsibilities, **your questions, comments, and feedback are never viewed as a distraction**. I aim to be accessible to my students, no matter the format. I check my email frequently, and will try to respond to you as soon as possible. Please do not feel uncomfortable calling me, either. I would not include my personal number if I did not want students to call when they had questions.

## **POLICIES**

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**Deadlines:** Although many of the constraints of time have been released for you in this course, deadlines are still inevitable. To keep you caught up in the course there are deadlines by which each assignment must be completed. Assignments may always be completed earlier than the deadline, but any assignment that is not up-loaded to the website by 6 p.m. (Mountain Standard Time) on the date due will not be accepted. I do not wish to debate our various time orientations; for this class 6:00 pm is a firm deadline, and 6:01 pm is considered late. Do your very best to get assignments in as soon as you complete them, and communicate with me immediately any difficulties you foresee in meeting a deadline.

**Ethics:** Many courses in higher education just leave ethics as a footnote, and assume that a thorough discussion of the subject is unnecessary as the topic is self-explanatory. Having practiced PR in the field, I believe it is not a footnote, but a core thread running through everything we do. I will not merely focus on the subject for a week; we will put ethical principles into practice in every subject we discuss, in every assignment you submit. That being said, I expect you to display integrity in your academic pursuits, and submit original work.

*Academic Integrity:* All students taking this course must adhere to the University of Montana's academic dishonesty policy as presented in the Student Conduct Code (SCC). As noted in the code, students are expected to practice academic honesty. Any actions that include, but are not limited to, the following behaviors are reasons for pursuing academic and university sanctions: plagiarism, copying another student's exam, allowing another student to copy from your exam or work, sharing information with another student during testing sessions, acquiring or possessing an exam without the instructor's permission, tampering with course materials or resources (including library references) submitting false information (data,

quotations, citations, etc.), representing someone else's work as your own, etc. Those of you who had me for public speaking know that I have an excellent reputation for busting cheaters; know that if you engage in any act of academic misconduct, you will be caught and punished. Penalties range from an "F" on the particular piece of work to the denial or revocation of a degree. In addition, steps will be taken to initiate University sanctions, as provided for in the SCC. You are responsible for reading and understanding this code—if you have any questions, please contact me or the department chair. The SCC can be viewed at [www.umt.edu/studentaffairs/sccAcademicConduct.htm#9](http://www.umt.edu/studentaffairs/sccAcademicConduct.htm#9). In the past, I have failed students from a course on their first offense. Bottom line: don't do it. There are plenty of other rule-breaking activities you can engage while at college which have less serious consequences and are a lot more fun.

*Original Work:* I expect all the work you do in this class to be completely original. No work that has been done by classmates (current or previous) may be used by you, in whole or in part, for your work in this class. No work that you have done (for any other course or in this course if you have taken it previously) may be submitted to fulfill the assignments in this class. Finally, absolutely no plagiarism (from the web, from organizations, from any other source) will be tolerated—be sure that everything you write in this class is completely your own creation.

**Disabilities:** The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that if you have a disability that may have some impact on your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see a coordinator in the Office of Disability Affairs so that such accommodations can be arranged. After you receive the accommodation letters, **please contact me to discuss the provisions of those accommodations.**

**Technology:** A known fact of technology is that it sometimes fails. Computers crash, printers run out of ink, Internet connections falter. In order to control for these failures, since the Internet is your only main link to the class, your guiding principles should be to think ahead and be prepared. Save your work often, and in several places. Leave yourself time before assignments are due to allow for connection errors, and familiarize yourself with communication resources in your area in case you need to use them as a back-up to complete your assignments.

The only acceptable technology-related excuse for not meeting the requirements of this course is a documented failure of the UM Blackboard system—if you find the system is not working, you'll need to email me immediately to inform me of the time at which you believe the system (not your computer or connection) was at fault. You should then contact the help desk at CIS (Help Desk: 406.243.4357, [helpdesk@umontana.edu](mailto:helpdesk@umontana.edu)). You should also continue attempting to access the system—any failures in the system are usually resolved within an hour. If documented failures of the system occurred when an assignment was due, you will not be docked late points, but it is expected that you will try to get an assignment in as soon as the system is up again.

**Consideration:** The overall atmosphere in the class should be that of respect—for yourself and everyone else in the class. Help foster an atmosphere where a priority for education and a respect for all students is valued by engaging in comments that relate to course content and show tolerance for opinions different from your own. Please understand that whether it is a face-to-face or online environment, harassment of any kind is both inappropriate and intolerable, and disciplinary action will be taken should it occur.

**Contesting Grades:** I am willing to go over any assignment or exam with you to discuss your concerns. This is more difficult in an online context than an in-person one, so we'll have to work with what we've got. Please wait 24 hours after receiving an assignment before you contact me.

When you do contact me, please write down your specific concerns and your backing for these concerns, and I will research your situation. We'll take it from there should further discussion need to occur.

## **GRADING**

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This course will be graded with traditional letter grades of A, B, C, D, and F; no plus or minus grading will be in effect for this course. **I do not curve grades.**

Getting Started Email	10 points	480-432 points=A
Message Board Posts (14@5)	70 points	431-384 points=B
Week 3 Writing Assignment	50 points	383-336 points=C
Week 6 Writing Assignment	50 points	335-288 points=D
Week 7 Writing Assignment	50 points	<287 points=F
Week 8 Writing Assignment	50 points	
Week 10 Writing Assignment	50 points	
<u>Information Kit</u>	<u>150 points</u>	
<b>Total Points:</b>	<b>480 points</b>	

## **ASSIGNMENTS**

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All assignments must be typed in 12 point Times New Roman font with one inch margins on all sides of each page. All assignments are due by 6:00 PM MST on the assigned date. Students are expected to meet all deadlines. Unless there is an acceptable (to me, offered in advance of the deadline) explanation for a late assignment it will be graded in view of its extended deadline; that is, a penalty of 10% per day will be assessed and grading standards will be higher. Assignments will not be graded after a week has passed since the assignment deadline. Specific directions for each assignment will be posted on our course website.

**Getting Started Email:** Consider this my gift to you: ten free, easy points right off the bat. All you have to do is send me an email ([megankateholbrook@gmail.com](mailto:megankateholbrook@gmail.com)) in which you let me know how comfortable you feel with the class format and what questions or concerns you have about the syllabus/course. If you feel that you need alternate accommodations, please include relevant information in the email as well.

**Message Board Posts:** Each week you will have the opportunity to participate on the discussion board section of the course website. Students learn most when they engage not only with the course content, but also with one another—thus, I take engaging in discussion very seriously. Each post is worth a maximum of 5 points. I will be grading the quality as well as quantity of your contributions to discussions. **Your contribution must exhibit that you have read the material.** You should strive to express more than simply your opinion—instead, **integrate** material you have learned in this and other courses to **add something new and insightful to the discussion** after each chapter. You should respond to the discussion topic I have introduced for the week, but you will find yourself more engaged in the class, and you will give yourself more opportunities to gain points, if you also respond to the ideas your peers bring up on the board.

**Writing Assignments:** I don't want this course only to be about reading the textbook. This is a writing course, and you will be spending a great deal of time writing. You will complete five major writing assignments over the course of the semester. Some are easier to complete than others, so make sure you look ahead and stay on top of the work you need to do. These writing assignments will become part of the Information Kit that you produce as your final for the course.

**Information Kit:** This course will culminate in the creation of an Information Kit that will include a cover letter, two news releases, a fact sheet, an organizational feature, a backgrounder, a position statement, a flier, visual materials with captions, and at least one brochure. Essentially, you will act as the PR person for an organization of your choosing (your employer, a family business, a place you volunteer, a nonprofit, etc.). ***You should choose your organization by no later than Friday, September 11,*** as your second writing assignment will require that you have an organization selected. I like to get you started with actual clients on the topic (or in this case, organization) of your final project as soon as possible. I believe that using the same “client” for all projects in this class not only makes the project more meaningful and real to you, but it also provides an opportunity for you to practice working with an organization over a longer period of time. Also, since some of the materials required in the final information kit will be pieces you have already written, it gives you an opportunity to revise and improve upon what you’ve already produced.

*A note on choosing your organization: Keep in mind that you will need to write the components listed above. Since you are acting as the PR person for this organization, you need to choose an organization that is worthy of a semester-long project. I’m not saying that the UC Market is not a worthwhile organization, but I am saying it will be more difficult for you to complete certain elements of this course (i.e. organizational features, position statements, and news releases) if you choose an organization that really doesn’t have much going on. Hint: Nonprofits work really well for these types of projects.*

## **EXTRA CREDIT**

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In general, I am opposed to extra credit. More often than not, it is completed at the eleventh hour when students realize they will otherwise not pass the class, and it creates more work for me towards the end of the semester. My belief is that you should keep up with your work and complete each assignment with diligence and integrity throughout the semester, not just at the last minute. That being said, you will have a continuous opportunity to earn extra credit points throughout the semester via two methods:

**Copy Editing:** I do my best to ensure the materials I provide you are free of errors. However, after reading each material 1-50 times, it is easy to get complacent. For each error (spelling/grammar) you find in any handout or course reading, you may earn one point (yes, this means you will actually have to read each assignment to earn points!). All you have to do is email me the document title, where the error is, and what the error is. There is an expiration date on this offer; all edits must be received by Friday at 6:00 pm MST of the week they are assigned.

**New Articles:** I’m constantly striving to keep the course readings current and relevant. As potential practitioners in the field, it’s important for you to keep up on current industry trends, too. If you find an article in a trade or academic publication you believe would be more appropriate for a given topic in this course, and I plan to use your article in a future course, you will earn five points. There is no expiration on this one. As you go through the course and expand your knowledge of the field, you may come across articles that apply to topics we previously covered.

## **SUBMITTING WORK**

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Please save all work in a Microsoft Word file, if at all possible. If you do not have access to Microsoft Word, you must save the file in rich text format, or “rtf.” Although your formatting might not come through, this should guarantee that your content does make it to me through cyberspace.

Due to instances of academic dishonesty online, I must insist that each of you be VERY CAREFUL in submitting your work to me. You are responsible for making sure that the assignment you send is correctly

uploaded and readable to me, before the due date. This requires some double checking on your part, but is necessary. I cannot accept assignments which are unreadable; you will not receive credit and will not be able to re-submit such assignments.

All of your assignments will either be submitted to the discussion board or to me directly through your digital drop box. The digital drop box is listed under “Tools.” You must click on “add file” to keep your assignments accessible to you throughout the course and to maintain a record of your postings (I recommend doing this). However, to actually turn your paper in to me you must then hit “send file” and select the appropriate assignment to send. **Please be very careful that you do actually send all assignments.** Your assignment files should be named in the following format, so it’s clear to me what you are sending in. Files should be saved using the following format:

month\_day\_last\_first\_assignment\_name

EXAMPLE:

09\_18\_holbrook\_megan\_standards\_for\_effective\_writing

Please note:

- Use underscore instead of spaces
- Use ONLY lowercase letters
- The month and day should be the day the assignment is due, not the day you submit the assignment

Also, please be sure that in the text of any assignment you include a header with your full name. Once you have submitted an assignment on the drop box, go back in the drop box and make sure it shows that it has been submitted, not simply added. Similarly, once you have made a discussion posting, go back into the discussion board and make sure that it shows up as posted (not simply saved as a draft, which means that no one else can see it).

**Please do not turn assignments in to me through e-mail**—the digital drop box and discussion board are the ONLY places I will accept assignments, and I will always clearly indicate in the assignment information which way I would like you to submit it. ■

## CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK	TOPIC/READING	ASSIGNMENT	DUE
1	<b>What is Public Relations?</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Gale 2007 <input type="checkbox"/> Murphy 2004 <input type="checkbox"/> Week 1 Notes	Respond to Message Board Posts (2); Getting Started email due by 6:00 PM MST	9/4
2	<b>Communication Theory and Persuasion</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 3: Communication Theory and Persuasion (pp. 42-60) <input type="checkbox"/> Appendix E (pp. 421-432) <input type="checkbox"/> Week 2 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post; <i>Select the organization you will be working with, email me the organization's name and your contact's name and contact info</i>	9/11
3	<b>Writing and What it Means to You/Effective Writing</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 1: Writing and What it Means to You (pp. 3-11) <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 2: Effective Writing (pp. 12-41)	Respond to Message Board Post; Week 3 Writing Assignment due by 6:00 PM MST	9/18
4	<b>The Writing Process</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 4: The Writing Process (pp. 61-92) <input type="checkbox"/> Week 4 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	9/25
5	<b>News and the Public Relations Writer</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 5: News and the Public Relations Writer (pp. 95-121) <input type="checkbox"/> Week 5 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	10/2
6	<b>News Releases/Working With the Media</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 6: News Releases (pp. 122-158) <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 7: Working with the Media (pp. 159-186) <input type="checkbox"/> Obston 2004	Respond to Message Board Post; Week 6 Writing Assignment due by 6:00 PM MST	10/9
7	<b>Organizational Features</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 9: Organizational Features (pp. 206-228) <input type="checkbox"/> Levy 2002 <input type="checkbox"/> Week 7 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post; Week 7 Writing Assignment due by 6:00 PM MST	10/16
8	<b>Advocacy and Opinion</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 10: Advocacy and Opinion (pp. 229-251) <input type="checkbox"/> Week 8 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post; Week 8 Writing Assignment due by 6:00 PM MST	10/23
9	<b>Newsletters and Corporate Reports</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 12: Newsletters and Corporate Reports <input type="checkbox"/> Week 9 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	10/30
10	<b>Flyers and Brochures</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 11: Flyers, Brochures, and Web Sites (pp. 255-274) <input type="checkbox"/> Kappel 2003 Reading <input type="checkbox"/> Week 10 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post; Week 10 Assignment due by 6:00 PM MST	11/6
11	<b>Writing for the Web</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 11: Flyers, Brochures, and Web Sites (pp. 266-274) <input type="checkbox"/> The SPIN Project <input type="checkbox"/> Week 11 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	11/13
12	<b>Broadcast Media</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 8: Broadcast Media (pp. 187-205) <input type="checkbox"/> Farsetta and Price 2006 <input type="checkbox"/> Week 12 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	11/20
13	<b>Information Kits</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Chapter 16: Information Kits (pp. 369-387) <input type="checkbox"/> Week 13 Notes	Respond to Message Board Post	11/27
14	<b>Careers in Public Relations</b> <input type="checkbox"/> Week 14 Notes <input type="checkbox"/> Appendix C: Careers in Public Relations (pp. 412-418)	<b>Information Kit must be postmarked by Friday, December 4.</b>	12/4