MCOM 692: Topics, In-depth Writing & Reporting
South Dakota State University
Spring 2011, 3 credits

Location: This course is delivered via the Internet through Desire2Learn at https://d2l.sdbor.edu/.

Time: 24/7. For almost all of the work, you have the flexibility to complete it when it’s convenient for you to do so. Weekly assignments are due each Sunday at midnight CST.

Instructor: Lyle D. Olson, Ed.D., professor, Journalism & Mass Communication (for more information, see the Your Professor link or my Profile at the Classlist link). Once class begins, e-mail me within D2L. I try to monitor and respond to e-mail several times a day. If I won’t be able to respond for more than two days, I’ll notify you in advance.

Office: Yeager Hall 226, 688-6516
E-mail: lyle.olson@sdstate.edu

Course description: This course provides you with the opportunity to (1) study effective writing, (2) report/research/investigate and then write on a topic of interest to you, and (3) obtain input and assistance on your writing from classmates and the instructor.

Based on the course title:
• In-depth = detailed and thorough. A blog posting, a one- or two-source news story, a book review, a one-page column about a vacation, hobby or personal experience, and so forth don’t qualify. A multi-source magazine article, a series of columns, a book prospectus (including a sample chapter), a business plan, etc. do qualify.
• Reporting = to gather information (or research and investigate). This term carries the additional connotation of giving an account of/presenting that information, as in publication or to a board, employer, organization, etc.
• Writing = to form words, letters, sentences, paragraphs on a surface (pen on paper, computer screen), to compose, to communicate.

Pre-requisite: On-campus students must be admitted to the SDSU Graduate School. Online students must be admitted to the SDSU Graduate School and Department of Journalism and Mass Communication online master’s degree program.

Technology skills/requirements/help: Basic computer, Internet, and word processing skills are necessary. Taking an Internet-delivered course typically requires problem-solving ability. Basic computer requirements for SDSU’s online classes are outlined on the D2L homepage. Technical support is available from the Help Desk at 605/688-6776.

Important course philosophy: In a typical face-to-face classroom, the instructor is generally an expert imparting knowledge to learners. In an effective online environment, the instructor’s role becomes more of a facilitator. According to Building Effective Online Communities, a “good online course does not ‘teach,’ but instead makes resources and activities available that allow students to explore the content together in an effective manner.” This approach is perfect for a graduate-level class composed of students who have considerable and varied life experience. We can all help each other become better writers.

Textbook:
• In addition, students will also explore online resources, such as the Poynter Institute.

Course goals include:
1. Giving you the opportunity to report and write about something you’ve always wanted to explore but never had time to do so.
2. Helping you improve your writing ability by studying and discussing writing, by having your writing critiqued by others, and by critiquing the writing of others (most teachers say that they learned the most about a subject when they taught it).
3. Helping you end with (1) a finished product ready to be submitted for publication, (2) a draft near completion, or (3) substantial background work for a project to be completed in the future.

Course objectives: By the end of the class, you will have
1. Studied and discussed essential strategies for good writers via reading and discussion posts.
2. Experienced the benefits of a collaborative online community via peer writing assistance.
3. Researched a topic in-depth.
4. Written about that topic in-depth via the final project.
ACEJMC & SDSU values:
SDSU’s Department of Journalism and Mass Communication has been continuously accredited since 1949, the year national journalism accreditation began. (Spring 2012, the online M.S. program will be recommended for first-ever provisional accreditation at the graduate level).

The Accrediting Council on Education in JMC requires that all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies. Values this class touches on are:
1. Think critically, creatively, and independently.
2. Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.
3. Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences, and purposes they serve.
4. Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.

SDSU and the South Dakota Regental System also have values and competencies for students. Two that this class touches on are:
1. Written communication — Students will write effectively and responsibly and will understand and interpret the written expression of others.
2. Information literacy — Students will recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, organize, critically evaluate, and effectively use information from a variety of sources.

Absences, late or make-up work: In an online course, you’ll demonstrate engagement by staying caught up with assignments, discussion postings, and so forth. For late work, I’ll deduct points unless you contact me in advance and explain the situation. I typically allow make-up work, but I may deduct points, depending upon the situation. Keep me informed. My goal is to be fair to students who complete work on time and understanding of students who, on occasion, experience problems when life issues arise.

Participation: Being part of an online learning community is different than being in a face-to-face class. Your participation is crucial. If you get behind in class discussion, you’ll become isolated, hindering not only your learning experience but also the learning experience of your classmates.

Ethics and academic integrity: I expect that the work you complete is your own work and is original. Be especially aware of the dangers of plagiarism — directly copying more than three or four words from another author without quoting/citing. Refer to the Standards of Conduct link on the course home page (left side) for more information.

Special needs: I acknowledge that ADA requirements are important and useful. If you need any accommodation to participate in this class based on a disability, please contact the Coordinator of Disability Services at http://www.sdstate.edu/campus/services/disability/index.cfm or call 605/688-4504 to privately discuss your specific needs. I also encourage you to discuss your needs with me.

Freedom in learning: Under SDSU and Board of Regents policy, student academic performance must be evaluated solely on an academic basis, not on opinions or conduct in matters unrelated to academic standards. You’re free to take reasoned exception to the data or views I offer in this course and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but you’re also responsible for learning the content of the course. If you believe that my evaluation of your academic work reflects prejudiced or capricious consideration of your opinions or conduct unrelated to academic standards, you should discuss the matter with me to initiate a review. If you remain unsatisfied, you may contact Dr. Mary Arnold, department head, and/or Dr. David Hilderbrand, interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, to initiate a review.

About Writing
In one of his newspaper columns, the late Bob Karolevitz wrote that the number 1 secret to writing is simply getting started.

An SDSU journalism grad and prolific writer (more than 20 books), Karolevitz told about a famous writer who was invited to speak to a writing club:

The members waited with baited breath to hear the great one’s lecture which would propel them to easy authorship.

After an interminably long introduction from the program chairman, the guest arose, glared out at the eager listeners and growled: “So you want to be writers? What the hell are you doing here? Go home and write!”

Then he walked off the stage and out the door.
Course requirements

Category 1 = 325 of 500 total points for the class

Week 2 ........................................ Mission statement due
   35 points — 7% of the final grade
Week 3, 4, 5 .................................. Progress reports due
   45 points (15 points each) — 9% of final grade
Week 6 ............................................. Draft due
   70 points — 14% of final grade
Week 8 ............................................ Final project due
   175 points — 35% of final grade (150 points for the project itself, 25 for the summary report)

Category 1 requirements relate to the indepth writing project that you select for this class. I have topics I might pursue if I was taking this class. For one topic, I could envision doing the reporting and research and completing a final draft in eight weeks. For another topic, I could spend eight weeks reporting and doing research and not have time to complete a polished final draft. For yet another topic, I have no idea what I’d be getting into in time-wise, yet in Week 2, I’d be required to turn in a topic. To accommodate the variety of topics you all might pursue and the uncertainties of how much time projects might take, I’ve set the following general guideline. Pick a topic that at a minimum, will require a week’s work or 40 hours (on average, 8 weeks at 5 hours per week).

So, when you begin to ponder and check out topics, write a mission statement, conduct interviews or Internet searches for information, write drafts, etc., log those minutes and hours as Category 1 work. When you turn in your final project, you’ll also turn in a log of your time.

Category 2 = 175 of 500 total points for class

Weeks 3 – 7 ......................... Peer writing assistance
   75 points — 15% of the final grade
Weeks 1 – 8 .............................. Discussion postings
   100 points — 20% of the final grade

On the course D2L page under Links, there are resources for giving and receiving critiques.

In the D2L Content area, I’ve posted the rubric I’ll use to evaluate your discussion postings.

Overview of requirements

(Note: Files in the course Content or Link areas or in the Weekly modules will provide more detail, such as a template for the progress report.)

Category 1

Mission statement/plan: Using the textbook as a guide, you’ll draft a mission statement for your class writing project (see Tool 40, p. 195).

Progress reports: You’ll submit progress reports
  * Week 3 = plan/timetable
  * Week 4 = work completed
  * Week 5 = assessment

Draft: You’ll submit a rough draft of your project at the end of Week 6, receive input from your classmates and provide input to your classmates.

Final project: You’ll submit your final draft at the end of the class (Week 8). You have the following general options:
  * A final polished, complete draft if your topic is one that you can wrap up in a tidy fashion in 8 weeks and a summary report*.
  * A polished but not quite complete draft if your topic is too complicated to finish in 8 weeks and a summary report.
  * An incomplete draft with some polished sections if your topic is especially large and a summary report.

*The summary report (25 points) outlines the work you completed for the 40-hour minimum. For options 2 & 3, I’ll need to see “evidence” in the summary to support that option.

Category 2

Discussion involves posting and responding to weekly topics, most related to the textbook and supplemental reading material.

Peer review involves reading and responding to your classmates’ work (mission statements, progress reports, drafts).

Grading scale:
A = 450 to 500 points
B = 400 to 449 points
C = 350 to 399 points