

Journalism 868: Information in Context

About our class

Welcome to J868, a graduate course that will help you sharpen your writing skills.

This course is designed to help you think about writing as a tool for problem-solving.

The course also aims to help you think about writing, not as something magical, but as a process that requires skills and decision-making about how best to communicate your message.

In this class, we'll learn about writing to:

- Provide information.
- Persuade or change attitudes or behavior.
- Connect with audiences.

One of the goals of this class is to get you thinking about writing with a purpose for targeted audiences with a clear message for a specific form of media. With everything you write, you want to think about:

Purpose → Audience → Message → Medium

In this class we'll explore writing for both traditional and social media.

Some of you may have written before; some of you may never have written more than a grocery list or a note on a birthday card. Either way, this class aims to help you improve.

The goals of the class are to help you learn to:

- Write carefully, clearly, and concisely.
- Write on deadline.
- Use research from credible sources to support your ideas.
- Write with specific goals in mind – to inform, persuade, or connect.
- Analyze audiences and write to meet their interests and needs.
- Write for a variety of media platforms.
- Think creatively and critically about writing as a means to communicate ideas for a company or organization.

How you'll learn

The best ways to learn about writing are to read what others have written and to write yourself. In this class we'll do both. You'll have readings assignments each week, and you'll write every week. I'll work to give you constructive feedback on your writing to help you improve.

Each week, I'll post readings and assignments on the course Blackboard site: <http://courseware.ku.edu>. I'll post readings and assignments early Monday morning each week. You'll want to read instructions carefully and note deadlines.

Readings

I realize that many of you have jobs, and I realize some of you are taking this course to help you do your jobs better, so I've tried to make the assignments short and practical.

To access readings, go to the course Blackboard site. Readings are organized week by week. Don't panic if you see a long list of readings. They're short. And some of the readings are graphic images or videos.

Also, I've also organized readings, realizing that you may not have time to read all of them. I'll mark some as "must read for this week;" some as "read if you have time;" and others as "nice to know." (Readings are color-coded: Red for "must-read," green for "read if you have time," and gold for "nice to know.") Most of the readings are taken from trade or industry publications, although readings may include some scholarly articles from time to time.

There is no textbook for this course. However, everyone should buy a copy of the *Associated Press Stylebook*. The AP stylebook is a tool (like a dictionary) that journalists use to ensure clarity and consistency; strategic communications professionals also use it for those same reasons. The AP stylebook helps with grammar and punctuation, but it also helps with Internet, sports, and business terms. For example: Are you working on a master's degree, a master degree, or a masters degree? Is KU part of the Big 12, Big Twelve, or Big-Twelve basketball conference? Does your company have a website, a Web site, or a Web site? The AP stylebook will tell you that the first one in the series is correct.

You can buy the stylebook online (Amazon, for example). You can get an online stylebook for Kindle or tablets by going to Apstylebook.com. You can also go to the same website to buy the spiral-bound copy of the stylebook. You can buy the current 2016 issue, which is backordered, or you can buy an older version. (Try to get a version from 2012 or later since that will include the most up-to-date business and internet terms.)

Your assignments

Each week we'll have a writing assignment. Assignments will be made on Monday and are due the following Monday. (See the Class Schedule for specifics.)

Detailed assignment directions and grading rubrics are posted on the course Blackboard site, but here's a preview.

You'll complete the following assignments this semester:

Learning about writing:

Reading about writing: For each week in the semester, you'll find a series of readings posted on Blackboard. I'll also post a discussion question about those readings, and you will want to write a short paragraph (five to eight sentences) responding to that question. The questions will be based on the "must read" articles. The goal of this assignment is to help us think about, understand, and analyze the readings. The response paragraphs should be based on your own thoughts, ideas, and experiences. You will write six responses, and post those responses on Blackboard under the "Response to Class Readings" tab. There are eight weeks in the class, so this means you can skip two weeks (but you should still do the readings).

Writing about yourself: At the beginning of the semester, you will write a three-paragraph biography about yourself. Keep it short and simple. It can be serious or funny, but it should be factual. Your goal is to introduce yourself to your classmates. Due: Monday, Jan. 23.

Writing to Inform:

Press release: I'll provide some information, and you'll write a news release. The goal of this assignment is to help you determine the most important facts for your audience. You'll write in the inverted pyramid style, and you will think of this as something you would post online on the company website. Accuracy is key. You want to think of your target audience as customers or potential customers, and you want to consider that the news media might use the information you've provided. Due: Monday, Jan. 30.

Backgrounder: You will do some research about a company or organization. You will want to use multiple credible sources, including the company/organization website, plus news articles. You'll want to list 10 key facts about the organization/company that someone reading the company/organization's website should know. This shouldn't repeat any existing backgrounder you find. Due: Monday, Feb. 6.

Interview: You want to interview one person and write a short profile story about him or her. You don't have to write about the person's entire life. Instead, think about interviewing the person to answer *this question*:

- Tell me about a time when you witnessed a historic event. This can be an event that you saw in person or an even that you saw on television.

Ideally, you want to conduct the interview in person or by phone. That way you can follow up on interviews by listening and asking questions. Interviews by email typically are less informative and more time consuming. Before you conduct an email interview, check with me. Due: Monday, Feb. 13.

Writing to Persuade:

Blog post: Bloggers write for a variety of reasons. They want to share information about their personal experiences (vacation in Costa Rica, day-to-day adventures in motherhood); they want to encourage you to make a change (eat healthy foods, learn how to keep a positive attitude during cancer treatments), or they want to share their expertise (CDC blogs on disease prevention). For this assignment, you want to write a blog post persuading someone to do something. You have a lot of flexibility here. You could write a blog post about a product you enjoy (everyone should try the new Kit-Kat "Big Kat" bar) or an issue you feel strongly about (no one should text and drive). For this assignment, you should use at least two secondary sources (research others have done). You should cite your sources and make an argument for why you feel the way you do. Bloggers typically write in first-person (I think, I believe, I know), and you should do the same. Your goal is to make a point, using research and your own experiences and ideas. Blogs are short. You'll want to condense all that you've found into five to seven paragraphs. And blogs are conversational, so you'll want to write the way you talk. Due: Monday, Feb. 20.

Op-ed: As with the blog, you want to select a topic or an issue that matches your interests. This does not have to be the same topic as your blog, but it should be an issue that you care about or have strong feelings about. For this assignment, choose an issue; don't chose to promote a consumer product. You want to write an op-ed column explaining the issue and your position, and your goal is try to persuade people to see your point of view and, maybe, change their minds or opinions. You want to share your personal points of view, and you want to establish yourself as a credible expert on the topic. Your credibility might come from your own experiences ("I served in Iraq," or "I am a breast cancer survivor") or it might come from something you've learned by reading, studying, or interviewing ("I have a bachelor's degree in business," or "I did some research on bills pending in the Kansas legislature," or "When I interviewed Pat Warren, president of the Kansas Speedway ..."). You want to acknowledge your point of view, and explain why you think the way you do. You want to acknowledge opposing points of view. And you want to end, by asserting that your point of view is the most informed, logical one. You want facts to shape your opinions. For this assignment, you want to use both primary and secondary sources. This means you will have to interview someone, who is a credible source or expert, plus read and synthesize research conducted by others. You'll want to link to that secondary research in your articles. Due: Monday, Feb. 27.

Writing to Connect:

Twitter monitor: For this assignment, you'll follow a person, business, or organization on Twitter for five to seven days, and monitor their tweets. You'll write a short paper (no more than two typed pages, double-spaced) about what you've learned. You can monitor a for-profit company or a nonprofit group (for example, American Airlines, the Red Cross, the Kansas City Chiefs). Or you can monitor a person (for example, President Donald Trump, talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, KC mayor Sly James). The choice is yours; just make it someone or something you're interested in. You'll want to answer these questions: Who is the person/company you followed? Provide a few details about them. How many followers do they have? What is the content of their Tweets? In other words, what were the tweets about? Are the tweets aimed at informing readers about something new? Persuading you to do something differently or think differently? Building a brand? What kind of reactions did the Twitter author get from followers? In thinking about your own writing, what can you learn from these tweets (both good and bad) that will help you become a more effective communicator? Due: Monday, Mar. 6.

Final project: You'll write a news article, a Tweet, and a blog post. Your news article will be a list-style article that will provide information on a topic that you choose. For example: Seven things to know before you apply for a job, or 20 examples of how Hollywood is improving diversity, or 13 time-saving products to add to your kitchen in 2017. This can be serious or funny, but the goal here is to synthesize research into "bite-size" pieces of information that are easy to read. You can write for a general audience (12 things to know before you adopt a pet; six things to know before you buy a car) or a specialized audience (15 things every military family should know before they move overseas or five tips for mountain bike riders). You should use both primary and secondary sources in your article. The format will be to list a point, then write a paragraph explaining, supporting this point. After you finish writing the informative piece, you want to develop a tweet that would persuade someone to read the article. Finally, you want develop a short blog post that summarizes what you've found in your research (no more than three paragraphs) inviting readers to read your article, comment, and give you feedback. Due: By Wednesday, Mar. 15.

How your work will be evaluated

I'll work to give you constructive feedback on each assignment. In assigning grades, I'll often use grading rubrics. They'll be posted when the assignments are posted online so you'll know how your work will be graded. Here are some general criteria.

A – The writing is excellent. With a few minor revisions, this could be published. The project follows directions. The writing is clear, succinct, and focused on an appropriate audience and appropriate media platform. The project shows superior creativity, critical thinking and research skills. Wow!

B – The writing is very good. With some minor revisions, this could be published. The project follows directions. For the most part, the writing is clear and succinct. The writing is focused on the appropriate audience and appropriate media platform. The project shows good creative and critical thinking. The article demonstrates very good research, although there may be some minor concerns with citing sources or the need to clarify why a source is credible.

C – The writing is satisfactory. This could be published, but significant revisions are necessary. Although the project follows directions, the writing is not clear and concise. There are passages that are confusing, or necessary information is missing. The writing may be targeted to the wrong audience or not clearly targeted to any audience. The writing may not be appropriate for the media platform. The project shows limited creative and critical thinking; it doesn't take a new, original approach. There are significant problems with the research; sources are missing, or they aren't credible.

D – Unsatisfactory. The work is poorly written, poorly researched. Sources aren't credible. There are major questions about what the author is trying to say, and significant information is missing.

F – Failing. The work is turned late, or is not original. The quality of the work is not what would be expected in a graduate course.

Here's how your grades will be calculated:

- Reading about writing responses – 60 points (10 points for each post)
- Writing about yourself – 15 points
- News release – 75 points
- Backgrounder – 75 points
- Interview – 125 points
- Blog post – 100 points
- Editorial – 150 points
- Twitter analysis – 100 points
- Final project—300 points (200 points for article; 25 points for Tweet; 75 points for blog post)

You can earn a total of up to 1,000 points in the class.

To calculate your final grade, I'll divide the total number of points you earned by the total of points available in the class. So, if you earned 700 points, your final class grade will be 70 percent ($700/1000=70$). If you earn 850 points in the class, your final grade will be 85 percent ($850/1000=85$).

Students often ask about rounding up. If your final class grade is .5 or higher, your grade will be rounded up. If it is .4 or lower, the grade remains the same. For example: If your grade is 86.5, your grade will be rounded up to 87. If your grade is 86.4, your grade will remain an 86.

You will earn a number grade, but the final grade for the course will be translated into a letter grade. Here's how that works:

A = 93 and above	C = 73-76
A- = 90-92	C- = 70-72
B+ = 87-89	D+ = 67-69
B = 83-86	D = 63-66
B- = 80-82	D- = 60-62
C+ = 77-79	F = 59 or below

How we'll communicate

Since this is an online course, we won't have the opportunity to meet face-to-face, so we'll communicate through the course Blackboard site.

Blackboard allows us to discuss our readings. It also allows me to email you via your KU address. (If you have a personal email, Blackboard won't let me contact you through that.) You need to check your KU email regularly.

I'll also post class announcements on Blackboard. Those should show up as emails to you, too.

I know some classes have used Slack.com. We won't use that for this course. Instead, we'll use the "Response to Readings" tab on Blackboard.

The easiest way to reach me is to email me at: barnettb@ku.edu (Be sure to use my last name, then first initial. There is another B. Barnett on campus, and he does not forward emails).

My office is 203-B Stauffer Flint Hall, and you can also make an appointment to meet in person.

Ethics, plagiarism and fabrication

Accuracy and transparency are the foundations of journalism, and they will be critical in this course on strategic communications.

The William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications does not allow plagiarism or fabrication. Neither do I.

Plagiarism means that you have taken someone else's words or ideas and have presented them as your own. Never do this. In the workplace, it's a fire-able offense. In this class, it means you will fail the class, possibly fail the course, and it could mean expulsion from the journalism school. If you include other people's ideas and words in any writing you do for this class, you must attribute to the original source.

Fabrication means that you made it up. This could be saying that you interviewed someone when you didn't. It could mean saying you did research when you didn't. It could be making up or embellishing a quote to make it sound more dramatic.

One word: **Don't.**

In this class:

- All your work must be original. It must reflect your own ideas, your own research, and your own writing.
- Your work must be accurate. You should not make up anything to make your work sound better or more interesting.
- You can use the internet for research, but you need to think about what you've learned and put it in your own words. Don't change a word or two and think the problem is solved.
- Never cut and paste from the Internet.
- Don't "double-dip." Don't use an assignment from another class (past or current classes) to meet a requirement for this class. Original work means that work is original to this class, not "recycled" from other class assignments.

Deadlines

In business and industry, deadlines are important. Missing a deadline can translate into canceled contracts, job loss, or money loss.

All deadlines for your work are announced in advance. Consequently, no late papers will be accepted.

If you have an emergency that might affect your work, let me know in advance, and we'll talk. Computer problems, lost work, last-minute vacations are not emergencies. Plan ahead. Again, talk to me if there's a problem.

You can work ahead and turn in assignments early. Just make sure that you turn in your work no later than the deadlines announced in the syllabus and the class schedule.

Special needs

The University of Kansas wants to help you learn. If you have an issue or concern that you think may affect with your learning, please let me know as soon as possible. You should also contact KU's Office of Student Access Services, which can arrange accommodations for you. You can contact the office by calling 785-864-4064 or by emailing: achieve@ku.edu. Here is a link to the website: <https://access.ku.edu/>

Some final thoughts

My job is to help you get through this class and to help you improve your writing skills. Please don't hesitate to contact me. I'm happy to work with you anyway I can.