

# **CRISIS COMMUNICATION**

MGTO 30670-01

Fall 2025

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*The Eugene D. Fanning Center for Business Communication  
Mendoza College of Business  
University of Notre Dame*

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## **Class Meeting Dates & Times**

Tuesday/Thursday; 12:30 PM-1:45 PM

Location: DeBartolo Hall 206

<http://canvas.nd.edu>

## **Instructor Contact Information**

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Office Hours: Monday (10:00-Noon), Thursday (11:00 AM-Noon), and by appointment (best arranged by email)

## **Course Purpose**

Crisis communication is the process of “verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its publics (often through the news media) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence.” Organized by the pre-, during, and post-crisis phases, this course explores the strategies for communicating with various stakeholders and the dynamics of managing a crisis in a digital communication era with an integrated crisis communication plan. Students will examine major scholars and crisis resources, and document their understanding of crisis communication through writing assignments and a crisis simulation. Students will recognize the major concepts and theories of crisis communication, be able to list 3-5 scholars relevant to crisis communication, identify best practices for writing crisis messages, and articulate the meaning and practice of crisis communication for various crisis events.

## **Learning Objectives**

- Define different crisis types and the emergent communication issues that inform effective crisis communication in business and society;

- Design effective and appropriate messages that are the products of a process that should begin with critical thinking;
- Improve students' writing skills, including issues related to language use, style, tone, grammar, punctuation and organization;
- Apply course ideas, concepts, and theories to a recent or past crisis;
- Understand the ethical dimensions of the multiple layers/levels of communication during a crisis;
- Identify best practices in library research, particularly in the business press, industrial specialty press, and business-related academic journals.

## Course Requirements

### Textbooks

- Seeger, M. W., & Sellnow, T. L. (2016). *Narratives of crisis: Telling stories of ruin and renewal*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Business Books.
- Coombs, T. (2019). *Ongoing crisis communication: Planning, managing, and responding*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- McKendree, et al. (2024). *Business ethics: A case approach*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company. Link to purchase: [he.kendallhunt.com/mckendree](https://www.kendallhunt.com/mckendree)
- Cases and articles distributed in class and posted on Canvas.

### Recommended

- Alred, G. J., Brusaw, C. T., and W. E. Oliu. (2017). *The Business Writer's Companion*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Bedford/St. Martin's. ISBN: 978-1-319-04476-3

Link to Purchase Course Materials:

[https://nd.bncollege.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/TBListView?catalogId=10001&storeId=84429&langId=-1&courseXml=<textbookorder xmlns=""><courses><course dept="MGTO" num="30670" sect="01" term="F25"></course></courses></textbookorder>](https://nd.bncollege.com/webapp/wcs/stores/servlet/TBListView?catalogId=10001&storeId=84429&langId=-1&courseXml=<textbookorder xmlns=)

### Achieving Student Learning Goals

To achieve the student learning objectives, you will read, discuss, and write about significant crisis events that shape our ongoing understanding of crisis communication.

### Assignments (Summary)

- 15% Assignment #1: Crisis Communication Case Study Analysis (3 pages)
- 15% Assignment #2: Narrative Analysis (3 pages)
- 25% Assignment #3: Crisis Plan (10 pages)
- 15% Press Briefing
- 20% Assignment #4: Final Exam (4 pages)
- 10% Narratives of Crisis Chapter Presentation, General Participation, and Professionalism

### Assignments (Brief Descriptions)

**Assignment #1: Crisis Communication Case Study Analysis.**

You will be asked to analyze and write a response to a case study. You will produce a business memo that contains the following elements:

- A *summary paragraph* disclosing the key recommendations offered in your analysis of the issues in the case.
- A *background section* providing details essential to a reader's understanding of what happened, including the basic facts of the case.
- A *discussion section* addressing the implications of the facts and assessing both critical issues and stakeholder interests. This should be the largest section of your memorandum.
- A *recommendations section* listing actions recommended in response to the case and specific, by-name or by-department ownership of those actions. Suspense dates for completion of the actions may be included, as well.

Your analysis should include each of the following steps:

- **Step 1: Define the business problem and write a problem statement.** What's the basic issue here? Tell your reader in one or a few paragraphs about the essence of the *business* problem that you have identified.
- **Step 2: Rank-order the critical issues.** As you consider relevant information and underlying assumptions, can you identify the critical issues in this case? Can you rank order them from most-to-least important?
- **Step 3: Identify key stakeholders.** Who is most directly affected by this situation in this case? What's at stake for them? Can you identify any indirect stakeholders. Are any individuals or groups at odds with one another?
- **Step 4: Specify interested observers in this case.** Identify those without a direct stake in the outcome of the case who may, nonetheless be interested. Consider NGOs, single-issue special interest groups, the news media, elected officials, or members of the immediate community.
- **Step 5: List options for actions.** What alternatives are available to the manager or executive in the case? What are the strengths or drawbacks of these alternatives? Which alternative solution would you select? Why? Make your most rational argument in favor of this solution.
- **Step 6: Decide how to communicate the solution.** Which communication channels should the executive use? Which audiences should he or she speak with? What sort of timing should you consider? Think about messaging elements and media choices: earned, owned, and paid. Be specific.
- **Step 7: Explain how to measure success.** In any particular case, what would success look like? Which metrics would be most important to executives? Be specific, detailed.

### **Assignment #2: Narrative Analysis.**

You will apply Seeger & Sellnow's (2016) narrative framework to a crisis event. Your task is to explain how humans "come to understand and make sense of uncertain situations . . . carry meaning, encode lessons, and frame larger public and societal understandings of risk, warnings, and potential harm" (p. 1-5).

### **Assignment #3: Crisis Communication Plan.**

You will create a crisis communication plan for a specific company, taking into consideration audience and context. You will also present this plan as part of a press briefing. Examples and templates will be discussed in class.

#### **Assignment #4: Final Exam & Reflection.**

The final exam for crisis communication includes 50 multiple-choice and short answer questions. During our course, you will experience the dynamics of an unexpected situation and go through the process of resolving the crisis by identifying appropriate publics and creating appropriate communication strategies. As part of the final exam, you will have the opportunity to reflect on what you learned and what you would do differently if involved in a crisis in the future.

#### **COACHING AND REVISION**

You will have as many opportunities as you want to revise initial drafts of your writing assignments, though none of the revisions will be accepted for the purpose of grade elevation. In other words, you should consider revising early drafts of your work, and then seek out your instructor for an opinion on how you are doing. Your instructor will read, mark, then comment on your work and provide you with personal feedback on the direction and quality of your writing. Revision of Writing Assignment #1 is a requirement. Only the revised version will receive a grade.

If you require assistance, please seek it as quickly and as often as you need. Do not wait until it is too late for us to help you. We are here to assist you with the task of learning and improving your writing. The opportunity for a one-on-one meeting with your instructor is always available, subject to scheduling and classroom teaching constraints. You are required to meet with the professor at least once while completing the Crisis Plan assignment.

#### *Grading*

Your grade in this course will be based on your performance as evaluated by your professor. However, please be aware that the Mendoza College of Business Management & Organization Department Grading Guideline calls for an average grade point between 3.0 and 3.5 in each undergraduate section. As a result, this course will be challenging, and your instructor will work hard to discriminate among subpar, good, and truly superior work.

The following minimum standards for student work align with what would be expected of employees in an actual business setting. Texts should be:

- **Clean.** Appearance and format should count toward the grade. The proper use of headings, white space, margins, and other visual devices all contribute to readability and accessibility of information. Handling them skillfully is extremely important.
- **Error-free.** Simple mechanical and grammatical accuracy is necessary. Nothing destroys an author's credibility faster than spelling or grammatical errors or typos.
- **Audience-appropriate.** Readability, a style and tone chosen for clarity of expression and suitable to the target audience, should also play a significant role in determining the grade on an assignment.
- **Purposeful and well supported.** Whether you set out to explain, analyze or persuade, your documents should have a clear purpose that is supported by appropriate facts and details. Research should be properly documented.

When your instructor assesses the quality of your work beyond these minimum standards with a letter grade, it might be helpful to consider how a letter grade would translate to an actual quality evaluation – and consequences – in the workplace:

- **A range:** An employer would be impressed with the professionalism and clear understanding of purpose, audience, content, expression, organization, style, and mechanics. This document would make your boss proud and you could deliver it on her/his behalf.
- **B range:** An employer would be pleased with aspects of the professionalism and understanding of purpose, audience, content, expression, organization, style, and mechanics; however, this document needs improvements in a few of these aspects of clear writing to be truly polished. Your boss would ask you to pay attention to – and to address – certain details before submitting.
- **C range:** The document is geared toward an audience and contains some good points. However, it is not well organized, its content could be more specific, there are stylistic problems, and/or the logic is faulty. In other words, it needs some important substantive revisions. Your boss would not want this to be sent out without significant restructuring and cleaning up the document.
- **D or lower:** There is a deficiency in content, arrangement, concept of audience, mechanics, and style (or an assignment is late without valid reason). In other words, this work might embarrass your boss and may make him or her question your competence. The employer has to correct the work and to send it back to you for revision, and then factor these new delays and into the schedule.

### Learning Resources

If you have any concerns about your writing skills, please bring those concerns to the professor's attention early in the course. Even if you are confident about your writing ability, you should familiarize yourself with the resources available to you from the Writing Center, which has two locations: Coleman-Morse and the Hesburgh Library ([writingcenter.nd.edu](http://writingcenter.nd.edu)).

International students have a special opportunity to use the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Program. You must make an appointment for a tutorial session by visiting their website: <https://cslc.nd.edu/services/peer-tutoring/>. The EAP Fellows will provide linguistic feedback to help you improve your academic English. The EAP is located in 334 Bond Hall in The Center for the Study of Languages and Cultures.

The Thomas Mahaffey, Jr. Business Library is located on the Lower Level of the Mendoza College of Business at the base of the circular staircase. Business librarians are available to assist with your business information needs. Our course will include a Course Guide created by business librarians and a class instruction session. For additional resources and services, please visit <https://library.nd.edu/business>.

### Course Policies

This course adheres to the following policies for Business Communication courses in the Fanning Center for Business Communication in the Department of Management & Organization.

### **General Expectations**

To recap, here is what I expect of you in the course:

- To attend each class session and arrive on time.
- To read the assigned readings for each class period.
- To participate fully and actively in our classroom discussions, writing exercises, and peer review.
- To complete all of the assignments described in this syllabus and to submit them on the specified dates.

Here are the policies that explain what happens if you fail to meet these expectations:

### **Attendance and Participation**

We regard your absence from any class as a serious matter. **If you incur more than one unexcused absence, expect to receive a lower grade as a result.** We expect full and active participation by all students in our discussions and feedback sessions, and this is assessed as part of your grade.

### **Classroom Decorum**

Just as in the workplace, respect for your instructor and fellow classmates is important in the classroom.

### **Deadlines**

There are no automatic extensions or make-ups. You will be graded down for failing to meet deadlines. If you believe you cannot meet your responsibilities in the course, contact your instructor well in advance of deadlines. Advance contact with me and documentation (in some cases) will be required for me to make any exceptions. In addition, technology breaks, servers go down, files become corrupt, etc. These are not considered emergencies – they are risks embedded in the normal production process. You bear these risks, and just as in the workplace, a problem with technology problems is generally no excuse for late work. Please be proactive and protect yourself by managing your time well and by backing up your work.

### **Incompletes**

As a rule, we do not award incompletes. In unusual cases, though, such as hospitalization or genuine emergency, an incomplete “I” will be assigned. The student must complete all class assignments within one semester or the Registrar will assign a grade of “F” unless an extension is approved by both the instructor and the Dean, and we notify the Registrar.

### **The Notre Dame Honor Code**

**“As a member of the Notre Dame community,  
I will not participate in or tolerate academic dishonesty.”**

The Undergraduate Academic Code of Honor Applies to this course. Please read it and be familiar with its contents to understand the standards to which you are being held. Two points will be highlighted here.

Exams: Students shall not give or receive aid on exams – whether paper or online. This includes, but is not limited to, viewing the exams of others, sharing answers with others, texting, calling, e-mailing, surfing the internet, and using books or notes while taking the exam.

Writing: Considering that much of the educational process in the Notre Dame Business School involves group discussion and collaborative activities, neither the College nor the Fanning Center for Business Communication wish to hinder the learning that can and often does take place in that environment. Fairness, however, requires that certain limits be observed in the actual production of assignments.

In the Business Communication curriculum, all writing and speaking tasks are to be accomplished by each student working independently, unless you are specifically advised to work in collaboration on a particular assignment. No student should copy another student's work or represent work done by someone else as if it were his or her own. Evidence of plagiarism is cause for serious disciplinary action by the College. *Please, do your own work.*

### **AI Policy**

Learning to use AI is an emerging skill that we will explore during our course. Be thoughtful about when this tool is useful for our assignments and in-class exercises. Please include a paragraph at the end of any assignment that uses AI explaining what you used the AI for and what prompts you used to obtain the results. Failure to do so violates our academic code of honor policies (*statement adapted from the University of Pennsylvania*).

### **Health and Safety Protocols**

In this class, as elsewhere on campus, students must comply with all University health and safety protocols. We are part of a community of learning in which compassionate care for one another is part of our spiritual and social charter. Consequently, compliance with these protocols is an expectation for everyone enrolled in this course. If a student refuses to comply with the University's health and safety protocols, the student must leave the classroom and will earn an unexcused absence for the class period and any associated assignments/assessments for the day. Persistent deviation from expected health and safety guidelines may be considered a violation of the University's "[Standards of Conduct](#)," as articulated in [du Lac: A Guide for Student Life](#), and will be referred accordingly.

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### Course Calendar

I may need to adjust deadlines and assignments throughout the semester to meet our learning objectives. If I do, I will announce those changes in class and update the syllabus online.

**Therefore, the official syllabus and assignment descriptions are online, not in print.**

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments Due
Tuesday, August 26 <sup>th</sup>	Course Overview & Introductions		
Thursday, August 28 <sup>th</sup>	Writing in a Crisis Situation	Coombs, Chapters 1-2  "Crisis Management and Communications" (On Canvas)	
Tuesday, September 2 <sup>nd</sup>	<b>Writing Workshop #1</b>		
Thursday, September 4 <sup>th</sup>	Narratives of Crisis  Humans as StoryTellers  How Stories Disrupt Our Sense of Meaning	Seeger & Sellnow, Chapters 1-3	Chapter #1, #2, and #3 Presentations
Tuesday, September 9 <sup>th</sup>	Making Sense Through Accounts  Blame Narratives  Renewal Narratives	Seeger & Sellnow, Chapters 4-6	<b>Assignment #1: Case Study Analysis (Draft)</b>  Chapter #4, #5, and #6 Presentations
Thursday, September 11 <sup>th</sup>	Victim Narratives  Hero Narratives  Memorial Narratives	Seeger & Sellnow, Chapters 7-9	Chapter #7, #8, and #9 Presentations

Tuesday, September 16 <sup>th</sup>	How Narratives Compete & Converge  The Consequences of Crisis Narratives	Seeger & Sellnow, Chapters 10-11	Chapter #10 and #11 Presentations
Thursday, September 18 <sup>th</sup>	Business Ethics & Crisis Communication: Part I	McKendree, et al. Chapters 2-4	Chapter #2, #3, and #4 Presentations
Tuesday, September 23 <sup>rd</sup>	Business Ethics & Crisis Communication: Part II	McKendree, et al., Chapters 5-7	Chapter #5, #6, and #7 Presentations  <b>Assignment #1: Case Study Analysis (Final)</b>
Thursday, September 25 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Writing Workshop #2</b>		
Tuesday, September 30 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Guest Lecture: Brett Beasley, Ph.D., “The Three Things Ethical Leaders Say During a Crisis”</b>		
Thursday, October 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Crisis Mitigation	Coombs, Chapter 3	
Tuesday, October 7 <sup>th</sup>	Virtual Reality Simulation (Meet in the Center for Digital Scholarship, Hesburgh Library)		
Thursday, October 9 <sup>th</sup>	VR Simulation Debrief  Crisis Preparing: Part I	Coombs, Chapter 4	
Tuesday, October 14 <sup>th</sup>	Crisis Preparing: Part II	Coombs, Chapter 5	
Thursday, October 16 <sup>th</sup>	Recognizing Crises	Coombs, Chapter 6	<b>Assignment #2: Narrative Analysis</b>
Tuesday, October 21 <sup>st</sup>	<b>Fall Break</b>		
Thursday, October 23 <sup>rd</sup>	<b>Fall Break</b>		
Tuesday, October 28 <sup>th</sup>	Crisis Responding & Postcrisis Concerns	Coombs, Chapters 7-8	
Thursday, October 30 <sup>th</sup>	Guest Speaker: Chris Talley, founder, Talley		

	Communication Strategies; former Chief Communications Officer, USAA		
Tuesday, November 4 <sup>th</sup>	Guest Speaker: Deb Hileman, SCMP, President & CEO, Institute for Crisis Management	“Preparing for a Media Interview” (On Canvas)	<b>Assignment #3: Crisis Plan due by Friday, November 7<sup>th</sup>, 11:59 PM.</b>
Thursday, November 6 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Writing Workshop #3</b>		
Tuesday, November 11 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Simulation</b>		
Thursday, November 13 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Simulation Debrief</b>		
Tuesday, November 18 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Plan Press Briefing</b>		
Thursday, November 20 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Guest Lecture &amp; Discussion</b>		
Tuesday, November 25 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Plan Press Briefing</b>		
Thursday, November 27 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Thanksgiving Holiday</b>		
Tuesday, December 2 <sup>nd</sup>	<b>Crisis Plan Press Briefing</b>		
Thursday, December 4 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Plan Press Briefing</b>		
Tuesday, December 9 <sup>th</sup>	<b>Crisis Plan Press Briefing</b>		

**Assignment #4: Final Exam: December 12<sup>th</sup>, 8:00 AM-10:00 AM**