SEMINAR IN HEALTH COMMUNICATION: MESSAGE DESIGN

CJT 771-001 Course Syllabus, Fall 2013
Monday 1-3:30 PM, 223 Grehan Building

“‘I’m against picketing, but I don’t know how to show it.’ Mitch Hedberg
‘I waited and waited, and when no message came, I knew it must have been from you.’ Ashleigh Brilliant

INSTRUCTOR CONTACT INFORMATION

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Office Address: 249 Grehan Building
Office Hours: Monday, 3:30-4:30 PM and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

You’ve heard, “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” Well, actually, it’s both. While in the daily world of “on the fly” interpersonal communication, we have only so much ability to craft what we say and how we say it, when we craft persuasive messages for interventions and campaigns, we have much, much, much more control. This seminar will consider approaches to constructing persuasive messages through an intensive examination of the literature investigating the structure, format, content, and function/effect of messages.

GENERAL COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. Students will become familiar with the conceptual and operational definitions of message “elements” (structure, format, content).

2. Students will become familiar with the outcome variables of interest (function/effect) in message design research.

3. Students will be aware of other communication elements (source, channel, receiver) operative in message design research and how they are considered in research design.

4. Students will be introduced to the theoretical and methodological approaches used to study message design and effects.

5. Students will investigate a specific area of message design research and propose a theoretically sound, methodologically viable, and intellectually stimulating empirical study to advance knowledge in the area.

6. Students will be provided practice in making a professional research presentation.

7. Students will become familiar with the major issues in message design research and develop a good sense of how various approaches either advance or impede scholarly work in this area.
REQUIRED BOOKS

Other readings as assigned (see below, pp. 5-8).

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE BOOKS

Communication

Writing

Methods/Statistics

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGY

This course operates as a graduate seminar. This means that students are expected to come to class having read and thought about assigned readings and that everyone will participate in an active and informed manner in class discussions. In designing this course, I have reviewed the communication and related literatures to identify empirical research that investigates some aspect of this thing we call a “message,” and I have organized the results of the search into topical categories ranging from the micro to the macro of message structure, format, and content. Where possible, I have tried to balance review pieces, meta-analyses, and original empirical research, all while keeping the amount of reading each week at a manageable level. My goal is to provide a comprehensive treatment of what a message is and does, while considering why it does what it does, and to whom and how. Tall order? Yep. That’s why I’m counting on you to jump right in and work with me to make this course engaging, challenging, stimulating, and, if we’re lucky, fun! At the end of this seminar, you should be able to recognize a message in a dark alley and know how to deal with it. ☺

PERSONAL NOTE

I am looking forward to having you in class and getting to know you as we work through our semester together. One of my goals is for you to leave this seminar with a broad background in message design issues (from the micro to the macro), along with an appreciation that the material covered in this class is just the “tip of the iceberg.” Another of my goals is for you to leave this seminar with an appreciation of the multiple aspects of scholarship—not merely an understanding of course content but also an appreciation of the importance of creative and theory-based hypothesis generation; careful and appropriate methodology and statistics; and, yes, sophisticated and pristine writing skills. To achieve these goals, I am committed to quality teaching. I will strive to make class time well organized, fully interactive, relevant, and intellectually stimulating. But I need you to commit to the course, as well! Come to class having read and thought about the week’s readings. A seminar like this works only if the instructor and students are fully committed to it. This can be a great experience. Please help me make it so! Along the way, if there is something that I can do to make this course more relevant to you, your work, or your research interests, let me know. Take advantage of my office hours and e-mail. I have an open door policy, and I’m willing to help. Just ask!
COURSE ASSIGNMENTS

Written Assignments

**Critical Summaries and Discussion Questions:** Students who are acting as discussion leaders (see below) will write “critical summaries” of one of the readings assigned that particular week [students must do different readings, so please coordinate with your discussion partner(s)]. Students who are not acting as discussion leaders will prepare a list of one discussion question per reading (this includes the first two weeks, when we have no assigned discussion leaders). See the “Critical Summaries and Discussion Questions” handout for detailed instructions.

**Research Proposal:** You will identify a message element that interests you. You will review in detail the research investigating this element, analyze its theoretical foundations, summarize/synthesize/criticize results, identify weaknesses/gaps/contradictions, and propose a research study to advance the knowledge in the particular area. See the “Research Proposal” handout for detailed instructions. Due Monday, November 25.

In-Class Presentations/Participation

**Message Examples:** Weeks 3-7 and 9-11, you will bring to class one example of one of the particular message elements under discussion. These messages may be on any topic (e.g., exercise, diabetes, tires, blue jeans) and may be print or video (no longer than 30 seconds, please). We will review these messages at the beginning of each class and draw on them as examples during our discussion. Finding messages like this may seem a daunting task at first blush, but it really isn’t: Messages are everywhere! Just keep your eyes open! Awareness is everything! (I really like exclamation points!!!! 😊)

**Discussion Leaders:** While all students are required to read and be prepared to discuss all of the reading assignments each week, students also will be assigned four weeks for which they will act as “discussion leader.” Any given week of readings will be assigned to at least two students so discussion is promoted and nobody is overwhelmed. The discussion should address the major issues/points made in the readings, should be responsive to questions asked by fellow students, and should attempt to synthesize ideas across readings (within and between topics, as applicable).

**Research Proposal Presentation:** You will make a formal, professional presentation of your research proposal in class. See the “Research Proposal Presentation” handout for detailed instructions.

COURSE EVALUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Written Assignments:</th>
<th>Critical Summaries (4 @ 50 each)</th>
<th>200</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussion Questions (8 @ 5 each)</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Proposal</td>
<td>250</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In-Class Presentations:</th>
<th>Discussion Presentations (4 @ 50 each)</th>
<th>200</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question Asking and Participation in Discussion (8 @ 10 each)</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Message Examples (8 @ 5 each)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Proposal Presentation</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
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Total Points 910*

With this point distribution, 54% of your grade is based on written work and 46% is based on presentations and participation.

Final grades will be determined using the standard 90-100% = A, 80-89% = B, 70-79% = C, <70%=E.

*Not a nice, round number. 😊
COURSE EXPECTATIONS

Attendance. I expect that you will attend class and be on time for each session. If you have a problem that prevents you from doing so, you should contact me before class begins. If you miss two or more classes, I will encourage you to withdraw from the course.

Writing Skills. I expect that you will demonstrate excellent writing skills. You should be able to compose grammatically correct sentences, write well-developed paragraphs, and express your ideas in a well-organized, coherent manner. (You also should be able to follow APA style.) If you have trouble with spelling, grammar, or punctuation, I will point it out to you. I will do so in the most face-saving way possible, but it is my responsibility as your instructor to point out mistakes, so if you make ‘em, I shall work with you to correct ‘em. This way, you won’t go through life mixing up “stationary” and “stationery.”

Oral Skills. I also expect that you will demonstrate excellent oral communication skills. You will be facilitating discussion of required course material and making a formal presentation. During discussions, you should be able to extemporaneously present your observations and arguments in a clear and concise manner. Your objective will be not only to help your fellow class members understand the material but also to show the relevance of your observations and arguments. I expect that formal presentations will be polished and, if appropriate, include polished handouts. Problems with spelling and punctuation are difficult to discern in an oral presentation, but if you tend to make grammatical or pronunciation errors, I will point those out to you, as well. That way, you won’t go through life sounding silly if you pronounce “segue” like it’s a hedge or you add “ir” to “regardless.”

Analytical Skills. I expect that you have some background in empirical research methods that will allow you to analyze the literature you will be reading. If your background is minimal, see me for some suggested readings.

Completion of Assignments. I expect that you will turn your assignments in on time. All written assignments are due at the beginning of class on the due date. You should proofread all assignments carefully before turning them in. Work that is challenged at the level of grammar, spelling, or punctuation will be penalized up to 10 percentage points. Work that does not meet APA standards also will be penalized up to 10 percentage points. Late work will be reduced by 10 percentage points for each day it is late. Poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part or a good reason for turning work in late. Also, please note that you are expected to complete reading assignments before due dates!

Academic Integrity. I expect that you will do your own work. Any student guilty of cheating or plagiarism as defined in the Students’ Rights and Responsibilities Code (http://www.uky.edu/StudentAffairs/Code/part2.html; especially see sections 6.3.1 on plagiarism and 6.3.2 on cheating) will be sanctioned with an E grade for the course. Although University of Kentucky policy stipulates the minimum penalty for an academic offense is a zero on the assignment, I have discretion as the instructor to impose a harsher penalty if I elect to—and in a graduate course, I elect to.

Reasonable Accommodation Policy. If you have a special need that requires accommodation or assistance, let me know as soon as possible but no later than Monday, September 23. You need to provide documentation. Then we will work to make reasonable accommodation so we can ensure you have the opportunity to fully demonstrate your abilities and benefit from this course.

Communication Graduate Student Association (GSA) Symposium. This is more of a professional development opportunity than a course expectation, but I had space on this page, so what the heck. Here is a message from the GSA (modified slightly for formatting):

The annual Communication Graduate Student Association Symposium is a student-sponsored event designed for graduate students to gain experience delivering a conference-style presentation of their research. Original research (completed studies and proposals), thematic reviews of literature, and theoretical essays/position papers may be submitted for presentation. This is also an excellent opportunity to receive feedback on your work before submitting to a professional conference. (NCA’s deadline is usually the end of March). Deadline for submission is Friday, January 17, 2014, by 11:59 pm. The symposium will be held Friday, February 21, 2014. To submit, send blind manuscripts (i.e., all author identifying information removed from the document) to Marjorie Buckner at marjorie.buckner@uky.edu.
PROBABLE SCHEDULE

September 9  
Introduction(s), Background, Overview, Assignments


September 16  
Theory and Measurement Issues in Message Design

O’Keefe, D. J. (2013). The relative persuasiveness of different message types does not vary as a function of the persuasive outcome assessed: Evidence from 29 meta-analyses of 2,062 effect sizes for 13 message variations. Communication Yearbook, 37, 221-249.

September 23  
Arguments and Evidence (message example due)

September 30  Argument Structure (message example due)


October 7  Narrative and Statistical Forms of Evidence (message example due)


October 14  Figurative Language (message example due)

October 21  Powerful/Powerless Language (message example due)


October 28  Catch Our Breath/Take Stock/Research Proposal Discussion Day


November 4  Emotions (message example due)


November 11  Message Sensation Value (message example due)


November 18  

Message Framing (message example due)


November 25  

Tailored Messaging


December 2  

Macro- and Micro-level Design Considerations


December 9 and 16  

Research Proposal Presentations