

---

## Commentary: Media as audience

### Should public relations students still learn to write like journalists?

---

Jennifer M. Keller

Western Washington University

---

#### Abstract

*Do the upsurges of social media as new forms of communication mean that public relations professionals no longer need to know traditional skills like writing media releases and understanding AP style? Should students focus their writing skills on Facebook updates, blogs and 140 character posts rather than understanding what it takes to be a journalist? Based on very preliminary research by this author, although practitioners want students to have a background in journalism, few colleges require those courses. This article suggests that while students do need to be well versed in new forms of media, traditional journalism skills are still essential for public relations majors. Why is there a discrepancy between what employers look for and what we provide our students in this skill set area? The author is looking for feedback to create a more in-depth study and identify whether others feel such a study would be beneficial.*

There is a lot of discussion these days about the ‘death’ of newspapers and whether writing media releases and knowing AP style is unnecessary for public relations professionals with the rise of social media. Today’s college graduates entering the public relations workforce face a wide variety of jobs and responsibilities – including website development, social media, multimedia, blogging, and, of course, pitching to bloggers and other new media. But does that mean they should abandon traditional journalism skills?

According to some people, yes. In 2010, Simon Dumenco wrote in *Advertising Age*, that the “long-suffering, much-maligned press release...finally died this summer” and has been replaced by the tweet. *The Guardian’s*

Higher Education Network, stating that “the demise of the press release has been a long time coming”, hosted an online discussion on whether media releases were dead and whether public relations people should be skipping traditional journalists altogether. One panellist felt that “public relations is ‘still too hooked’ on the idea that public relations is based on media coverage”.

In fact, some people say we should be going direct to the customer, rather than through journalists.

Who is the target audience for your press releases? If the answer that comes to mind is ‘journalists’ then think again. Do journalists buy your products or services? They might do if you are a well-known consumer brand, but probably not. The real audience is likely to be a mix of your current or potential customers, investors (where applicable), current and future employees, partners and range of other important stakeholders. (Alistair Wheate in Caines, 2011, para. 4)

On the other hand, some feel we need to focus on both traditional journalism and new media. A few years ago, we were beginning to realise that “while traditional journalists still have significant authority, influence is now more diffused” (Pick, 2009), and public relations professionals needed to learn new skills in addition to traditional ones. Rainie (2012) of Pew Internet Group describes the social media space as a “fifth estate,” outside of traditional journalism and having a “different civic sensibility” but not replacing the fourth estate.

So what do we need to be teaching our students – new skills, traditional skills, both? A survey by Text 100 in early 2012 said that

journalists still prefer media releases for receiving corporate news, although they look for added media such as photos and videos (Falkow, 2012). While the number of traditional journalists may be decreasing – we see stories every day about print newspapers moving online or disappearing – they are still present as a way to reach certain consumers.

What I wanted to find out is what we are teaching our public relations students and what we should be teaching them. This means not only new technology, but also all writing – from traditional journalism skills to feature writing to social media. Are we in alignment with what practitioners look for in new public relations hires or are there discrepancies?

### **Rationale**

A decade ago, if you asked people what the most important skill was for public relations students, they would have said ‘writing’. While that is still true today, the type of writing has changed. In their benchmark research on perceptions of public relations curricula, Stacks, Botan and VanSlyke Turk (1999) looked at the public relations topics that practitioners thought should be taught. Their results showed that practitioners wanted students to have an overall view of the industry – including various specialisations, research, evaluation, persuasion, ethics, special events and so on. In particular, skills should focus on five areas: communication theory, journalism, broadcast, graphic design and filmmaking.

Guiniven (1998) felt that colleges and universities needed to gather input from practitioners when creating curricula, rather than solely listening to the demands of incoming students. He felt that teachers and practitioners were often at odds, when they should be working together. In a survey of practitioners in the for-profit sector, Guiniven found that practitioners felt many different areas should be studied, with journalism as the most important area.

Few recent studies have focused on practitioners and educators. In 2006, DiStaso, Stacks and Botan followed up the 1999 survey to examine the state of public relations education. Overall, while writing skills were still seen as most important, practitioners also

wanted students to understand research, planning, strategic thinking, ethics and multimedia (a change from just film photography).

Whether focusing on traditional journalistic writing or writing for new media, research across the board shows that practitioners want to hire people who can write but are dissatisfied with what students are learning. Studies by Cole, Hembroff and Corner (2009), and Todd (2009), report public relations practitioners are increasingly dissatisfied with entry-level public relations practitioners’ writing skills and suggest a need for more hands-on learning. Yet, according to Hardin and Pompper (2004, p. 361), “Among the 152 accredited public relations programs evaluated, slightly more than half (57%, n = 87) require a news writing class and approximately half (51%, n = 77) require a public relations writing course”.

I did some initial research into what we are teaching our students and how that lines up with what practitioners want. Do they want our students to know more about blogging and social media or do they still desire students with journalism experience? Is there a shift in what our students should learn or merely an addition to what we have traditionally taught them?

#### *Initial research*

Before embarking on a bigger study, I conducted two small surveys to set a benchmark. The first was a survey of our alumni working in the public relations field to find out which courses they felt best prepared them for their current position. The questions focused on how coursework, and hands-on courses like student publications in particular, impacted future career success. I asked alumni questions in the following categories:

- How important they felt each required course had been to success in their current career.
- Whether they would recommend students entering their field write for the student publications.
- Whether they took service-learning courses and, if so, whether they felt they were important.

- What they wish they could have taken – either something offered that they did not take or something we should add to the curriculum.

Using a list provided by the university’s alumni office, I sent an email survey to nearly 500 Western Washington University journalism alumni. The return rate was approximately one-third with 174 respondents; of these, 64 currently work in public relations.

Of those currently practicing public relations, 58% earned their degree in print journalism, 39% earned a degree in public relations and the other 3% earned a degree in environmental journalism.

The public relations programme began at Western in the mid-90s, with the first students graduating with public relations degrees in spring 1997. Public relations majors responding represented graduates from 1997-on, with most graduating after 2000. Of the print journalism majors now working in public relations, nearly two-thirds graduated before 1997.

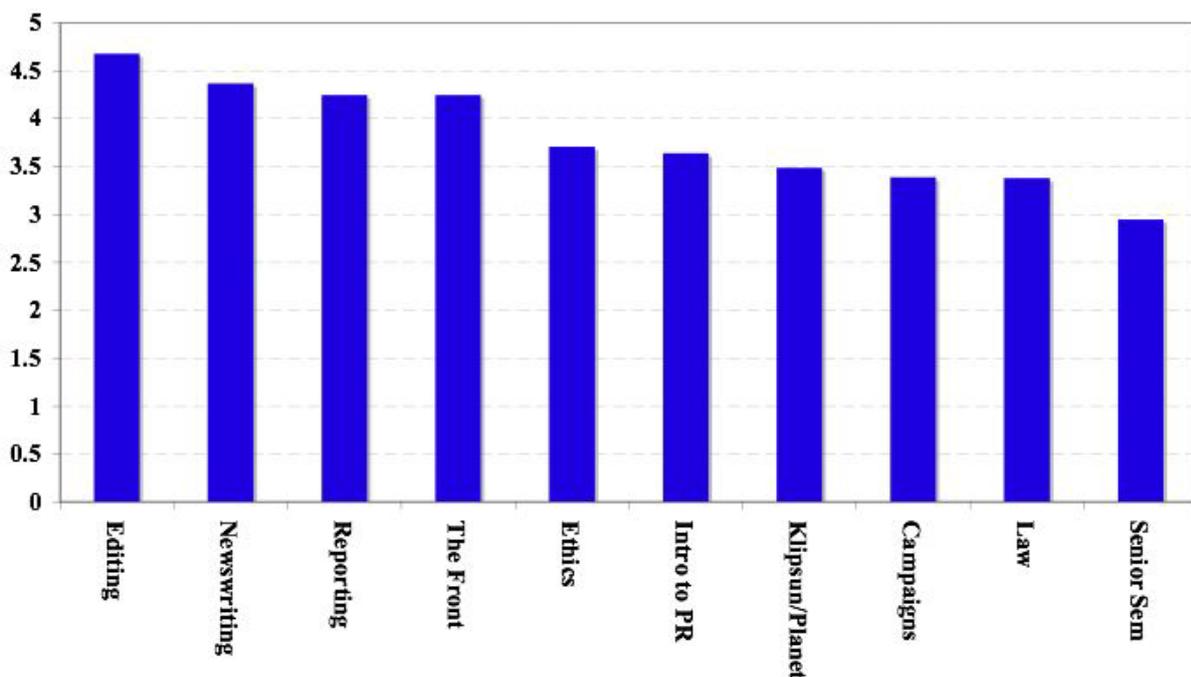
The survey first looked at all required courses, paying particular attention to responses

regarding writing courses (including reporting and editing) and working for student publications including student magazines *Klipsun* and *Planet*, and the student newspaper *Western Front*. Other classes included the public relations courses (Intro and Campaigns), law, ethics, and senior seminar.

Students were asked to rank how important courses were from crucial (5) to not important (1). A majority across all majors felt newswriting was crucial to their current careers, as was being required to write for *Western Front*.

For those working in public relations, the top four most important courses, ranked between very important and crucial, were editing, newswriting, reporting and writing for the student newspaper. Public relations classes ranked lower, however, the introductory public relations class did not exist until the first year of the public relations major and the campaigns class did not exist until 2000. The Advanced Public Relations Writing course was added in 2009.

**Figure 1: How important do you feel the following courses were to helping you succeed in your current public relations career?**



Source: Author’s unpublished survey data

Most alumni working in public relations admitted there were courses they wished they had taken but did not, either because of time constraints or because the courses did not exist at the time. Again, all of these were focused on real-world skills or hands-on experience. They included design, advertising, photojournalism, social media, the Internet, multimedia and several public relations skills courses that did not exist when they were at Western. These were a campaigns class (introduced in 2000) and a writing class (teaching pitch letters, speeches, media releases, etc.), which began in 2009. In terms of subjects, a majority also suggested new courses to keep up with the changing industry and technology – such as social media, graphic design and blogging.

The results of this showed me that they appreciated the hands-on journalism experience yet also looked for additional work with social media. This suggested a potential need not for a change to social media entirely but adding that to a journalism-driven curriculum.

#### *Expanding beyond alumni*

Based on this, I developed two specific studies – one for educators and one for practitioners. These were both small samples to determine where there were discrepancies, if any, in order to develop a future in-depth study of public relations practitioners and educators.

The educators' survey was sent via email to a variety of public relations educators around the country. To identify respondents, I reviewed books and websites to determine which colleges had public relations majors. I wanted to focus on schools with full majors, rather than concentrations, as those schools were more likely to have fully developed curricula rather than one or two courses in public relations. I sent the survey to 104 professors and received 24 responses, a 23% response rate.

For this initial study, I used a convenience sample for the practitioners' survey. It was sent via email to members of the PRSA Puget Sound and Greater Rochester (N.Y.) chapters. The local chapters sent the link themselves in order to guarantee privacy and anonymity of the respondents. A total of 121 people responded to the practitioners' survey and 88 completed the survey after a weeding-out

question to ensure only current practitioners responded. Approximately one-third (34.7%) of respondents were members of the Rochester chapter, with 65.3% of the respondents being members of the Puget Sound chapter.

Questions focused on general curricula, writing-specific courses, specific writing skills, new technology and hands-on experience, such as writing for a publication and service-learning courses. I focused on the following categories:

- Overview questions – Number and type of courses public relations majors are required to take and how important practitioners feel specific courses (from introductory public relations to campaigns to newswriting) are when reviewing a new hire's credentials
- Writing skills questions – number of writing courses, specific topics and specific responsibilities (like writing for a student newspaper) required of majors and how important practitioners believe those same skills are.
- New technology questions – asking which specific technologies (and how in-depth) professors teach in class and which ones practitioners believe are essential.
- Additional questions on service-learning, outside courses (such as business or English) and anything else not covered that they felt was important.

The surveys were conducted between November 2010 and February 2011. The data was then analysed using the SPSS programme.

#### *The good news*

In general, educators and practitioners agreed on many areas of undergraduate public relations education.

First, what was true in the past still holds true today. Both educators and practitioners believed that writing skills are the most important ability students need to attain before entering the public relations workforce. Despite discussions that the 'press release is dead', the initial sample also agreed that this means developing traditional public relations skills, such as learning to write media releases and memos, as well as learning to write for newer types of technology, such as blogs and websites.

In terms of general public relations courses, both practitioners and educators seemed to

agree on core courses that were important for public relations majors. These included a separate public relations writing course, internships, campaign management, research methods, case studies and an introductory public relations course.

In the public relations writing course itself, while practitioners were slightly more likely to rate certain skills—such as brochures, proposals, and PSAs (public service announcements)—as not important, those percentages were very low. Overall, both sets of respondents agreed on the general skills we need to teach students through the writing class, including media releases, business emails, memos, speeches and newsletters, along with the aforementioned brochures, proposals and PSAs.

Educators and practitioners also understood the importance of teaching our students new technologies, including websites, social media, desktop publishing and other related software programs. A majority of educators incorporated a variety of technology in their required classes. These included everything from websites and social networking sites to desktop publishing and Photoshop. Most educators provided their students with hands-on experience, although with newer technologies (ones that are not as popular with educators such as GIS and Soundslides), most provided merely an overview of the topic.

Practitioners agreed that technology is important. They specifically singled out multimedia and design as among the most important skills we can teach our students. In addition, a majority of practitioners used social media to communicate information or monitor the environment. Providing these skills to our students can only help them gain a job once they graduate. Those organisations that do not use social media either have not had the time or opportunity to begin or do not feel their target audiences use it. That, however, is likely to change in the future.

Practitioners agreed with educators about the general skills our students need along with writing, such as critical thinking, communication, public speaking and ethics.

However, practitioners also singled out other skills such as relationship building, teamwork, leadership, editing, and time management. While it is very likely our educators agree these are important and try to improve those skills among their students, it is interesting that they were not popular responses with the educators.

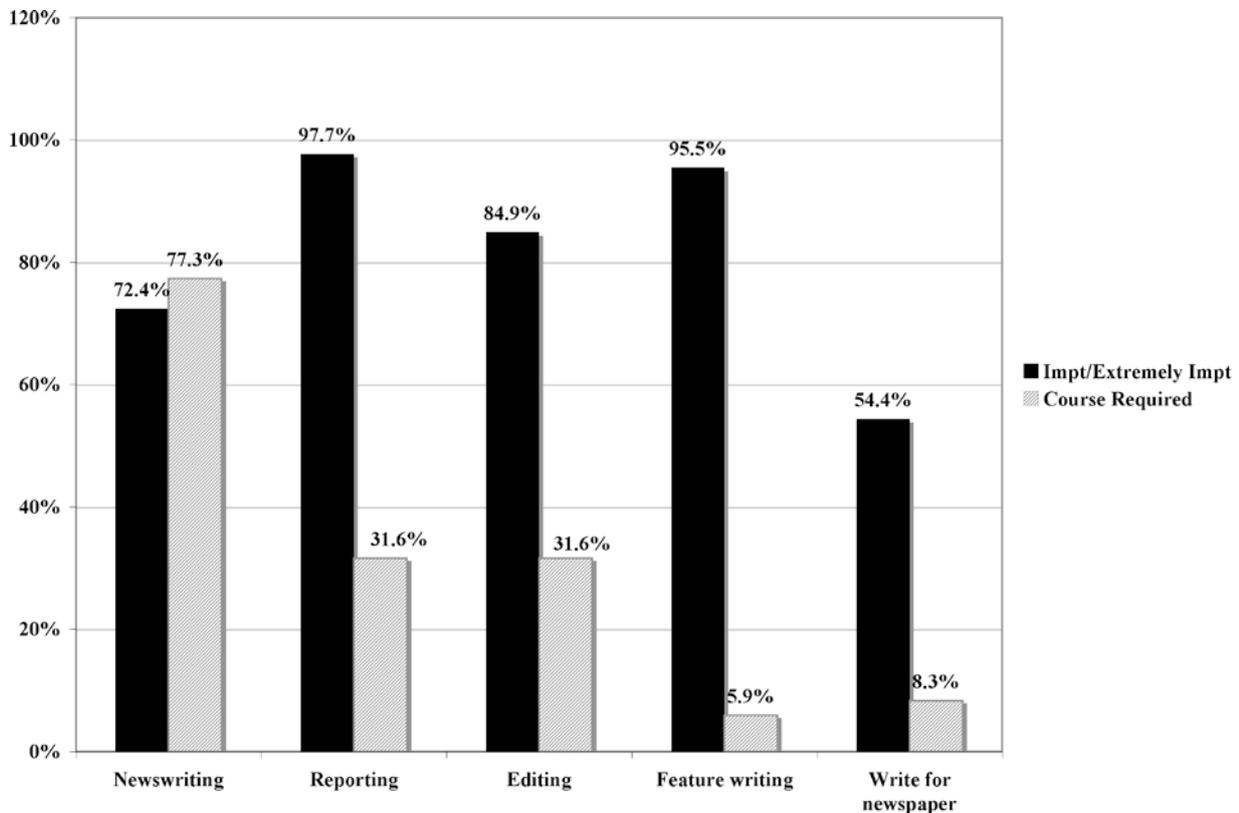
While many programmes require students to have an outside concentration or minor, understanding the areas practitioners look for can be beneficial when helping our students. Beyond English, employers also look for students with backgrounds in business, political science, psychology, sociology and history. It is interesting to note that practitioners did not really see a benefit in students taking math and natural science classes. That is likely different if the organisation is directly related to one of those fields.

Finally, research has shown that hands-on learning is important in helping students be successful once they graduate. Internships are a primary way to gain this experience and are considered important by educators and practitioners alike. While service-learning is another avenue for providing hands-on experience, only a slight majority of programmes surveyed incorporate service-learning into at least one course, usually the campaigns course.

#### *The discrepancy*

The primary discrepancy of this introductory study had to do with public relations students gaining experience in journalism. In terms of journalism courses, while both educators and practitioners believed a newswriting course is important for public relations majors, practitioners placed a greater emphasis on classes like editing and reporting than educators did. Practitioners placed a high importance on both editing and reporting, with a majority saying they were very important or important. Yet most educators ranked editing and reporting as somewhat important or not important. Also, while only a handful of educators required feature writing, most practitioners believed it is very important or important.

**Figure 2: Percentage of practitioners who believe certain courses are extremely important/very important for public relations majors versus educators whose programmes require those courses for their public relations majors**



**Source: Author's unpublished survey data**

In addition, while educators believed public relations students should gain hands-on experience through writing for student publications, particularly the student newspaper, a majority of programmes do not require their public relations majors to write for a student publication. However, practitioners felt that hands-on experience writing for a student newspaper or publication is very important. Most practitioners said they had worked for their student newspaper and more than half said a public relations student should have to work for a student publication for more than one term.

One reason educators might not require their students to write for a publication is that not all student publications are under the supervision of an academic department. Therefore, they cannot require students to work on the publication. In addition, many public relations programmes are housed in a department other than journalism, while the student paper may be

housed in that department. However, it is also possible that many programmes that DO have the ability to control access to the publication require their journalism majors to write for the newspaper, but not public relations majors.

*Future research*

From this initial research it appears that traditional journalism skills are still a necessity for public relations graduates. Our alumni working in public relations felt journalism courses and writing for the student newspaper were crucial to their success in the field. Practitioners in the benchmark survey also felt public relations students should take reporting and editing courses and write for the student newspaper and magazine.

While both surveys show a need for the social media skills we are already adding to our curricula, this cannot be at the expense of traditional journalism skills. Our students appear to need to know a wider variety of skills

– from AP Style and newspaper deadlines to blogging to multimedia to Twitter posts.

In conclusion, I feel it would be important to do an in-depth study focusing solely on the traditional journalism skills we teach public relations students. Which ones do they really need and how important are they? Was this just a result of the specific practitioners who responded or is this true across the board?

Also, even if practitioners and educators agree that writing for the student newspaper is important, how viable is it to make that a requirement? How many schools have some sort of academic control over the student publication? At Western, for example, student editors have final control over the content and layout of the newspaper. However, it is a class and the faculty adviser grades all articles written (whether selected for publication or not) for a grade. In many other schools it is quite likely that the student publication is entirely out of the department's control. If so, how can students be required to gain the necessary experience?

Until we do learn more, however, we must be careful not to produce graduates who can write a fantastic 140-character tweet but have no idea of AP Style.

### References

- Caines, M. (2011). Live chat: Beyond the press release – innovative PR in higher education. *The Guardian - Higher Education Network*, August 10, 2011. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2011/aug/10/higher-education-innovation-pr-press-release>
- Cole, R. T., Hembroff, L. A. & Corner, A. D. (2009). National assessment of the perceived writing skills of entry-level PR practitioners. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 64(1), 10-26.
- DiStaso, M.W., Stacks, D.W., & Botan C.H. (2009). State of public relations education in the United States: 2006 report on a national survey of executives and academics. *Public Relations Review*, 35(3), 254-269.
- Dumenco, S. (2010). RIP, the press release (1906-2010) – and long live the tweet: When it comes to pithy spin, should marketers be taking their cues from the celebrity-industrial complex? *Advertising Age*, September 13, 2010. Available at <http://adage.com/article/the-media-guy/rip-press-release-1906-2010-long-live-tweet/145838/>.
- Falkow, S. (2012). The press release is not dead yet! *The Proactive Report*. April 1, 2012. Available at <http://www.proactivereport.com/c/pr/the-press-release-is-not-dead-yet/>.
- Guiniven, J. E. (1988). Public relations executives view the curriculum: A needs assessment. *Journalism of Mass Communication Educator*, 52(4), 48-55.
- Hardin, M.a C. and Pompper, D. (2004). Writing in the public relations curriculum: practitioner perceptions versus pedagogy.” *Public Relations Review* 30(3), 357-364.
- Pick, T. (2009). Social media relations vs. traditional PR skills. *The WebMarketCentral blog*. April 22, 2009. Available at <http://webmarketcentral.blogspot.com/2009/04/social-media-relations-vs-traditional.html>.
- Rainie, L. (2012). *The future is yesterday: Public relations in the networked era*. A presentation from the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, September 20, 2012. Available at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2012/Sep/Public-Relations-in-a-Networked-Era.aspx>.
- Stacks, D.W., Botan, C. & VanSlyke Turk, J. (1999). Perceptions of public relations education. *Public Relations Review*, 25(1), 9-28.
- Todd, V. (2009). PRSSA faculty and professional advisors' perceptions of public relations curriculum, assessment of students' learning, and faculty performance. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 64(1), 71-90.
- Keller, J. M. (2013). Commentary: Media as audience Should public relations students still learn to write like journalists? *PRism* 9(1): <http://www.prismjournal.org/homepage.html>

**Author contact details:**

Jennifer Keller  
Western Washington University, Dept. of  
Journalism  
e-mail: [jennifer.keller@wwu.edu](mailto:jennifer.keller@wwu.edu)

**Copyright statement:**

The author of this article has elected, in the interests of open dissemination of scholarly work, to provide this article to you in open access format. This means that, in accordance with the principles of the Budapest Open Access Initiative (<http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>), you may freely copy and redistribute this article provided you correctly acknowledge its author and source, and do not alter its contents.