

Jonathan Rick  
 English 394 (1701): Business Writing  
 Fall 2018  
 Tuesday, 6:30 – 9:10 PM  
 Tawes 1105

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## Syllabus

### Why You're Here

**The Short Version.** In today's globalized age, few things can differentiate you better than polished communications skills. And yet, these skills are increasingly scarce. This course will survey the fundamentals of professional communications generally, and business writing specifically, in five parts:

| Theme                    | Topics                               | Duration                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Writing 101           | Myths and Maxims                     | August 28 – September 4     |
| 2. Professional Branding | Cover Letters, Résumés, and LinkedIn | September 11 – September 18 |
| 3. Everyday Skills       | Numbers, Email, and Web Writing      | September 25 – October 16   |
| 4. Framing and Packaging | Visual Aids and Headlines            | October 16 – October 23     |
| 5. Presenting            | PowerPoint and Message Development   | October 30 – December 4     |

My promise to you: If you read all the materials, attend each class, and [never, ever turn in a first draft](#), you'll set yourself up for success not only in this course, but also in your career.

**The Long Version.** The Professional Writing Program (PWP) strengthens writing skills and prepares students for the range of writing expected of you after graduation. After completing a PWP course, you'll be able to:

- Analyze a variety of professional rhetorical situations and produce appropriate texts in response
- Understand the stages required to produce competent, professional writing through planning, drafting, revising, and editing
- Identify and implement the appropriate research methods for each writing task
- Practice the ethical use of sources and the conventions of citation appropriate to each genre
- Write for the intended readers of a text, and design or adapt texts to audiences who may differ in their familiarity with the subject matter

- Demonstrate competence in Standard Written English, including grammar, sentence and paragraph structure, coherence, and document design (including the use of visuals), and be able to use this knowledge to revise texts
- Produce cogent arguments that identify arguable issues, reflect the degree of available evidence, and take account of counterarguments

## Who I Am

**What You Need to Know.** I love teaching. I enjoy helping people polish their communications skills, and want you to excel. Equally important, I also want you to have fun in this class.

I'm a stickler for details. Pay attention to my pet peeves and follow instructions, and you'll do well.

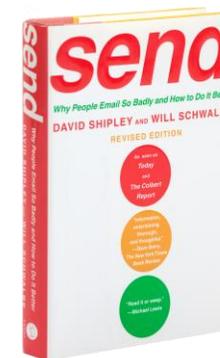
I appreciate being challenged, so never hesitate to disagree. Similarly, pose questions whenever they occur. When in doubt, ask, don't assume.

**What's Nice to Know.** By dawn, I'm in the pool, swimming for a Masters team. By daytime, I [deliver workshops around the country](#) (similar to those we do in class); I help clients burnish their brand (with résumés, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles, and the like); and I ghostwrite for executives.

I began my career as a journalist, writing for *Time* magazine in New York. Realizing that I preferred to opine rather than report, I moved to Washington and embraced the sister fields of marketing, public relations, and ghostwriting.

## Required Reading

You need to read one book for this course: [SEND: Why People Email So Badly and How to Do It Better](#), by David Shipley and Will Schwalbe. (The edition doesn't matter.) Written by two veteran editors, this short primer offers an excellent overview of email communications. (Such is the book's reputation that it was [requested by a secretary of state while in office.](#))



## Recommended Reading

1. Ask 10 writers what the most important book about writing is, and at least seven will tell you it's [The Elements of Style](#), by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White.

2. [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#), by Dale Carnegie, brilliantly elucidates the art of dealing with people — especially in business.
3. I write a blog about the use and abuse of language called [Sprachgefühl](#). (You may notice that some of your readings appear here.)
4. Each one of you should be reading a newspaper. If you're not, here's the next best thing: [theSkimm](#). It's an e-newsletter that arrives every Monday through Friday morning and summarizes the top three stories of the day.

### How to Contact Me

The best way to reach me is via email, at [jrick@umd.edu](mailto:jrick@umd.edu). I strive to respond to all emails within 24 business hours, though if you contact me on the day of class about homework due that day, you may not get a response as quickly as you'd like (after all, I have to prepare).

I also strongly encourage you to contact our teaching assistant, Lucas Thompson, at [lpthompson12@gmail.com](mailto:lpthompson12@gmail.com).

I hold office hours immediately after each class, from 9:10 – 10:10 PM, and by appointment.

### How I Grade

I don't grade on a curve. Instead, in assessing your assignments, I'll ask one overarching question: "Have you demonstrated mastery of the given assignment?" I'll use the following criteria to arrive at an answer:

| Grade    | Description  | Explanation   |
|----------|--------------|---|
| <b>A</b> | Exemplary    | The text demonstrates originality, initiative, and rhetorical skill. The content is clear, thorough, and forceful, and the style is well-organized and formatted. |
| <b>B</b> | Effective    | The text generally succeeds in meeting its goals without the need for further major revisions.  |
| <b>C</b> | Satisfactory | The text is adequate but requires some substantial revisions.   |

|          |                |   |
|----------|----------------|---|
| <b>D</b> | Unsatisfactory | The text requires extensive revisions. You've encountered big problems.   |
| <b>F</b> | Unacceptable   | The text doesn't have enough information, does something inappropriate for a given situation, or contains major and pervasive problems. |

I'll convert these letters into numbers as follows:

|               |           |          |           |           |          |           |           |          |           |           |          |           |          |
|---------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| <b>Letter</b> | <b>A+</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>A-</b> | <b>B+</b> | <b>B</b> | <b>B-</b> | <b>C+</b> | <b>C</b> | <b>C-</b> | <b>D+</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>D-</b> | <b>F</b> |
| <b>Number</b> | 100       | 96       | 93        | 89        | 86       | 83        | 79        | 76       | 73        | 69        | 66       | 63        | 0        |

I'll calculate your final grade as follows:

|               |           |          |           |           |          |           |           |          |           |           |          |           |          |
|---------------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|
| <b>Letter</b> | <b>A+</b> | <b>A</b> | <b>A-</b> | <b>B+</b> | <b>B</b> | <b>B-</b> | <b>C+</b> | <b>C</b> | <b>C-</b> | <b>D+</b> | <b>D</b> | <b>D-</b> | <b>F</b> |
| <b>Number</b> | ≥96.5     | ≥93.5    | ≥89.5     | ≥86.5     | ≥83.5    | ≥79.5     | ≥76.5     | ≥73.5    | ≥69.5     | ≥66.5     | ≥63.5    | ≥59.5     |          |

I'll break down your final grade as follows:

| <b>Assignment</b>                       | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|-------------------|
| Branding Portfolio                      | 15                |
| SWOT Analysis                           | 15                |
| Messaging Document                      | 15                |
| Headlines                               | 15                |
| Presentation                            | 15                |
| Pass/Fail Documents (including syllabus | 10                |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| feedback, myths and maxims, and quizzes)   |    |
| Participation (including attendance, revisions, and visits to the writing and oral communications centers) | 15 |

## Revisions

After your graded work is returned, I encourage you to revise and resubmit it.

Except for your presentation, you can revise as many assignments as you like, but each one only once. A successful revision will typically lift your grade by one half letter (for example, from a B+ to an A-, or, in the case of a pass/fail assignment, from an F to a P).

For further details, please read the document, “Revise, Reflect, Resubmit: How to Earn a Better Grade.”

## Absences

Do you know what a “[smart](#)” quotation mark is? Should you write “25 September,” “September 25,” or “September 25<sup>th</sup>”? Should you use the [serial comma](#)? The only way to be sure is to attend each class. After all, there’s only so much you can get from reading; true education blends independent studying with discussion.

Indeed, because we meet only once a week, missing one class is like missing three 50-minute classes. Therefore, absences *will* affect your grade.

Finally, if you miss a class, it’s your responsibility to get the notes from a classmate.

## Policies

1. **Email.** I don’t accept homework via email; you need to print everything.
2. **Staples.** I don’t accept homework that isn’t stapled together.

- 3. Deadlines.** Homework is due — again, in hard copy, never by email — at the beginning of the given class. If you're absent that day, you're still responsible for handing in your work on time. Assignments that are late will be penalized by a full letter (for example, from an A to a B) every 24 hours.

Since I'm on campus only one night a week, if you need to turn in something outside of class time, please use the PWP mailbox in Tawes 1220. Equally important: Let me know when you do so, so I can grade you appropriately.

- 4. Punctuality.** Class starts promptly at 6:30 pm. If you're late, I mark you as absent. (This can be rectified easily: Just see me during the break or after class.) By the same token, I don't end class early; expect to stay until 9:10.
- 5. Participation.** This course is highly interactive; I call on people frequently, at random, and without warning.
- 6. Computers.** [Studies show that students learn better](#) when they take notes by hand. [As a professor at Dartmouth has observed](#), "The act of typing effectively turns the note-taker into a transcription zombie, while the imperfect recordings of the pencil-pusher reflect and excite a process of integration, creating more textured and effective modes of recall." Accordingly, please don't use a laptop or tablet during class. (The exceptions, of course, are if you have a documented disability or we're doing an exercise for which I've asked everyone to bring a computer.)
- 7. Food.** While drinking during class is fine, please don't eat; it's distracting to others. You'll have time to snack during our break.
- 8. Tutors.** I strongly encourage you to use the university's [writing center](#) and [oral communications center](#). For free, trained tutors will consult with you about any piece of writing or presentation at any stage of the process. If you use the centers, be sure to let me know, so I can credit you appropriately.
- 9. Double Spacing.** Homework that's not double-spaced will earn an automatic F — just as proposals, in the real world, which don't follow instructions are [summarily rejected](#).
- 10. Extra Readings.** I'll often send emails with links to interesting and timely articles. I hope you'll not only read this material, but also reply with reflections. (If you don't participate enough in class, this is an opportunity to lift that part of your final grade.)
- 11. Exit Tickets.** I will often ask everyone, before I end class, to write an "exit ticket." This is an opportunity for you to articulate something that confused you during class, something you think can be improved, or something you enjoyed. These aren't graded and can be handwritten.

**12. Quizzes.** On occasion, I'll assign a pass/fail pop quiz to make sure you're doing the readings. If you miss a quiz, it's your responsibility to see me, the next time you're in class, to make it up.

**13. Plagiarism.** While the rules for citations in business writing differ from those in academic writing, a fundamental reality holds for both: Don't steal. Borrowing ideas is perfectly fine, but cite your sources liberally. When in doubt, give credit. Any student guilty of plagiarism will be referred to the Honor Council.

Put another way, remember these lines from Aaron Sorkin's TV show, *The Newsroom*: "You can save your students a lot of time. On the first day of class, tell them they know the difference between right and wrong. Do what's right. They don't need a lawyer to tell them their moral absolutes. And whenever you hear someone giving a monologue defending the ethics of their position, you can be pretty sure they know they were wrong."

## Homework

Because the format I use for each assignment is so specific, we'll walk through a detailed template for each one during the preceding class.

Note: The templates are for format, *not* content. If your content is as thin as that on a template, you'll be unhappy with your grade.

## Schedule

| Date | Theme       | Topic                                    | Reading Beforehand   | Homework Due | Homework Afterward |
|------|-------------|--|--|--------------|--------------------|
| 8/28 | Writing 101 | Course Introduction and Myths and Maxims | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Syllabus and Related Documents*</li> <li>2. <a href="#">How to Email Your Professor*</a></li> </ol>  |              | Syllabus Feedback  |
| 9/4  | Writing 101 | Myths and Maxims (Continued)             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">Why You Should Always Read the Fine Print</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">Sounding Smart Is Not the Same Thing As Being Smart</a></li> </ol> |              | Myths and Maxims   |

| Date | Theme                 | Topic                      | Reading Beforehand  | Homework Due       | Homework Afterward |
|------|-----------------------|----------------------------|---|--------------------|--------------------|
|      |                       |                            | 3. <a href="#">Omit Needless Words</a>  |                    |                    |
| 9/11 | Professional Branding | LinkedIn and Cover Letters | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">The Cover Letter Formula That Skyrocketed My Interviews From 0% to 55%</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">I Read 500 Cover Letters for Entry-Level Media Jobs*</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">Cover Letters Are Hard to Write — but This Template Makes It a Breeze*</a></li> <li>4. <a href="#">Want Your LinkedIn Profile to Stand Out? Don't Include These 10 Overused Words*</a></li> </ol> | Myths and Maxims   |                    |
| 9/18 | Professional Branding | Résumés and Job Searching  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">Show Me the Numbers!</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">Delete These 9 Things From Your Résumé</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">19 Reasons Why This Is an Excellent Résumé*</a></li> <li>4. <a href="#">The Best Résumés Don't Have a "Skills" Section</a></li> </ol>   |                    | Branding Portfolio |
| 9/25 | Everyday Skills       | Numbers                    | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">You Can't Spell "Numbers" Without "Numb"*</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">This Animated Video Shows How Deep the Ocean Really Is</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">How Expert Explainers Put a Mind-Boggling Supercomputer Into Human Terms</a></li> </ol>  | Branding Portfolio | SWOT Analysis      |

| Date  | Theme                                      | Topic                       | Reading Beforehand  | Homework Due       | Homework Afterward |
|-------|--|-----------------------------|---|--------------------|--------------------|
| 10/2  |  | Conferences                 | We'll meet one on one for up to 13 minutes to review your progress. Bring all your homework thus far.   | SWOT Analysis      |                    |
| 10/9  | Everyday Skills                            | Email                       | Bring a laptop.<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#"><u>SEND: Why People Email So Badly and How to Do It Better</u></a>*</li> <li>2. <a href="#"><u>4 Times You Were Rude in an Email — And Didn't Even Know It</u></a></li> <li>3. <a href="#"><u>Saying "No" Is Better Than Saying Nothing</u></a></li> </ol> |                    |                    |
| 10/16 | Everyday Skills, and Framing and Packaging | Web Writing and Visual Aids | Bring a laptop.<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#"><u>Use This One Simple Trick to Make People Actually Read What You Write</u></a></li> </ol>  |                    | Messaging Document |
| 10/23 | Framing and Packaging                      | Headlines                   | Bring a laptop.<br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#"><u>Why Every Profession Could Benefit From Better Headlines</u></a></li> <li>2. <a href="#"><u>Newspapers Are Still Putting Boring Headlines on Amazing Stories Like the Jamie Gilt Shooting. Why?*</u></a></li> </ol>                                     | Messaging Document | Headlines          |
| 10/30 | Presenting                                 | Conferences                 | We'll meet one on one for up to 13 minutes to review your progress. Bring all your homework thus far.   | Headlines          |                    |

| Date  | Theme      | Topic  | Reading Beforehand  | Homework Due | Homework Afterward |
|-------|------------|--|---|--------------|--------------------|
| 11/6  | Presenting | Guest Speakers                                 |   |              |                    |
| 11/13 | Presenting | PowerPoint                                     | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">The Top 10 Secrets of Every Memorable PowerPoint Presentation</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">Slide Makeovers: SlideShare</a></li> <li>3. <a href="#">You Suck at PowerPoint!*</a></li> <li>4. <a href="#">Lots of Little Things You Can Do to Make Your Slides More Pleasing to the Eye</a></li> <li>5. <a href="#">The Secrets of TED Talks*</a></li> </ol> |              | Blurb              |
| 11/20 |            | <i>No class; Thanks-giving</i>                 |   |              |                    |
| 11/27 | Presenting | PowerPoint (Continued) and Message Development | <p>Bring a laptop.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <a href="#">The One Investment Warren Buffett Says Will Change Your Life (And It's Not a Stock)</a></li> <li>2. <a href="#">Which Is More Important: Linguistic Perfection, or Conversational Engagement?</a></li> </ol>   | Blurb        |                    |
| 12/4  | Presenting | Presentations                                  |   |              |                    |

\* Most of the readings are short; those marked with an asterisk are longer.