

Cornell University  
Department of City & Regional Planning

**CRP 3850/5850 Communication Skills for Planners**  
**Fall 2009**

West Sibley 208 on Mondays and Wednesdays from 8:40-9:55 AM

Instructor: Dr. Katia Balassiano, AICP

Office Hours: West Sibley 217 on Tuesdays 1:00-3:00 PM and Fridays 9:00-11:00 AM,  
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### **I. Course Overview**

This three-credit course is designed to help students learn and practice the communication skills needed for employment in a public or private planning office. Using information gathered from local planning authorities, students will be asked to write extensively and make oral presentations with, and without, PowerPoint. Exercises offer students the opportunity to practice taking minutes, write memos pertaining to actual subdivisions and planning department budgets, and draft press releases and scopes of work. PowerPoint presentations developed for other courses will be critiqued and improved. Another major component of planning practice involves working with groups in public forums; as such, discussions will include how to plan for and manage meetings and large workshops using, for example, annotated agendas.

Communication skills used in academic settings differ somewhat from those required of planning practitioners. Municipal planners, for example, rarely write papers summarizing the literature on a particular subject. Instead, they write short memos - in clear, simple, widely accessible language - documenting the status and history of a subdivision. They write letters and grant proposals requesting funds to update a plan or to fund a community improvement project. Presentations before decision-makers may, or may not, involve PowerPoint; and obviously, it's not a grade at stake, but a department's budget or community's ability to defend or further livability. Rather than presentations being greeted with polite applause, planners should occasionally expect interruptions or hostile follow-up questions. This course should serve as a safe place where students can honestly evaluate their public speaking and writing skills and work diligently to improve them.

### **II. Learning Objectives**

Students who successfully complete this course will:

1. Have practiced writing certain documents regularly produced by community planners, including meeting minutes, memos to planning boards pertaining to development plans, letters and memos to city councils regarding budgets and requests for project support/funds, and press releases.
2. Know the components of written documents that communicate clear messages to readers and listeners persuasively and be able to assess their own writing abilities and the abilities of others.

3. Have had the opportunity to improve their public speaking and presentation skills by practicing them individually and in groups, be able to assess their own speaking skills, and learn from the guidance provided by their peers and instructor.
4. Know the components of a persuasive or otherwise compelling oral presentation, including how to make effective use of PowerPoint.
5. Be able to convey criticism in a constructive and polite manner.
6. Have interacted with professional planners and collected information from planning offices, and have organized that information into presentations and documents similar to those regularly produced by planning practitioners.
7. Know how to prepare for and manage public workshops through the use of annotated agendas.

### **III. Assignments and Grades**

This is a hands-on course designed to make students of planning comfortable and competent in the workplace. Students will learn by doing, critiquing, being critiqued, and doing again. Readings, short handouts, class instructions, and grading rubrics will guide written and oral assignments. Many assignments are structured such that students practice presenting information orally before the written component is submitted for a grade. In fact, there is only one graded oral assignment, but there are many opportunities to improve oral presentation skills throughout the semester. Students should be aware, however, that the participation grade will reflect not only the degree to which they participate in classroom discussions, but also how well prepared they are for the oral presentations.

Students will be writing and practicing presenting based on information often collected from government staff and files. Obtaining information from government offices can be easy or frustrating. The key to productive inquiries is often tenacity and finding the right person to assist. Interacting with government officials can be time consuming, but please consider such interactions as opportunities to practice communicating and learn how government functions.

The assignments and maximum points that can be accumulated for each are listed below. Several assignments are based on activities that may be spread over several days, and therefore, the subsequent due dates vary. A student-specific spreadsheet providing the specific due date of assignments will be distributed on the second day of class.

***Assignment One due Sept 14:*** Submit typed minutes from the Planning Board meeting seen on YouTube.

***Assignment Two due after the PowerPoint presentation (Sept 23, Sept 28, or Sept 30):*** Submit a black & white paper copy of an improved PowerPoint presentation with notes on each slide documenting what was changed and why.

***Assignment Three due after the oral presentation (Oct 14 or Oct 21):*** Look through a file of a subdivision or development plan submission in a planning office. Make a list of everything found in the file and write a detailed history of the submission (a general review of the proposal, what was submitted and when, outstanding issues, how the proposal changed over time, etc.). Students may wish to visit the site proposed for development. Use the information gathered to

draft a brief memo to the Planning Board explaining the proposal's history and current status. Submit both the detailed history and memo.

**Assignment Four due Oct 19:** Submit minutes from a Planning Board/Commission meeting you attended. Note: Assignment Ten may be linked to attending this meeting

**Assignment Five due after the Council letter is read aloud (Nov 2, Nov 4, or Nov 11):** Obtain a budget for two consecutive years from a planning department. Prepare a cover letter to the Council discussing your proposed budget, including what has changed and why, your department's achievements, future plans, and whatever else you feel is important to highlight and persuade the Council to approve your proposed budget. The week after the letter is read aloud in class and critiqued by your classmates, you will submit the revised letter (2-3 single-spaced pages).

**Assignment Six due Nov 16:** Submit a press release advertising the purpose of the workshop you designed on November 2 and inviting the public attend.

**Assignment Seven due Nov 16:** Submit an annotated agenda for a Comprehensive Plan workshop. Assume this first of several workshops will last two hours and be attended by 50 to 75 people. Document your assumptions, e.g., whether city staff or consultants will be used as additional facilitators, the forum setting, supplies, etc.

**Assignment Eight due Nov 18:** Get a copy of the "real" minutes of the Planning Board/Commission meeting you attended and write a one page single-spaced summary comparing your minutes to the "real" minutes.

**Assignment Nine due a week after the new project proposal was presented (Nov 30 or Dec 2):** Submit a proposal for a new project in the form of a letter or memo to the Council (5-6 single-spaced pages).

**Assignment Ten due Nov 30 and Dec 2:** Each student will demonstrate his/her oral presentation skills by reflecting on the Planning Board meeting he/she attended earlier during the course (or a second one attended) and evaluating the verbal skills used by one or two of the meeting participants.

Assignment 1: YouTube Board Minutes	5
Assignment 2: PowerPoint Presentation	5
Assignment 3: Subdivision Memo & History	10
Assignment 4: "Real" Board Minutes	10
Assignment 5: Council Budget Letter	10
Assignment 6: Press Release	5
Assignment 7: Annotated Workshop Agenda	10
Assignment 8: Comparison of Board Minutes	5
Assignment 9: Council Proposal	10
Assignment 10: Final Oral Presentation	15
Active, Engaged Participation	15
TOTAL POINTS	100

The books identified in the Course Schedule are on reserve at the Fine Arts Library in Sibley Hall. The handouts are available on-line. Grading rubrics will be distributed in class.

#### **IV. Academic Integrity**

Each student in this course is expected to abide by the Cornell University Code of Academic Integrity. Any work submitted by a student in this course for academic credit will be the student's own work. Students are encouraged to discuss information and concepts covered in lecture and the sections with other students. Students can give or receive "consulting" help to or from such students. However, this permissible cooperation should never involve one student having possession of a copy of all or part of work done by someone else, in the form of an email, an email attachment file, a diskette, or a hard copy. Should copying occur, both the student who copied work from another student and the student who gave material to be copied will both automatically receive a zero for the assignment. Penalty for violation of this Code can also be extended to include failure of the course and University disciplinary action.

#### **V. Accommodations for Students with Disabilities**

In compliance with the Cornell University policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that may be required for student with disabilities. Requests for academic accommodations are to be made during the first three weeks of the semester, except for unusual circumstances, so arrangements can be made. Students are encouraged to register with Student Disability Services to verify their eligibility for appropriate accommodations.

#### **VI. Course Schedule** (*may change to accommodate class size & student needs*)

##### **Aug 31 (Mon)                      Introductions**

What are your communication strengths and weaknesses? Learn how to assess your audience's communicative needs/responses. Begin reviewing syllabus.

##### **Sept 2 (Wed)                      Course Logistics, Review Assignments, Create Student Teams**

Discuss how to critically review your own efforts and instruct/critique the work of others.

*Readings:*

- "Revising" <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/revision.html>.
- Makay, John J. "Chapter 3: Listening to and Evaluating Speeches" in *Public Speaking: Theory into Practice*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1992.

##### **Sept 7 (Mon)                      Taking Meeting Minutes**

Discuss the use of Robert's Rules and alternative meeting management options. Take minutes while watching a YouTube video of a Planning Board Meeting; discuss the minute taking process/potential problems (students to complete viewing video and taking minutes after class).

*Readings:*

- Ash, Peter. "Chapter 5: Working with Small Groups" In, Hemalata C. Dandekar's "The Planner's Use of Information" 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Chicago: Planners Press, 2003.
- *Example of Planning Board Minutes and Agenda* (to be distributed in class)
- "How to Take Minutes" <http://www.wikihow.com/Take-Minutes>
- "Introduction to Robert's Rules of Order" <http://www.robertsrules.org/rulesintro.htm>

### **Sept 9 (Wed) Writing Memos to Planning Boards and Councils**

Discuss the difference between academic and professional writing. Review the components of a memo documenting the status of a subdivision and components of a memo/letter proposing a new program/defending a proposed budget.

*Readings:*

- *Example of a memo to a Planning Board and Council (to be distributed in class)*
- “Active and Passive Voice”  
[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g\\_actpass.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/grammar/g_actpass.html)
- Armentrout, Vivienne N. “Chapter 9: Written Communication” in Hemalata C. Dandekar’s “The Planner’s Use of Information” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: Planners Press, 2003.
- Baugh, L. Sue. Chapters 2 through 5 in “How to Write First-Class Memos” Lincolnwood: NTC Publishing Group, 1995.
- Hairston, Maxine. pp 113-136. “Successful Writing” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

### **Sept 14 (Mon) Oral Presentations**

Learn how to decide on the content, organization, and format of a PowerPoint presentation and how to use pointers and handouts.

*Readings:*

- “Oral Presentation Skills” <http://www.etsu.edu/scitech/langskil/oral.htm>
- “Designing Presentation Visuals” [http://www.plu.edu/libr/media/designing\\_visuals.html](http://www.plu.edu/libr/media/designing_visuals.html)
- “PowerPoint Made Perfect”  
<http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/profdev/presentation/powerpoint.pdf>
- Makay, John J. Chapters 9 through 14 in “Public Speaking: Theory into Practice” Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1992.
- DeVito, Joseph A. Chapters 10 through 13 in “Essentials of Human Communications” 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Pearson, 2008.
- Zelazny, Gene. “Say It with Presentations: How to Design and Deliver Successful Business Presentations.” New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006. (access this e-book through the Cornell library system)

### **Sept 16 (Wed) Student PowerPoint Presentations**

Each student to give a PowerPoint presentation he/she had previously prepared for another class; peer and instructor critique follows presentation. Presentations will be videotaped. Students should review their performance after class and be prepared to reflect on their efforts on Sept 28.

*Readings: see list from Sept 14*

### **Sept 21 (Mon) Student PowerPoint Presentations (cont. from Sept 16)**

*Readings: see list from Sept 14*

### **Sept 23 (Wed) Student PowerPoint Presentations (cont. from Sept 16 and 21)**

*Readings: see list from Sept 14*

### **Sept 28 (Mon) Reflect on Videotaped PowerPoint Presentations**

Students should have watched their videotaped presentations and be prepared to discuss their strengths, weaknesses, and improvement goals.

**Sept 30 (Wed) Interacting with Town Hall**

Discuss efforts associated with getting information from city/town hall in preparation for the presentations beginning Oct 5. What communication styles did you encounter? How did you adapt your communication style? Discuss telephone and email etiquette.

*Reading:*

- DeVito, Joseph A. Chapters 5 and 4 in "Essentials of Human Communications" 6th ed. Boston: Pearson, 2008.

**Oct 5 (Mon) Oral Presentation Exercise**

Student teams to summarize a subdivision's history and status without the use of PowerPoint; critique follows presentation. Presentations will be videotaped. Students should review their individual performances after class and be prepared to reflect on their efforts on Oct 19.

*Readings:*

- Storey, Alfred W. "Chapter 8: Speaking Skills for Presentations" in Hemalata C. Dandekar's "The Planner's Use of Information" 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: Planners Press, 2003.
- Urech, Elizabeth. "Deliver Your Message with Power and Comfort" in "Speaking Globally: Effective Presentations across International and Cultural Boundaries" Dover, NH: Kogen Page, 1997.

**Oct 7 (Wed) Oral Presentation Exercise (cont. from Oct 5)**

*Readings: see list from Oct 5*

**Oct 12 (Mon) No Class – Columbus Day**

**Oct 14 (Wed) Oral Presentation Exercise (cont. from Oct 5 and Oct 7)**

*Readings: see list from Oct 5*

**Oct 19 (Mon) Reflect on Oral Presentations**

Students should have watched their videotaped presentations of Oct 5, 7, and 14 and be prepared to discuss their strengths, weaknesses, and goals for improvement.

**Oct 21 (Wed) One-on-one Meeting with Instructor**

Instead of meeting as an entire class, this day will be used for individual meetings between the students and instructor to discuss each student's efforts to date.

**Oct 26 (Mon) Cover Letter Exercise**

Pretending you are a planning director before the Council, read aloud a letter or memo requesting funds for your department's annual budget (do not use PowerPoint). Critique follows presentation.

*Reading:*

- Jacobi, Jeffrey. pp 157-179. "The Vocal Advantage" Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996.

**Oct 28 (Wed) Cover Letter Exercise (continued from Oct 26)**

*Reading: see list from Oct 26*

**Nov 2 (Mon) Public Workshops**

Learn how to decide on the content, organization, and format of a workshop. Review the contents of a press release and notice of a public meeting / hearing. Discuss the role of an Executive Committee, volunteers, government staff, and consultants. Discuss the use of breakout groups and beginning a workshop with warm-up activities. Practice writing on a blackboard and easel. Discuss ways of keeping the community informed/involved. Identify workshop follow-up activities.

*Readings:*

- “How to Write a Press Release” <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Press-Release>
- *Example of a Public Hearing Notice (to be distributed in class)*
- *Example of a Workshop Agenda (to be distributed in class)*
- Cogan, Elaine “Chapter 6: Public Participation” in Hemalata C. Dandekar’s “The Planner’s Use of Information” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: Planners Press, 2003.

**Nov 4 (Wed) Cover Letter Exercise (continued from Oct 26 and 28)**

*Reading: see list from Oct 26*

**Nov 9 (Mon) Public Workshop Exercise**

Work in teams to draft an agenda and press release for a first workshop of a Comprehensive Plan Update process (assume 50 - 75 attendees).

*Readings: see list from Nov 2*

**Nov 11 (Wed) Proposals/ Scope of Work**

When will planners in the private/public sector write proposals/scopes of work? Learn where and when planners have the opportunity to seek funding outside of the municipal budget. Identify common components of proposals and scopes of work and how to conform to “industry standards”, e.g., Community Development Block Grant proposals.

*Reading:*

- *Example of a Request for Proposals (to be distributed in class)*

**Nov 16 (Mon) Proposals/ Scope of Work Exercise - One**

Imagine yourself as a planning director, consultant, or leader of a nonprofit working with a community that needs to update its Comprehensive Plan (or other project – each team will have a different project). Assume there is opportunity to apply for state funds to support the effort, but the state application requires the Council’s approval and commitment of matching funds. Work in teams to roughly outline the proposal components, including:

1. The project’s importance and your request of the Council
2. A scope of work that describes the project/its benefits/relationship to the community’s comprehensive plan or goals or state’s goals or compliance with other goals; a discussion of the technical approach and public outreach; a proposed project timeline and budget
3. The people and stakeholders who should participate in the effort and why (their knowledge and abilities that are relevant to completing the project)

*Readings:*

- Zelazny, Gene. “Say It With Charts: The Executive’s Guide to Visual Communication” 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.
- Hairston, Maxine. Chapters 7 through 9 and pages 211 – 216. “Successful Writing” 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

**Nov 18 (Wed) Proposals/ Scope of Work Exercise - Two**

Work in teams on computers to develop a 10-minute PowerPoint Presentation to persuade the Council to support the project scoped out on Nov 16.

**Nov 23 (Mon) Proposals/ Scope of Work Exercise - Three**

Teams to present their PowerPoint presentations of Nov 18; critique follows presentation.  
*Readings: review those from Sept 14*

**Nov 25 (Wed) Proposals/ Scope of Work Exercise (cont. from Nov 23)**

Teams to present their PowerPoint presentations of Nov 18; critique follows presentation.  
*Readings: review those from Sept 14*

**Nov 30 (Mon) Final Oral Presentations**

Each student will demonstrate his/her oral presentation skills by reflecting on the Planning Board meeting he/she attended earlier during the course (or a second one attended) and evaluating the verbal skills used by one or two of the meeting participants.

**Dec 2 (Wed) Last Class - Final Oral Presentations (cont.)**

**VII. Additional Resources**

Electronic links to many of these subjects can be found on: <http://www.khake.com/page66.html>. In addition to the full books from which certain readings have been extracted for the course syllabus, you may find the following books/sources helpful.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Gregory, Hamilton. *Public Speaking for College and Career*. 7th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Kaminski, Steven H. "PowerPoint Presentations: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." Available at <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/powerpoint.htm>.

Macris, Natalie. *Planning in Plain English*. Chicago: APA Planners Press, 2000.

O'Conner, Patricia T. *Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know About Writing*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1999.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 8th ed. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005.