

Communications Course: Writing as a Christian Practice

Jason Byassee
Vancouver School of Theology
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Course time and place: Tuesdays 9am-12pm, Room 205

Instructor contact: jbyassee@vst.edu & 604.828.3745.

Goals of the course:

One of the key roles of a leader of any organization is to define reality. What is going on? Where is God? Who are we called to be? And how do Christians, as those who worship and feast on the incarnate Word, deploy their own words with passion and care? The course will deal with both theologies of writing and actual practices of communicating in a variety of genres. By the end, students should have a sense of their giftedness as communicators who lead (and vice-versa) for the sake of thriving communities on the way to God's intentions for humanity.

The course will have a focus on writing—understood expansively, to include social media, website work, and other forms of media.

To learn how to communicate well, we first have to learn how to *see* well. The first questions in writing are not the 5 w's (who, what, where, when, why, sometimes how) of journalism, but the question, "What is going on?" This course will teach the skills of seeing, and then writing, the truth. It is designed for future ministers, theologians, and other leaders. The task of writing is central to these vocations: ministers need to write sermons, newsletters, pastoral admonitions and even thank-you cards. Theologians often feel called to write for an audience beyond their fellow trained academicians. We will foster the skills necessary to communicate to fellow ministers in Christian media or to an occasionally-interested, occasionally hostile outside world. It is the church's task to build up members and neighbours in love, to do evangelism, to advocate for social justice, in short, to announce and embody God's kingdom. This course will help us all do those tasks better by making journalistic writing a central strength of our various ministries.

Course Objectives

- 1- To analyze and describe what makes for good writing in a variety of genres.
- 2- To articulate a theology of writing and communication more broadly both in and for the sake of the church and for wider publics.
- 3- To submit a piece of writing or other media for possible publication

Required reading: academic material

Books to buy

Stanley Fish *How To Write a Sentence: And How to Read One* (Harper Paperbacks, 2012).

Freedman, Samuel. *Letters to a Young Journalist* (Perseus, 2006).

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (Anchor, 1995).

Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

Chapters & articles (all on moodle)

Anderson, David Earle, "Acceptance of RNA Lifetime Achievement Award," September 11, 2004, on blackboard.

St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 15-42.

Birkerts, Sven "Afterword to the 2006 Edition," in *The Gutenberg Elegies* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2006), 231-250.

Crouch, Andy. "Gestures and Postures," chapter 5 of *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 2008).

Elzweig, Matthew, "Questions for the Questioner," *New York Press* (October 10, 2007), <http://www.nypress.com/article-17317-questions-for-the-questioner.html>.

Fagerberg, David W. "The Essential Chesterton," in *First Things* (March 2000), at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2007/01/the-essential-chesterton-17>.

Lash, Nicholas. "Ministry of the Word," *New Blackfriars* 6 (1987), 472-483.

Niebuhr, H. Richard. *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 2001), chapter 6, 190-218.

_____. "The Meaning of Responsibility," in *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1963), 47-68.

O'Connor, Flannery, "Greenleaf," and "The Displaced Person," In *The Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1995), 311-334 & 194-235.

_____. "The Fiction Writer & His Country," and "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday, 1995), 25-35 & 154-168.

Orwell, George. "Politics and the English Language," in *The Norton Reader: An Anthology of Expository Prose* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 353-364.

Stegner, Wallace, "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood," "Thoughts in a Dry Land," and "A Letter to Wendell Berry," in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 3-21, 45-56 & 207-213.

Steinfelds, Peter, "Constraints of the Religion Reporter," *Nieman Reports* (Summer, 1993), 3-5 & 55.

Doug Underwood, *From Yahweh to Yahoo!: The Religious Roots of the Secular Press* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 19-114.

Yoder, John Howard. "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of Christ and Culture" in Glen Stassen, et al., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 31-90.

_____. "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald, 1998), 127-140.

Journalistic Exemplars (this list could expand indefinitely!)

David Brooks. *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

Alan Jacobs. "A Commonplace Book," *First Things* (May 2008), 14-15:
http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=6213.

Joel Lovell. "The Late Great Stephen Colbert," *GQ* (August 17, 2015),
<http://www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story>

Marilynne Robinson "Fear," *New York Review of Books* (Fall 2015),
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/sep/24/marilynne-robinson-fear/>

Sherry Turkle *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin, 2015).

Douglass Todd, ed. *Cascadia: The Elusive Utopia* (Ronsdale, 2008).

Course Requirements

1) Class presence and participation

2) Report on one of the academic readings. Write an 800-word response to one of the readings early in the class (we'll divide up readings on the first day). These should *engage* the argument of the writer. That is, not just summarize, but argue against or with the writer's thesis and assess its import for Christians' participation in journalism. You'll read this out loud in class and kick off discussion.

3) Report on an individual journalist: we learn first by watching others. So choose a religion writer whose work you admire and would like to live into. Read 10-12 of her or his pieces over

the course of several years. You will present on this writer in class, describing the writer's choice of topics, particular theological or political slant (insofar as you can tell), shifts during their career, etc. Conclude with criticisms and reasons for praise. You will present on your writer in class and turn in a 1500 word report to me. Some suggested journalists to write about: Gustav Niebuhr, Spengler/David Goldman, Jody Bottum, Jon Meachum, Nicholas Kristof, Cathleen Falsani, Jeff Sharlett, Garry Wills, Christopher Hitchens, Adelle Banks, Eliza Griswold, Kenneth Woodward, Christopher Hedges, Paul Elie, Ross Douthat, Amy Sullivan, Dianne Winston, Lauren Winner, Ron Reed, Sarah Bessey, Peter Chattaway, Leah Kostamo—or one of your choice (no one who works at VST please). Please clear your choice with me, as I want to avoid having multiple reports on the same writer (first come, first served!).

4) Report on a religious publication: imagine you've been asked to write for a publication. But you don't know much about it. Read the magazine or newspaper or religion section going over the last year or so. What issues concern this publication? What's its theological slant? Who is its imagined audience? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Choose carefully—you will write your feature article as though it were a submission for this publication. Again, present me with a 1500-word paper and plan to present in class. Some options: *United Church Observer*, *Presbyterian Record*, *Touchstone*, *Anglican Journal*, *Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Books & Culture*, *Sojourners*, *First Things*, *The Other Journal*, *Geez*, *Image*, *The Sun*, *Washington Post's On Faith, Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, *Religion Dispatches*, *Get Religion*, religion sections of *Time*, *Newsweek*, coverage in *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Maclean's*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, or other denominational publications (See me if you'd like to review something not on this list, it's very flexible).

5) Blog: everyone should participate in the class blog (available on moodle) at least once a week (with one skip). By "participate" I mean both 1) two original posts, say, on a current event at the intersection of faith and media, or on one of our readings for the class. Posts can be brief (as few as 300 words) or long (no more than 700 to be effective really). To be good they need to make a substantive point in a readable way. We will divvy up who posts which week on the first day of class. **And** 2) The other form of participation is a comment on someone else's post. The weeks you don't post an original entry, please comment at least once.

These posts and comments will be private, and so readable by class members but not outsiders (eg. by future employers!). Feel free to double dip with the blog: for example, the week you present on a secondary reading you'd be wise to post on that (with something original, of course). We may discuss the blogs in class.

6) Feature: Write a 3000 word feature as a final project (word count flexible—it will depend on what publication you imagine or actually plan to submit to). All previous class discussion—of how to see, book reviewing, interviewing, opinion writing and so on will go into this work. I'll help the best pieces be submitted to publications.