

**COM 110, Digital Information in the Contemporary World
Spring 2011 Semester
CUNY Online BA in Communication & Culture**

Required, Information Literacy, General Education course

3 credits

Prerequisites: none

What does it mean to learn – to inquire, to investigate, to collaborate, to research – online? In this class, students will propose answers to these questions by exploring new communications technologies and probing their impact on contemporary understandings of identity and community. In addition to readings on these issues, there will be online discussions, writing, group work, and other activities organized around learning and practicing problem-solving skills that require finding, examining, and evaluating online resources.

Instructor: Prof. Wendy Williams (wendy.williams@sps.cuny.edu)

[Note: my reply may come from a different address.]

Learning Objectives

In this course, students will:

- Learn and practice critical thinking skills that require finding, examining, evaluating, and contributing to online resources.
- Access and navigate resources for online research and collaboration for academic, professional, and social communication.
- Evaluate and differentiate among scholarly, news, and popular sources of information online and use them appropriately.
- Analyze how the format in which information appears may affect how it is understood or can be used.
- Practice visual and quantitative literacy skills, and complete a major project requiring collaborative (group) learning.
- Define a research topic, formulate research questions, locate appropriate sources, and refine the research topic based on the availability of relevant information resources.
- Create a formal written project in digital format and integrate appropriate illustrations and/or audio-visual enhancements and links to web sources.
- Consider best practices for interacting with information online, and practice writing for various types of media, including wikis, blogs, social networking sites, and discussion boards, as well as formal research projects.
- Communicate in varying styles, evaluating and selecting the appropriate register for their audience and the information being conveyed.
- Demonstrate an understanding of ethical, legal, and social issues surrounding plagiarism, copyright, and intellectual property and apply principles of academic integrity in their use of information.
- Manage information effectively to provide evidence for a claim, both individually, and as a member of a group.

- Integrate digital information into their writing, using correct styles to quote, paraphrase, attribute, and cite information.

Textbooks: none (all readings will be done free online or via library course reserve)

Requirements: Be aware that the due dates given in the Calendar now may be subject to change during the semester. You'll need to **stay tuned in to our course almost every day** to make sure you know where we are and that you're participating fully. The readings listed below are also subject to changes and additions, but everything will be available online (**no books to purchase**). There will be a series of short assignments along the way, generally involving a group discussion on the discussion board; also, group blogs will be created (more to follow). We will experiment with using the blog and wiki tools for other assignments, too, to give you a chance to interact with and learn more about your classmates before it comes time to choose groups for the final project. The final project will involve research on a relevant issue. This will be a group project, and will include an interim paper or discussion outlining a work plan, detailing how the group will analyze the conceptual issues and literature. The final result will be presented in the form of a wiki and will be a substantial part of your grade.

Other readings: We will start off by reading a piece of short fiction with technology as a theme, within the genre of science fiction, a short story by Bruce Sterling. This is freely available online, as are most of the readings. The other readings will be available to you with your password link to our online library, so there is no need to purchase any texts for this course. You should, however, make sure right away that you can access the library pages with your student ID. If you have problems, check with the help desk right away at helpdesk@sps.cuny.edu.

A few rules: You should **plan to log on to our site almost every day** throughout the semester. Do not let any block of time go by without checking in, or you risk falling behind. Most assignments will last seven days, and usually the work flow goes from Monday morning through Sunday night, with new assignments appearing on Monday mornings and due by midnight on the following Sunday. But many weeks will not fit neatly into that pattern, and you should print out both this and the short Interactive Syllabus to keep you tuned in to assignments and due dates, bearing in mind that dates are subject to change. **Do the readings first** and post your response to the discussion board within the first two to three days of each new week in order to have time for an asynchronous (not in real time) discussion as the week goes on. So, for example, if you post by Wednesday, and someone responds on Thursday, then you'll have time to reply to their post by Friday, and so forth, until a new topic comes up in the week ahead. **As experienced online students will tell you, be sure not to procrastinate!**

Tips for communicating with me: Because our topic is communication in the digital era, we will be drawing distinctions between different levels of communication online. You can begin by keeping our communications somewhat more formal (or businesslike, if you will) than a text message to a friend. You may call me Prof. Williams, or Ms. Williams, or Wendy, but **every email you send me should include a greeting and a signature, and come from your school email address**. Also, please note that I am teaching two sections of this course, so it will make my response time faster if you

remind me every time which section you are in (either COM 110-03 or 110-04).

[This is only for emailing from your SPS webmail page. If you are writing to me from the Communication page of our course site, Blackboard will automatically put this info in the subject line.] You will not need to email me any assignments, as all work will be posted on our Blackboard site, but feel free to email me with questions at any time. I will try to respond within one day, and **if you don't hear from me within 24-36 hours, feel free to re-send** your email, in case your original (or my reply) went awry somehow. We will also have a discussion board [DB] forum for posting questions that you think may apply to others, where your question and my answer will be available to the whole class.

A word about grades, and group work: The biggest part of each student's grade will be based on individual contributions, especially to online discussions on the Discussion Board, as well as posts to the group blogs, and other assignments. We will also have some group work. The final group project will be done in groups, and that will be a substantial part of your grade. We will have some smaller assignments along the way that will give you a chance to get used to group work and to get to know your fellow students well. Students should remember that all group work is visible in the course site – which is to say that group discussions and file-sharing are accessible to the instructor. If you don't pull your weight, that will be obvious – and in a way that would never be possible in a classroom-based course (one of many things about the class-work here pertinent to the course's focus).

Weekly Discussions: A lot of our work will be focused on discussing the readings on the discussion board, so here are some tips for doing that effectively:

Your contribution to each forum on the discussion board should be thoughtful and substantive in order to get the best mark for that topic. Mentioning something specific you learned about (or agree or disagree with) from the readings is a good way to show you have done them and to give your entry substance. Since we do not have the opportunity for you to raise your hand and speak out in class, you can make all your posts a bit more formal and complete than you would in a brick-and-mortar classroom. You can show that you have 'gotten' the reading and strike the right tone for this course by making your DB (discussion board) post about it more like an essay, not at all like a casual text message.

You should try to keep bringing in the work and readings so far into any discussion, and try to give the background to and reasons for any point you want to make. Just giving an off-the-cuff opinion that does not reflect the coursework to date will diminish the value of your DB entry. Try to post your DB entry as early in the days devoted to a topic as possible, so that others will have time to respond, and then check back later to respond to them. **Ideal DB participation will include your own substantive entry, remarks posted to what others have written, plus a response from you to anything that others said in response to your original entry.**

Course Outline

Unit 1. 1/28-1/31

Introductions

Unit 2. 2/1-2/6

Topic: Computer Mediated Communication

Task: Talking about communication technology -- does it make it harder or easier to be "human"?

Reading: Bruce Sterling short story, "[Maneki Neko](#)"

Unit 3. 2/7-2/13

Topic: Blogs and Wikis

Task: Discuss web 2.0 forms and what is new about them, how they are evolving; choose group blog topic for the rest of the semester

Readings:

- 1) [Generations Online](#)
- 2) A [Wired](#) article
- 3) "[Following the Wikipedia Controversy](#)" by Michel-Adrien Sheppard (December 14, 2005).
- 4) Watch screencast about the [Heavy Metal Umlaut page](#) in Wikipedia.
- 5) A Pew Internet report on [Wikipedia use](#) today

Unit 4. 2/14-2/20

Topic: Online research

Task: take Bare Bones Tutorial online and write mini-research paper; improve search skills and evaluation of sources; discuss research process

Reading: [Bare Bones tutorial](#)

Unit 5. 2/22-2/27 (**no class 2/21**)

Topic: IP and Copyright, Free Culture

Task: Learn about copyright and intellectual property rights; discuss implications for digital age

Reading: chapter 10, "Property," from Lawrence Lessig's [Free Culture](#)

Unit 6. 2/28-3/6

Topic: Plagiarism

Task: Read about and discuss plagiarism and reliability of online resources, and make self-critique of paper from Unit 4, in terms of proper sourcing and credibility of sources

Readings:

- 1) What Is Plagiarism? ([History News Network](#) site)
- 2) Plagiarism and the Web ([Western Illinois U](#) site)
- 3) Plagiarism: What It Is and How to Recognize and Avoid It ([Indiana U.](#) site)
- 4) How do I know if the information I find is reliable? ([MIT](#))
- 5) Critical evaluation of resources ([UC Berkeley](#))

Unit 7. 3/7-3/13

Topic: Visualizations, learning to "read" visual media

Task: Choose one website to evaluate and discuss in small groups; report back to entire class

- 1) Smithsonian's [Ocean Portal](#)
- 2) Rhode Island School of Design [exhibit on engravings](#)
- 3) NASA's [website](#)
- 4) Robie House by Frank Lloyd Wright [restoration project](#)
- 5) Repoweramerica.org, an organization [fighting global warming](#)

Unit 8. 3/14-3/20

Topic: Social Networks

Task: Choose at least four articles to read, and discuss (including summaries of articles as everyone reads different selections)

Readings:

1. [The burden of Twitter](#), Steven Levy, Wired (January 19, 2009)
2. [The Twitter experiment](#), David Pogue New York Times (January 29, 2009)
3. [Why Social Networks are Good for the Kids](#), Sarah Lacy, TechCrunch.com (February 24, 2009)
4. [The Revolution Will Be Twittered](#), Marc Ambinder, The Atlantic (June 15, 2009)
5. [The Shrinking Generational Digital Divide](#), Sami Hassanyeh, AARP, on Nonprofit Technology Network (August 25, 2009)
6. [Short Outbursts on Twitter? #Big Problem](#) Laura M. Holson, New York Times (October 7, 2009)
7. [Can the law keep up with technology?](#) Manav Tanneeru, CNN (November 17, 2009)
8. [Spy vs. Spy on Facebook](#), Monica Hesse, Washington Post (December 7, 2009)
9. [Why Twitter will endure](#), David Carr, New York Times (January 1, 2010)
10. [The virtual mob spreading spite online](#), Harry Wallop, The Telegraph (February 15, 2010)
11. [Ceasing to Exist: Three Months in the Social Media Detox Ward](#), Edan Lepucki, The Future of the Book (April 5, 2010)
12. [Web sites once used for fun are now a front line in product promotion](#), Robin Carol, Tufts Daily (April 5, 2010)
13. [Google and Facebook's Privacy Illusion](#), Bruce Schneier, Forbes.com (April 6, 2010)
14. [6 Career-Killing Facebook Mistakes](#), Erin Joyce, SF Gate, reproduced in Yahoo Finance (April 6, 2010)
15. [Trust and reputation systems: redistributing power and influence](#), Craig Newmark, SF Gate (April 6, 2010)
16. [How I learned to Love Twitter](#), Margaret Atwood, The Guardian (7 April, 2010)
17. [Small Change: Why the revolution will not be Tweeted](#), The New Yorker, 10/4/10
18. [Weak ties, Twitter, and Revolution](#), Wired, 9/29/10

Unit 9. 3/21-3/27

Topic: Texting lingo and the evolution of formal and informal communication (

Task: read two chapters of David Crystal's book and discuss implications for everyday communication

Reading:

Crystal, D. "Ch. 2. How weird is texting," in [Txtng: The Gr8 Db8](#). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 12-33.

Crystal, D. "Ch. 3. What makes texting distinctive?," in [Txtng: The Gr8 Db8](#).

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 36-62.

Unit 10. 3/28-4/3

Topic: History of the development of the internet

Task: Read a chapter from Castells and draw conclusions about what factors contributed to early development of the internet

Reading:

Castells, Manuel. "Ch. 1: Lessons from the History of the Internet." The Internet Galaxy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. 8-35.

Unit 11. 4/4-4/10

Topic: Digital Information and Learning

Task: Read selections by Steven Johnson and Sherry Turkle and discuss how digital information affects learning and cognition

Readings:

1) Johnson, Steven. "Games," in Everything Bad Is Good For You. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005. 15-63.

2) Turkle, Sherry. "Ch. 5. The Fellowship of the Microchip" in Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millenium. Eds. Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco and Desiree Baollan Qin-Hillard. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004. 96-113.

Unit 12. 4/11-4/16

Topic: 'Ridiculously Easy Group-Forming' – how digital information facilitates group formation and activism

Task: Read selections from Clay Shirky and discuss

Readings:

Shirky, Clay. "Ch. 1. It takes a village to find a phone," in Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. 1-24.

Shirky, Clay. "Ch. 2. Sharing anchors community," in Here comes everybody: the power of organizing without organizations. New York: Penguin Press, 2008. 25-56.

Unit 13. **4/17-4/26**

Spring Break

Unit 14. 4/27-5/3

Topic: Globalization and cross-cultural variation on internet use and access, especially in terms of education

Task: Choose one of three readings, discuss in group blogs (group 3 searches for more related articles); report back to class

Readings: (choose one)

1) Rees-Mogg, William. "How Google will Stasify all our lives." Mail on Sunday 27 May 2007. 63.

2) Sandywell, Barry. "Monsters in cyberspace cyberphobia and cultural panic in the information age." Information, Communication & Society 9.1 (2006): 39-61

3) Van De Bunt-Kokhuis, Sylvia. "Globalization and the freedom of knowledge." Higher Education in Europe 29.2 (2004): 269-284.

Unit 15-18, 5/4-5/27

Final Group Projects take shape in increments: choose teams and topics, write proposal, do research, prepare final wiki presentations

Examples of past final wiki projects: 1) Rise of online news and decline of newspaper industry, 2) Social Networking and Resistance Movements, 3) the economics of search engines

Policies

Please familiarize yourself with the [Academic Handbook](#), particularly the sections dealing with **Academic Integrity** (especially pages 32-34). You are responsible for learning about plagiarism and how to avoid it. I will do my best to help with this, but the responsibility falls on you as a writer and a student. Take it seriously, and remember that, as the Academic Handbook notes,

Academic dishonesty is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Cheating, forgery, plagiarism and collusion in dishonest acts undermine the educational mission of the City University of New York and the students' personal and intellectual growth. The School of Professional Studies students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity, and to uphold its ideals. Ignorance of the rules is not an acceptable excuse for disobeying them. Any student who attempts to compromise or devalue the academic process will be sanctioned. Sanctions may include failing grades, suspension, and expulsion. Engaging in acts of academic dishonesty can end a student's school career, have an impact on the person's professional life and jeopardize future career goals.

Of specific concern in our class is the avoidance of plagiarism, so I am including part of the relevant passage here (note: the bracketed and bolded portions are my own, adding further clarity in regard to our course):

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the inclusion of someone else's words, ideas or data as one's own work without acknowledging the source. When a student submits work for credit that includes the words, ideas or data of others, the source of that information must be acknowledged through complete, accurate, and specific references and, if verbatim statements are included, through quotation marks **[or block indented text]** as well. By placing his/her name on work submitted for credit, the student certifies the originality of all work not otherwise identified by appropriate acknowledgments. Plagiarism covers unpublished as well as published sources, including internet-accessed materials. Examples of plagiarism include but are not limited to:

- Quoting another person's actual words, complete sentences or paragraphs, or entire piece of written work without acknowledgment of the source. Copying another person's actual words without the use of

quotation marks and footnotes. **[Note: this includes “cutting and pasting” any amount of material from the internet.]**

- Using another person's ideas, opinions, or theory even if it is completely paraphrased in one's own words, without acknowledgment of the source,
- Borrowing facts, statistics or other illustrative materials that are not clearly common knowledge without acknowledgment of the source,
- Copying another student's essay test answers,
- Copying, or allowing another student to copy a computer file that contains another student's assignment, and submitting it, in part or in its entirety, as one's own,
- Working together on an assignment, sharing the computer files and programs involved, and then submitting individual copies of the assignment as one's own work,
- Failing to acknowledge collaborators on homework and laboratory assignments
- Submitting as your own any academic exercises (e.g., written work, printing, musical composition, painting, sculpture, etc.) prepared totally or in part by another.

Important College Resources:

- Student Services are available through the [CUNY Online Baccalaureate website](#)
- [Online Tutoring](#)
- [Library Services](#) (requires username and password emailed to your SPS email upon enrollment in the program)
- [Disability Services](#)
- [Help Desk \(technical support\)](#)
- [Academic Policies Handbook](#)