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Peer Review of Teaching Portfolio for JOUR 304: Multimedia Journalism

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Peer Review of Teaching Portfolio for JOUR 304: Multimedia Journalism

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Abstract: The term *multimedia journalism*, as used in the field, is vague and can describe a wide-ranging set of skills, including writing, audio/video production, graphic design, data analysis, and even front-end web development. For this reason, past multimedia offerings in our college have been described as 'kitchen sink courses' with many disparate elements thrown in. Through the Peer Review of Teaching Project, the course is analyzed and focused to include a coherent progression of skills.

Keywords: Journalism, multimedia, broadcasting, teaching

Contents

Benchmark Memo One	3
About JOUR 304 Multimedia Journalism	3
Course goals	3
Course choice	3
Portfolio goals	4
Portfolio type	4
Possible changes	4
Benchmark Memo Two	5
Course learning outcomes	5
Teaching methods during contact time with students	5
Course activities outside of class	6
Rationale for methods	6
Linking course choices to the broader curriculum	6
Benchmark Memo Three	7
Ramping up student audio editing skills	7
Figure 3-1: Comparing audio levels between strong and weak projects	7
Figure 3-2: Comparing final project audio quality year over year	9
Reflection	10
Course Syllabus	11

Peer Review of Teaching Portfolio for JOUR 304: Multimedia Journalism

Benchmark Memo One

About JOUR 304 Multimedia Journalism

The multimedia journalism course teaches students to create content for the web and social media. Projects include making videos about current events, collecting audio and shooting video with their phones, building web pages, and creating longer video stories for web presentation.

The multimedia journalism course is for third and fourth year students who have already taken courses in basic reporting, writing, video and web skills. Because of this, it is possible to focus a bit less on the technology skills and more on reporting and storytelling.

The course meets for 75 minutes twice per week in a computer lab, and usually has about 18 students. Our college is majority female, and the course demographics generally reflect that.

Course goals

My goal is to make the course on where students tie together both the technical skills they've learned in skills classes, with the news sense and reporting skills they've learned in writing classes. I want them to be able to make professional-level, publishable web pages, web videos and social media content. They have spent years practicing and building up ability, now it's time to execute.

In order to do this, I want them to understand how to gather interesting and well-executed raw materials during their reporting. Then, they need to use an understanding of characters and plot to stitch the raw building blocks they've got into something compelling that the public will want to read and/or watch.

I want them to come at the course from the perspective that they are no longer practicing, but making journalism. They are ready.

These goals are reflected in the fact that the class is a hands-on course. Lectures are brief. There are no quizzes or exams. We learn mainly by deconstructing actual published examples and then making similar types of projects ourselves.

Once students start creating journalism that is meant to make it out into the world, it also helps them understand the role that journalism can play in society. They have the ability to create things that otherwise would not exist, to draw attention to injustices that would stay in the background without a journalist's attention.

With that in mind, I encourage them to talk to as wide an array of people and witness as wide a variety of experiences as possible.

Course choice

I chose this course because it is currently in transition. For many years, the presumption was that journalism majors would be working for newspapers. Web and multimedia skills were considered auxiliary, and the course was described as the 'kitchen sink' class, where students would dabble in new technologies. Now, most journalism is published on the web, and multimedia skills are essential on the job market. The course thus needs to move from 'grab bag' to cornerstone.

Portfolio goals

My main goal in creating this portfolio is to refine this course to reflect the actual importance it deserves in the curriculum. Because these skills are so essential in the job market, I want to make sure students get the best preparation possible.

One struggle teaching the course is finding ways to give more incremental instruction than doing projects and critiquing. Because the projects take weeks, it is hard to fit very many opportunities for this kind of feedback into a semester.

I also struggle sometimes with assessment. What are interesting ways to give feedback on assignments and projects when assessment of them is almost inherently subjective. What are more meaningful things to say than 'I like that, I think it's good'?

Starting next year, there may be additional professors teaching the course. I'd like to have a tested course plan to share.

Portfolio type

I would like this benchmark portfolio to focus on a better ramping up to larger graded projects with incremental assignments.

Possible changes

The changes I would like to test are:

- Giving students stronger guidance on technical aspects of their projects
- Adding more practice assignments before they are asked to

Benchmark Memo Two

This memo discusses the classroom practices I employ in this course, and the rationale for them.

Course learning outcomes

- Collecting high quality audio
- Collecting high quality video
- Writing for the web
- Assembling publishable web packages
- Editing on the go under deadline pressure
- Using social media in a professional context
- Making good story choices
- Dissecting and learning from new story forms that emerge

Teaching methods during contact time with students

Because this is a journalism course, my goal is for the students to be able to actually produce publication-quality multimedia stories and/or story components. To that end, I use four general strategies during the class, which meets for 75 minutes, twice per week:

- Lectures or demonstrations of approaches to certain concrete tasks such as recording audio clips or editing video for social media.
- Showing examples of good and bad work published by professionals, and then deconstructing them together through group discussion.
- Hands-on group work where students try out topics that have been demonstrated or discussed. For example, in a recent class I demonstrated the use of a 360° video camera, and then asked students to form groups and shoot a 360° video tour of the school building.
- Group critiquing, where students are asked to offer constructive comments on where work is strong or how it could be improved.

I never exclusively lecture for the duration of a class period. There is a hands-on component to nearly every class.

Lectures and demonstrations, when kept short, are an efficient way of introducing the conceptual framework for a topic or giving the basics of using a technique or piece of equipment. An example of this would be a demonstration in front of the class of how to collect good audio with a mobile phone. When multiple sets of the same equipment are available, I try to bring them to class so that students can follow along with me.

Discussion helps me assess whether students are perceiving key aspects of the journalism technique I am highlighting. When they are able to deconstruct the components of a work example (e.g. video, archival footage, interviews, still photos, text titles) I know that they understand what components they'll need to create themselves. When they can deconstruct the plot arc of an example work, I know they understand how to stitch the components they make together.

I also like to ask them about the subjective decisions the creator of the work made. Why did they make these choices? What were they trying to accomplish? Were they successful? What would they do differently? And finally, because there are not necessarily right and wrong answers, I want them to express whether they liked the piece or not.

Hands-on group work helps cement learning by having students immediately try what was discussed. An example of this would be showing examples of a 5-shot sequence, then asking students to break into groups and make a short film about one member making an origami Yoda head. (You may remember that guy from Star Wars). I like having students do these things in groups, in class, because it is a relatively low-stakes way to try something new.

Being in class gives me very useful opportunities for assessment. Because the students are in groups, I can eavesdrop on their conversations to assess their understanding of the task. I also ask them to submit the finished work, which gives me class-per-class data points on how well students understand and are able to apply what they've learned.

Course activities outside of class

Out-of-class assignments are exclusively journalism projects that ask students to apply specific journalism tools and techniques to a story of their own choosing. What I try to achieve is a slow ramping up of degree of difficulty on these projects.

- The first project asks students to edit together a **short web video** using footage from a current event. Last semester it was the State of the Union speech. This semester it was the Emmy awards. This helps them practice their video editing and animated graphics skills, as well as their news sense, by asking them to identify the key points of the event to highlight. Being able to condense an hours-long event into a 2-minute video is a storytelling skill in itself.
- The second project asks students to gather an audio interview and natural sound clips for a story they choose, and then assemble their written **text, audio and photos** into a **finished post** for the student news website. They use this to practice audio collection, and also web production techniques like writing headlines and using html to embed content.
- The third project is similar to the second, except this time they are asked to write **a story with strong video elements** on a topic they choose. This helps reinforce their video editing and web production skills, and requires them to practice the new skill of collecting good video with mobile journalism tools.
- The final project is a 3 to 6-minute **web explainer video** a la Vox or the New York Times which requires students to choose six or more techniques from the course of the semester and stitch them together to engagingly explain a topic. Here they practice video editing, audio and video gathering, story selection, interviewing, animated graphics, voiceover and optional additions like data visualization.

Rationale for methods

At a fundamental level, journalism is about making things. Thus, I treat each assignment as a way for the students to practice their craft. When we spend class time together creating journalism, we can focus not just on the end product, but also on building a good practice. This means using sound processes to conceptualize, plan, execute and – then self-edit – journalistic content.

The trajectory of a journalism process can differ greatly from project to project. Therefore it is important for students to be flexible, creative and resilient. This factors into my decision to avoid work like quizzes and exams which I feel do too much of the work for a student.

Journalists don't just seek answers to questions, they have to invent their own questions. Most often, projects start with a blank screen. I don't want to do anything in the classroom that creates the expectation that students will just be intellectual batters having balls tossed at them.

Linking course choices to the broader curriculum

While the school does offer some courses that are about journalism, for example a course about journalism ethics and law, in general our focus is on teaching students how to do journalism. This means that assignments where they're asked to create, coupled with feedback and critique, are an appropriate way to help them improve their journalism practice.

For many years it has been clear that the new normal for journalism is an extreme state of flux. Familiar forms of journalism like print stories are in many ways being eclipsed by web publication forms. But those forms are constantly evolving. By encouraging students to dissect new forms of journalism that they encounter and assess them, they are learning a skill that will help them adopt whatever new forms may arise.

Benchmark Memo Three

Ramping up student audio editing skills

One of the stated goals of this portfolio was to focus on ramping up skills over the course of this class. The disjointed 'kitchen sink' presentation of the course in the past meant that students somewhat started over in terms of skillset for each of the major assignments.

It is challenging in journalism to find opportunities for quantitative assessment. Whether something is enjoyable or stimulating to read or watch is inherently subjective. This makes it hard to attach meaning to small numerical differences in grade.

To deal with this, with input from co-participants at one of the retreats, I identified a more concrete aspect of the students' work: consistent audio levels.

Without thinking about it, most of us have experienced the scourge of wildly varying audio levels. When we are watching a video, and find ourselves diving for the volume dial because some segment of it is much louder or softer than the rest, someone did not do a good job normalizing their audio. This is an important skill because it is impossible for a piece to seem professional and polished with poorly adjusted audio levels, no matter how strong the content is.

The most common flaw in past students' final projects was inconsistent audio. To address this, I took a three-pronged approach: 1. The school had no official guidance for students on what appropriate audio levels were for web content. I worked with the broadcasting, production and basic skills faculty to settle on explicit decibel levels for normalization for the Soundcloud, YouTube and Spotify platforms. This allowed me to give students firm, concrete instructions. 2. I added an additional video editing assignment where students were not required to capture any of their own audio or video. Instead they were given State of the Union footage from C-SPAN to work with. This let them focus on their competency with the editing software and details like consistent audio, instead of capturing content and the story itself. 3. Students were given a brief lecture before their final projects were due, reminding them of the importance of consistent audio levels, reiterating the hard numerical levels the faculty identified for platforms, and walking through the steps to normalize audio in their editing software.

Figure 3-1: Comparing audio levels between strong and weak projects

This chart shows an example of a problematic student project, and a correctly executed one. Extremely low levels will be too soft. Conversely, levels above 0 will be 'clipped' which means they will have an extremely undesirable distorted effect. The red dashed line indicates the 0 decibel level. The green dashed line indicates the -7 decibel level, which would be the maximum audio level for student projects where they followed instructions.

(It is impossible to link to the multimedia projects, because the students are in them and thus the work can't be anonymized.)

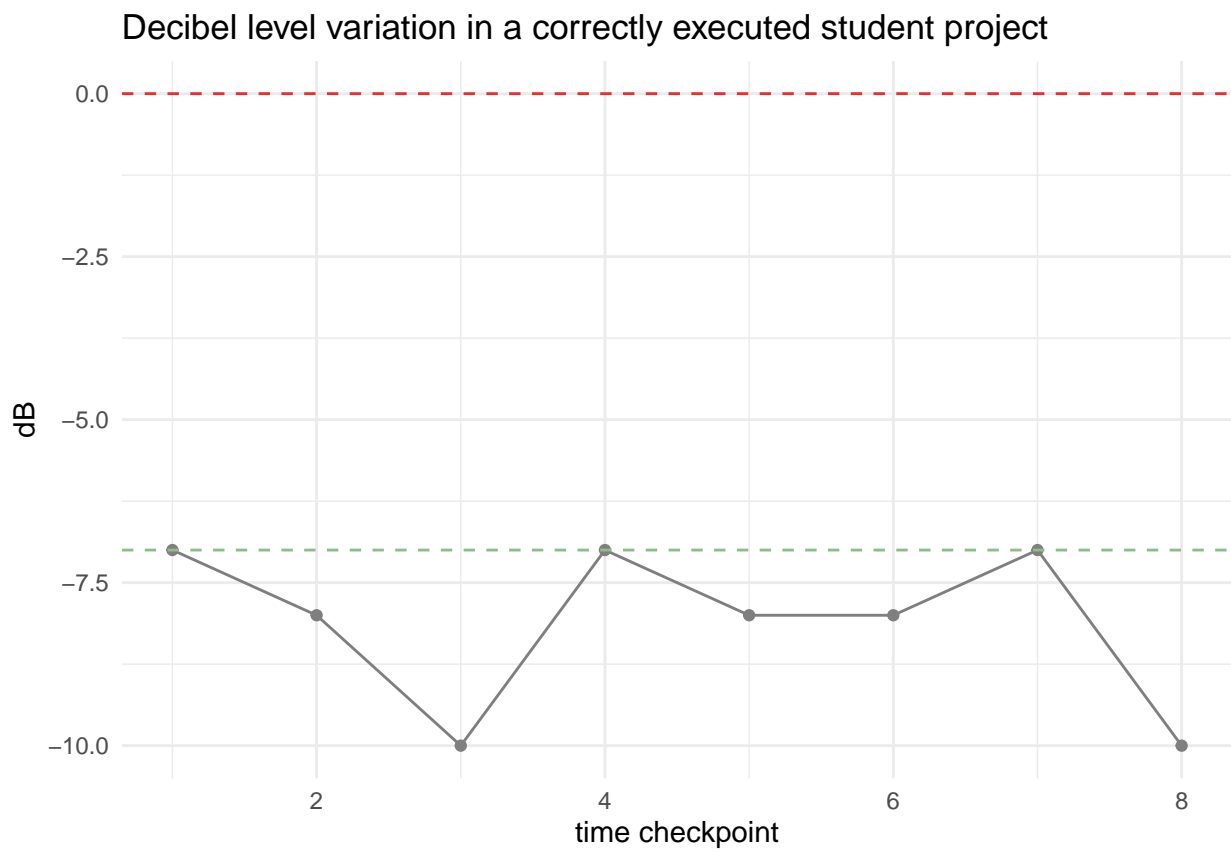
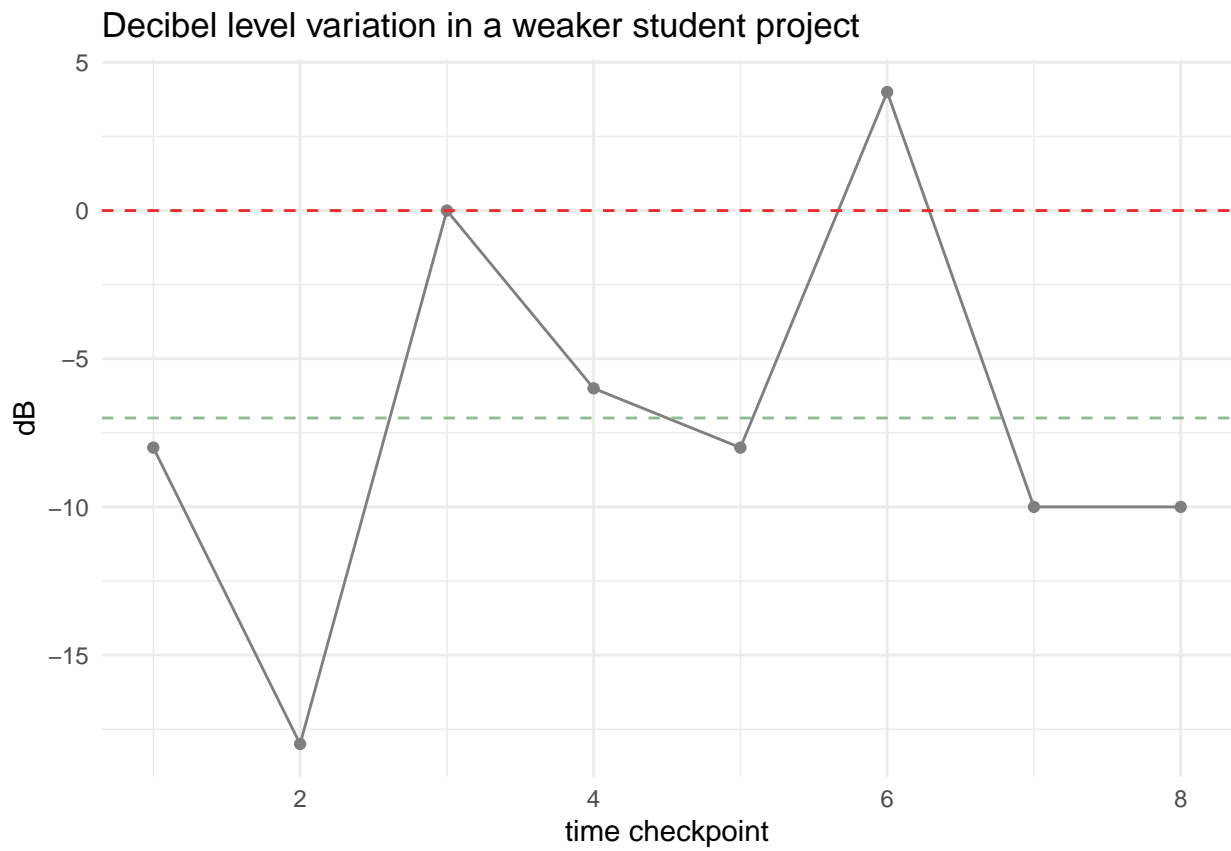
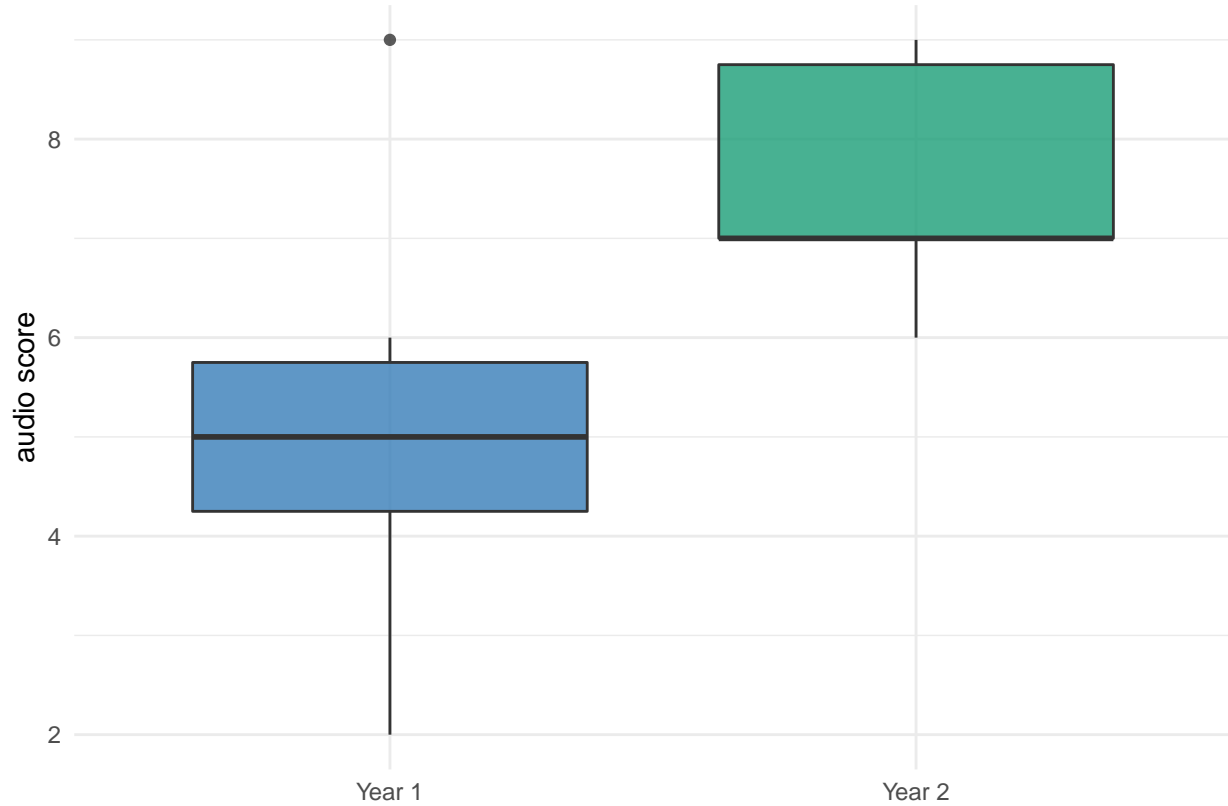


Figure 3-2: Comparing final project audio quality year over year

To compare last year's final projects to this year's, I assessed a random sample of 10 final projects from each. The projects were given a rating from 1 to 10 specifically reflecting the quality of audio. I considered the proper normalization of audio, appropriate dynamics (no huge peaks or troughs), and proper balance of background music, speech, ambient sound, archival footage, and voiceover audio levels.

All of the projects I examined this year had properly normalized audio levels, and the mean score increased from a 5 to a 7.6. None of the projects in Year 2 were in the extremely low range below a 5.



This was especially remarkable given the challenges related to COVID-19 and the move to remote instruction.

Reflection

With the advent of COVID-19 and the sudden, drastic changes all participants faced this program shifted gears, and I am so appreciative of that. It was so helpful to have a space to think aloud about how best to teach given the new realities. I feel lucky that my participation in this program and this bonkers school term happened to coincide. I sometimes felt isolated even before we were all confined to our homes.

That being said, I also valued the opportunity to reconsider this course which I inherited – possibly – because it was not a beloved course among the faculty who were asked to teach it.

I definitely plan to use the techniques we have been taught to organize my thinking about learning objectives and the assignments that connect to them. This kind of starting at the end has helped me make sure that all course objectives have corresponding assessments and vice versa.

I was pleased that assessing the student projects aligned with the vague sense I had that the changes I made to the course were leading to better projects. I feel validated that increased focus on an important skill from the course resulted in greater student competence.

Going forward, I plan to continue using the strategies we've learned to create a more cohesive course that builds from one assignment to the next.

Course Syllabus

Journalism 304 | Multimedia Reporting

Spring 2020 Syllabus

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Course description

The audience for your journalism will find and consume it through an ever-expanding and increasingly integrated range of media. Building on strong reporting and writing skills, you will also learn multimedia skills and knowledge to help you create work that takes full advantage of opportunities on the web, including mobile and social media.

This course is intended to help expand your vision of what a 'story' can be, and what 'published' means. While this course will help you navigate a number of different technologies, it is first and foremost a journalism course. So the focus will be on the journalism – the reporting and the story – not on the tools. However, you should leave with the background and skills to create multimedia journalism for publication across platforms.

You will learn the basics of creating online story packages: planning, pitching, reporting, editing and determining the best use of multimedia and visual presentation. You should be prepared to move seamlessly into future courses, where you will have the background and skills to create advanced multimedia story packages for publication.

Course objectives

- Collecting high quality audio
- Collecting high quality video
- Writing for the web
- Assembling publishable web packages
- Editing on the go under deadline pressure
- Using social media in a professional context
- Making good story choices
- Dissecting and learning from new story forms that emerge

Materials

The primary digital tool we'll be using is your smart phone, supplemented by equipment available via the school.

Assignments

Project 1: Using the tools we've cultivated for covering current events with multimedia you'll create a video with narration and animations highlighting an aspect of the 2019 Academy Awards.

Project 2: Combining images, audio and text. You will pitch a story of your choosing that will use multiple audio clips plus text to tell a complete story. You will capture multiple audio clips and present them in the text where they make sense, giving the reader a narrative that combines the two media.

Project 3: Liveblogging and breaking news. You will live tweet a newsworthy event on the NNN Twitter account, shoot photos from the event, capture and edit a relevant video using a mobile app like Adobe Rush and write a short wrap-up story for the web.

Final project: A video explainer that contains video, audio, photos and visualizations to elucidate a topic. This will be accompanied by a text story and short social media versions of the video.

Multimedia assignments/quizzes: Several smaller multimedia exercises related to online content, photography, video, data, mobile and graphics. These may be in-class assignments or assignments with a longer deadline. Some may be easy; some may be more complex. Some may be graded; some may not. But these will not be busy-work assignments; they will be designed to help you practice important skills.

Grading

Category	Percent of grade
Stories	40%
Final project	20%
Pitches	5%
Assignments	30%
Class participation and attendance	10%

Grading scale

A+	97-100
A	93-96
A-	90-92
B+	87-89
B	83-86
B-	80-82
C+	77-79
C	73-76
C-	70-72
D+	67-69
D	63-66
D-	60-62
F	59 or below

Attendance

Stuff happens. If you are going to miss class, let me know ahead of time and we'll work it out. But this class is as much workshop as lecture and the loss of hands-on time and the ability to learn from your fellow students is difficult to make up.

(Approximate) Class schedule

This may change a bit over the course of the semester as you and I dynamically adjust. Be ready to roll with that.

Date	In class
Jan 14	Course introduction
Jan 16	What do we mean by multimedia
Jan 21	Creating for the web
Jan 23	Current events videos
Jan 27	Video editing
Jan 29	Basic animations
Feb 4	More animations
Feb 6	State of the Union Project
Feb 11	Oscars project
Feb 13	Oscars project presentations
Feb 18	Quick turnaround video "Good enough" Intro to Adobe Rush
Feb 20	Speed production project
Feb 25	Audio for web intro
Feb 27	Audio skills practice
Mar 3	NO CLASS Audio project pitch meetings
Mar 5	Web publishing Using a content management system
Mar 10	Audio project in CMS due Audio project presentations
Mar 12	Prep for Perry Photo Challenge/Social Media coverage
Mar 17	More video skills
Mar 19	NO CLASS Video project pitch meetings
Mar 31	Long-form video
Apr 2	Present video story in CMS
Apr 7	Explainers, explained
Apr 9	NO CLASS Final project pitch meetings
Apr 14	Video frontiers
Apr 16	Social media
Apr 21	Data and visualization
Apr 23	Data and visualization
Apr 28	Final project lab time
Apr 30	Final project presentations

Academic integrity

Every student must adhere to the policy on academic integrity set forth in the UNL Student Code of Conduct as outlined in the UNL Bulletin. Students who plagiarize may receive a failing grade on an assignment or for an entire course and may be reported to the Student Judicial Review Board. The work a student submits in a class must be the student's own work and must be work completed for that particular class and assignment. Students wishing to build on an old project or work on a similar project in two classes must discuss this with both professors.

Academic dishonesty includes:

- handing in another's work or part of another's work as your own.
- turning in one of your old papers (including something you wrote in high school) for a current class.
- turning in the same or similar paper for two different classes.using notes or other study aids or otherwise obtaining another's answers for a quiz or an examination.

Anything and everything you include in your papers that comes from another source must be attributed with proper citation. That includes ideas and opinions. Plagiarism consists of using phrases, sentences or paragraphs from any source and republishing them without alteration or attribution. The sources include, but are not limited to, books, magazines, newspapers, television or radio reports, Web sites and other students' papers.

Students with disabilities

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact me for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation as determined by Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). This includes students with mental health disabilities like depression and anxiety. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide individualized accommodations to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with SSD which is located in 232 Canfield Administration (472-3787).

Diversity

The College of Journalism and Mass Communications values diversity, in the broadest sense of the word – gender, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, income, religion, education, geographic, physical and mental ability or disability, sexual orientation. We recognize that understanding and incorporating diversity in the curriculum enables us to prepare our students for careers as professional communicators in a global society. As communicators, we understand that journalism, advertising and other forms of strategic communication must reflect society in order to be effective and reliable. We fail as journalists if we are not accurate in our written, spoken and visual reports; including diverse voices and perspectives improves our accuracy and truthfulness. In advertising, we cannot succeed if we do not understand the value of or know how to create advertising that reflects a diverse society and, thus, appeals to broader audiences.

ACEJMC Competencies

The College of Journalism and Mass Communications is accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). The mission of ACEJMC is “to foster and encourage excellence and high standards in professional education in journalism and mass communications.” ACEJMC recommends that all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies.

This course addresses the following competencies:

1. Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the journalism profession, audience and purposes students serve;
2. Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work;
3. Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
4. Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
5. Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
6. Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.

One of ACEJMC’s principles is to promote student learning by assessing your achievement of the competencies listed above at the course and program level. After completing this course, students will be able to:

- Gain an awareness of the fundamental elements of journalistic ethics and the pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.
- Understand and apply the basic principles of Web and mobile writing, including:
 - How to shape stories that make sense for time-starved readers.
 - How to produce stories that are clearly and concisely written, appropriately structured and thoroughly written.
 - How to apply the basics of grammar, spelling, punctuation and AP style.
 - How to think of your audience and the audience needs (time-pressed, two-way conversation, etc.) as you produce stories for Web publication.
 - Use the basic principles of linking and curating to provide context and additional information on the Web. In other words, help the reader sort through the vast material on the Web to find information that matters.
 - Understand the basic principles of search engine optimization (SEO). Create Web-friendly headlines, sub-heads and links.
- Understand and apply how to use digital and social media tools for news gathering and distribution, including:

- Knowledge of enhanced digital reporting techniques.
 - Use of social media for reporting, distributing news, curating information and engaging the audience.
 - Verification of information.
 - Understand and apply the basics of how the Internet works, how to use very basic HTML code and how to use a content management system.
- Understand and apply how to augment a story with basic data journalism and simple visualizations through:
 - Basic data literacy, including where to find data, various common file types, importing data into a spreadsheet, basic data cleaning and normalization.
 - Basic analysis, including sorts, sums, minimum, maximum, rankings, measures of central tendency, percent change, rates and ratios.
 - Basic visualization for the Web, including elements of visual communication, chart choices, scale, sourcing, interactivity and embedding into a publication system.
- Understand and apply the principles of good visual and audio storytelling, including:
 - How to use photography and video to demonstrate action, reaction and emotion.
 - How best to watch, find and photograph subjects.
 - How to use light, framing, composition, positioning and sequencing in photography and video.
 - How to structure visual projects, including how to write a story script.
 - How to edit photographs, audio and video.
 - How to interview for visual storytelling, how to record sound and how to use narrative audio to add appropriate story details in support of interviews and visual elements.
 - How to write compelling captions for photographs. How to integrate visual information into cohesive visual communication, creating unity and balance within the image or images, and using visual communication to produce compelling multimedia stories.
- Understand the concepts of multimedia storytelling, including what elements are best for telling particular aspects of stories and how to provide layers and context with the different elements.