

JOUR 599: Copy Editing for
Cross-Platform Journalism

**Number of units:** 2.0

**Section:** 21341D

**Meeting:** ASC 228 Thursdays, 6:30-10:10 p.m., March 9-May 4

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**I. Course Description**

“There is something about words. In expert hands, manipulated deftly, they take you prisoner. Wind themselves around your limbs like spider silk, and when you are so enthralled you cannot move, they pierce your skin, enter your blood, numb your thoughts. Inside you they work their magic.”  **―**[**Diane Setterfield**](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/22665.Diane_Setterfield)**,**[**The Thirteenth Tale**](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/849453)

Words. This course, at its most basic, is about their power and utility and necessity. It’s also a course about the daunting challenge to use them well.

Whether you get your information from a piece of paper or the swipe of a finger, your capacity to learn, to understand and to feel is directly related to the words you see and hear. As a professional communicator, you will make thousands upon thousands of decisions about words. Those decisions should be easier if you have firm grasp of the fundamentals of language and an appreciation for the nuances of how your choices ensure accuracy, promote balance or provide context. (And this course will help in that regard.)

But writing well is a never-ending struggle.

Sometimes, your knowledge or your talent or your circumstances will cause you to come up short. Technology may get in your way. Coworkers can let you down. And, always, time will be your enemy.

So, this course is also about practicality and sensitivity — about honing your ability to adjust your decision-making about words to fit the circumstances. Is great writing a worthy goal? Sure. Is it smart to write for the ear as well as the eye? Of course. Should you be sensitive to tone, rhythm and pace in an effort to hone your voice? You bet. But, under deadline pressure, simply being adequate enough to get your point across without any major mistakes may be all you can truly expect.

Yes, the editor’s role in a newsroom focuses on quality assurance. Eliminating mistakes. Preventing embarrassment. Improving clarity. Promoting concision. Ensuring consistency.

But it’s also about helping writers overcome the endless hurdles they face in telling stories in ways that are as important, as impactful and as memorable as possible. The best writers know the value of a good editor in providing the polish that writing requires if it hopes to break through the indifference and impatience of its endlessly distracted audience.

This course will provide tips and best practices that should help any writer, whether the work is a printed story, an online blog or a script for a video or audio piece. It will focus on the value of language usage in credibility, so that poor grammar, incorrect word choices or erratic punctuation don’t undermine the power of the story or foster doubt about its accuracy.

And, of course, this course will also serve other practical functions as well. You’ll be expected to show knowledge of punctuation, grammar and the parts of speech. You’ll memorize some style rules. You’ll work to improve your speed and accuracy.

You’ll also discuss the importance of headlines and practice writing them for different circumstances. You’ll learn about teasers for print, online and broadcast. You’ll review story summaries. You’ll talk about photo captions. And you will discuss Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Social Media Optimization (SMO) too, and whether the necessity to generate clicks can get in the way of journalism’s basic mission to inform and educate the public.

Much of the course will focus on the details of writing, but it won’t ignore the larger issues of content and scope in journalism. The course covers story structure, for example, and it also explores the role of background information, the value of strong quotes and the importance of transitions.

Other topics include writing tone and context. The role of humor. The pros and cons of sentence length, pace and complexity. You will explore how to identify misleading references and avoid improper editorializing. And you will compare circumstances — the instances when narrative objectivity is essential versus the occasions when a more personal, conversational approach is warranted.

This course focuses on copy editing, but even if you never edit the words of anyone but yourself, you’ll come away with a greater appreciation of the essential role that language plays in journalism. If you write, you’ll benefit. If you want to write better, this course should help.

**II. Overall Learning Objectives and Assessment**

This course will explore the practice of editing in a journalistic context, honing students’ appreciation for grammar and precision in language to promote effective storytelling in U.S.-based print, broadcast and digital news media. Students will be required to learn the essentials of copy editing and display that knowledge on quizzes and exams. They will also hone their skills through practical editing simulations, often under deadline pressure.

**III. Description of Assignments**

Some assignments will be based on the workbook that accompanies the class textbook, “When Words Collide,” with additional exercises provided by the Instructors in an effort to simulate the challenges faced by today’s multiplatform editors.

**IV. Grading**

**a. Breakdown of Grade**

Homework and in-class assignments, including quizzes 50 percent

Practical application project 20 percent

Final exam 20 percent

Involvement\* 10 percent

**Total 100 percent**

**\*** May include points awarded for attending classes, actively participating in peer reviews, providing worthwhile examples for class discussion and adhering to class norms related to submission of work in appropriate ways.

**b. Grading Scale**

Students will earn points based on grading categories that relate to individual assignments and quizzes. When viewed as percentages of the total, those criteria essentially translate as follows:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 95 to 100%: A | 85% to less than 90%: B+ | 70% to less than 75%: C+ | 55% to less than 60%: D+ |
| 90% to less than 95%: A- | 80% to less than 85%: B | 65% to less than 70%: C | 50% to less than 55%: D |
|  | 75% to less than 80%: B- | 60% to less than 65%: C- | 45% to less than 50%: D- |
|  |  |  | 0 to less than 45%: F |

The total score for all assignments will be translated to a percentage when determining the final course grade based on the same breakdown as above.

**c. Grading Standards**

All assignments will be assessed on journalistic standards for attention to detail, knowledge of grammar, punctuation, word usage and AP style, attention to factual accuracy, and sensitivity to cultural bias.

**“A” exercises** are edited as close to a professional level as possible, with almost no errors in language or facts. Quiz scores and assignments reflect a thorough knowledge of grammar and AP style.

**“B” work** may include shortcomings in grammar, AP style knowledge or fact-checking that seem to relate to lack of experience rather than a lack of commitment.

**“C” work** contains multiple shortcomings in language and fact. Evidence suggests an indifference to detail or a lack of time devoted to learning the course material.

**“D” exercises** have an unacceptable number of errors, and may include instances in which the student introduced errors during the editing process. Major revision prior to distribution would be necessary.

**“F” work** shows little effort to complete an assignment in accordance with the standards of the class. Other specific offenses may result in an F grade on an assignment or in the course as a whole:

• Academic dishonesty, including failure to complete work based solely on the student’s individual knowledge of the information.

• Failure to turn in an assignment or attend a class in which a quiz or exam was administered.

**V. Assignment Submission Policy**

* All homework is to be turned in at the beginning of each class session. Homework assignments correspond directly to in-class material, so it’s important to keep up with the work.
* Class attendance and completion of all assignments and projects are vital.
* Most class sessions begin with a quiz based on reading assignments. It is the student’s responsibility to arrive each week fully prepared for these quizzes.
* Makeup work for full credit is allowed only with prior consent of the instructors. It is the student’s responsibility to document this approval in writing (such as attaching a copy of an email in which it was authorized). Makeup quizzes and assignments must be completed within one week of the original due date. Otherwise, a score of 0 will be recorded.
* Makeup work from an unexcused class session is allowed only in rare circumstances such as a last-minute emergency. Even so, a penalty of 50% will be assessed.
* Electronic submission of many assignments will be required. Details about the specifics of this process will be explained at the beginning of the semester.

**VI. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials**

* “When Words Collide” (*Ninth Edition), by Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald,* with “Student Workbook” *(Ninth Edition), by Tracy Ilene Miller*
* “The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law” *(2016 edition)*
* Dictionary: The following online dictionary will be the official reference for in-class assignments, homework, midterms and finals: Merriam-Webster: www.m-w.com.
* Recommended grammar reference text: The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style, *by Bryan Garner*
* Supplementary handouts and online reading assignments as directed by the instructors.

**VII. Laptop Policy**

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the [**Annenberg Virtual Commons**](http://vc.uscannenberg.org/) for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s [Information Technology Services](http://itservices.usc.edu/wireless/support/) website.

**BASIC COURSE OUTLINE**

**WEEK 1**

1. The role of the editor
2. ethics for editors
3. Introduction to STYLE

**WEEK 2**

1. LEGAL AND PRIVACY CONSIDERATIONS
2. bungled homonyms, MISplaced modifiers and other common language-usage mistakes

**WEEK 3**

1. PUNCTUATION
2. CONTENT EDITING

**WEEK 4**

1. Headline writing
2. Writing captions and summaries
3. being conversational and evocativE

**WEEK 5**

1. IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON EDITING PROCESS
2. DATA JOURNALISM FOR EDITORS
3. FACT-CHECKING AND PROOFREADING
4. GATEKEEPER ROLE OF EDITORS (AVOIDING HOAXES, MISUSED DATA, ETC.)

**WEEK 6**

1. Voice AND TONE
2. ACCURACY AND CLARITY
3. EDITING OF LONG-FORM JOURNALISM

**WEEK 7**

1. OVERFLOW DATE FOR ANY UNFINISHED MATERIAL
2. Review for final examination
3. live simulation of a breaking story, WITH A DEADLINE EDITING COMPONENT

**FINAL EXAMINATION DURING EXAM WEEK**

**VIII. Detailed Course Plan**

This course is being taught as a seven-week class for the first time during the spring 2017 term, and ad hoc revisions may be necessary at the instructors’ discretion as the course proceeds. But here is the expectation regarding specific details that will be covered from week to week, plus a rough schedule for homework and reading assignments:

**WEEK 1**

* The role of the editor today. Why writers need to be their own best editors.
* The ethics of editing. Developing a sensitivity to cultural biases (age, gender/orientation, race, socioeconomic status) and an eye for potential lawsuits. Handling corrections.
* Introduction to proofreading symbols and how to read the dictionary. Why a stylebook matters.

**In-class exercise:** Writing and editing skills test.

**Reading:** Chapters 1, 2 and 3 in “When Words Collide.”

**Homework:** Exercises 5, 6 and 8 in “When Words Collide” workbook.

**WEEK 2**

* Weighing privacy considerations, including photo use.
* Homonym hell: Knowing the difference between like-sounding words and when to use which. Farther and further. Gibe and jibe. Gantlet and gauntlet. Comprise and compose. Discreet and discrete. Disinterested and uninterested. Plus, the pitfalls of misused words: bucolic and bemused, begs the question and dilemma.
* Review of common problems in grammar, from subject-verb agreement to pronoun selection to possessives. Like versus as if and when to use that or which in the establishment of restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses. Parallelism in verb tenses. Misplaced modifiers.

**Review in-class exercise and homework from previous week.**

***AP Style quiz No. 1, Chapter A, capitalization, abbreviations and numbers.***

**In-class exercise:** Timed editing exercise to be completed in class.

**Reading:** Chapters 4-6 and Appendix A in “When Words Collide.”

**Homework:** Exercises 9 and 14 workbook.

**WEEK 3**

* A look at punctuation, from commas to semicolons to the best use of dashes and how all these elements play a part in the development of voice in writing. Plus understanding hyphens. Review in-class exercise and homework from previous week.
* Introduction to content editing. Editing for content issues (missing information, too much information, lack of clarity, gaps in logic) and story structure (poor intro, undeveloped nut graf, misfiring or unnecessary transitions), along with such language breakdowns as redundancy and word echoes. Help writers avoid stating the obvious.

**Reading:** Chapter 7 in “When Words Collide.”

***AP Style quiz Chapters B and C*In-class exercise:** Timed copyediting exercise to be completed in class.

**Homework:** Exercises 16, 19, 20, 21 and 22 in workbook.

**WEEK 4**

* Headline writing.
* Writing captions and summaries.
* The art of making headlines more conversational and evocative, especially for magazines and other long-form presentations.

**Reading:** Chapter 8 in “When Words Collide” plus supplementary material as provided by instructors.

**In-class exercise:** Headline writing and timed copy editing exercise to be completed in class.

***AP Style quiz, Chapters D through G***

**Homework:** Exercises 24 and 25 in workbook.

**WEEK 5**

* How technology has helped and hindered accuracy in online publishing. Newspaper copy editors and magazine fact-checkers are the safety nets in keeping errors from publication. What they check and how, and ways in which this process can be implemented for online sites. The importance of staying alert to hoaxes and misinformation provided by citizen journalists. When the process breaks down: The Rolling Stone scandal and others.
* Content editing for a burgeoning media world that focuses on dining, shopping, cultural events, home design, recreation and other pastimes.

**Reading:** Chapter 9 and all of Part II in “When Words Collide,” plus supplementary material as provided by instructors.

**In-class exercise:** Editing exercise to be completed in class.

***AP Style quiz, Chapters H through O***

**Homework:** Exercises 26 and 27 in workbook.

**WEEK 6**

* Recognizing voice in writing and when it’s speaking effectively and when it’s not. Why accurate reporting and precise language still matter. The problem of plagiarism. Plus, the business of editing. How to monetize your skills.
* Editing long-form pieces, the most challenging editing of all. Should long-form pieces be handled differently for the web than for print? Talking to writers upon conception of a story idea. The importance of organizing early on: How to structure a 4,000-word piece, and how the same principles apply across all platforms. Original long-form writing online. A look at award-winning websites that present long-form journalism.

**Reading:** Supplementary material as provided by instructors.

**In-class exercise:** Editing exercise.

***AP Style quiz Chapters P through Z***

**Homework:** Exercises 31 and 34 in workbook.

**WEEK 7**

* News judgment and practice simulation to be completed in class.
* Review for final examination.

**Reading:** Supplementary material as provided by the instructors

**Final Examination: 7 p.m., Thursday, May 4**

**IX. Policies and Procedures**

**Additional Policies**

**Internships**

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must by unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism class.

**Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**

**a. Academic Conduct**

*Plagiarism*

Presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* <https://scampus.usc.edu/b/11-00-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>.

*USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity*

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

**b. Support Systems**

*Equity and Diversity*

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* <http://equity.usc.edu/> or to the *Department of Public Safety* <http://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men*<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage <https://sarc.usc.edu/> describes reporting options and other resources.

*Support with Scholarly Writing*

A number of USC’s schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

*The Office of Disability Services and Programs* <http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html>provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.

*Stress Management*

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

*Emergency Information*

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

**X. About Your Instructors**

Les is the faculty adviser for the Daily Trojan. He has taught at the collegiate level for more than two decades, including three different courses at USC. He is a former copy editor, designer and graphics editor in daily newspapers, primarily at the Los Angeles Times. He also currently works in a university public information role and does occasional freelance design and editing work.

Nick is a senior consultant for a company that provides training and documentation related to CCI NewsGate, a widely used newspaper writing, editing and layout program. He is a former copy editor and designer in daily newspapers, with experience that includes the Los Angeles Times, San Francisco Chronicle and Dallas Morning News. He also does freelance editing, and print and web design.