

# USING THE INTERNET TO TEACH MASS MEDIA WRITING STYLE

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Abstract: Baiko Jo Gakuin University in Shimonoseki last year launched a successful mass media course utilizing Internet resources. Our premise was that the Internet is mass media – not only a mass media entity itself, but also the vehicle for many other forms of mass media including newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Our objectives were: (1) to show students how to use a web browser on the Internet; (2) to introduce them to mass media writing style through exploration of news web sites around the world; (3) to teach objective (factual) and subjective (editorial, personal column) writing styles as well as the difference between them; and (4) to have students report on events in their own communities in objective and subjective styles. We found that continual exposure to Internet news sites greatly enhanced students' journalistic writing skills.

## 1. Introduction

Baiko Jo Gakuin University in Shimonoseki launched a successful mass media writing course in its new multi-million

dollar communications facility this past year. Our goal was to teach the essentials of journalistic writing style while incorporating the vast resources of the Internet. Numerous examples of mass media were introduced initially in the class. Our premise was that the Internet is mass media—not only a mass media vehicle itself, but also the vehicle for many other forms of mass media, since nearly all major newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations have Internet web sites. Several times we drove home the point that the Internet is the ultimate in mass media. Many people can be reached instantly throughout the world through the Internet. Our overall plan for the course included the following objectives:

- \* show the students how to use a web browser on the Internet;
- \* introduce them to mass media writing style through exploration of newspaper web sites around the world;
- \* teach the difference between objective and subjective writing for the mass media; and
- \* have the students report on events in their own communities in objective (news writing) as well as in subjective (editorial, personal column) styles.

## 2. Teaching Techniques

### (1) Assessing the skill level

Our first task was to assess the skill level of the students. At the time our course began, most students did not have computers in their homes and had never been exposed to computers at all. Since many of the students were also simultaneously being exposed to an all-English environment for the first time, we chose simple but fun exercises to introduce them to Internet navigation.

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## (2) Site restrictions

Second, we took steps to ensure that the students would not be exposed to any area of the Internet that might bring embarrassment to Baiko University. This meant screening all sites that were used in class beforehand and prechecking all links, including advertisement links, to ensure that no prurient materials were connected to any of our exercises on the Internet.

## (3) Instructor-to-pupil ratio

One instructor is not adequate for a class size of forty students. Initially students will require individual attention in learning how to click, highlight and drag. Many may require assistance in setting up printers or just entering information on the screen. Our class started with a class size of 42. Several were turned away from the class because our computer lab was limited to 21 terminals. After mid-term, we moved to a larger classroom that had 80 terminals with Internet access. Although we now had a terminal for each student, we found that it was more difficult to teach with the students spread farther apart. However, the space was better for the students.

## (4) Equipment

The facilities were excellent. Each student had her own terminal and shared a printer with one other student. There was an instructional monitor between every two students, and it was controlled by the instructor's console. We had a wireless microphone which permitted walking throughout the classroom as we taught. We found it easier for the students to watch the instructional monitor and view the instructor clicking on the Internet. We

could also type using a word processor at the instructor's console, and the students could view the words being typed. We found this method was more successful in teaching the harder subjects, such as the concept of attribution.

Also, we realized that computer access time was limited for some students; therefore, we used careful consideration in designing homework assignments. Some students cannot access the Internet unless they are at the University.

### (5) Working in groups

We discovered that students work best as groups as opposed to working alone. Teaching the Internet also works best initially when students work in groups. We found that some students are more skilled at computers, and others may know the English language better than others. This disparity makes group activity more conducive for sharing knowledge. Dividing the class into groups was especially effective when teams competed with each other to see who could most quickly find specific information using search engines, as explained in the "Search Engine" category below.

## 3. Using the Internet

### (1) Start with fun things

Mass media as we know it is a challenge in itself, and the instructor must make the class as enjoyable as possible to keep the students' attention and in turn to teach each student basic Internet and mass media skills. Whenever possible we tried to have some fun things in each class.

To teach simple point and click techniques used by Windows®), we chose the web site of the famous McDonald's hamburger:

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www.mcdonalds.com. This site not only was simple, but it helped each student to see her name in headlines. Each student went to the McWorld icon and it opened her to choosing “Your Name in Headlines.” Each student then had the choice of the titles of Movies, TV, Sports, and Music. Since many Japanese university students are keenly aware of movie stars and music, these categories were perfect to grasp the attention of the students. Quickly they learned how to point the mouse and click the mouse button to go to the next page. Soon the students filled in the blanks on the web page and saw their names on the headline of a news article along with the famed movie star of their choice. The excitement within the classroom built. This was a good springboard for the mass media class. (Editor’s Note: By the time this article appears, the “Your Name in Headlines” feature of the McDonald’s web site may no longer be available. But similar interactive features can be found at other sites.)

## (2) Definition of Internet terms

Internet terms such as “URL” and “hyperlinks” were explained with at least two classes. Several classroom drills were used to reinforce the terms. One class exercise led the students to an Internet glossary ([www.squareonetech.com](http://www.squareonetech.com)) where they could look up essential terms like WWW, http, html, home page, link, hyperlink, URL, and page. The students filled out worksheets with these definitions. The students could then take the worksheets home and study them.

## (3) Search engines

The search engine is a quick way to access huge amounts of

informational data available on the Internet. We did several drills to teach students how to find information on any topic on the Internet. We did follow-up exercises in other classes to reinforce this skill. This is a very important required task for seeking information on the Internet. This task must be fully understood by each student.

In one exercise, which was a perfect illustration of the benefits of group activity, students practiced using the “search buttons” on their web browsers. The class was divided into teams, and each team chose a name for themselves, such as “The Koala Bears.” We then had a contest to see which team could most quickly find specific bits of information, using only their search buttons. The questions they had to answer and turn in as quickly as possible were:

\*Two South Korean men escaped from a North Korea prison recently. How long were they held in prison?

\*Thai Airways Flight TG261 crashed in Thailand recently. How many people survived the crash? How many died in the crash?

\*What is the U.S. Congress attempting to do to President Bill Clinton?

\*What did Puerto Rico recently vote against in that country?

\*What is Leonardo DiCaprio's middle name?

\*Greenwich is the home of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). In what country is Greenwich located?

Each group elected a team captain who was the spokesperson for the team and who delivered the answer to each question to the

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front of the classroom as quickly as possible. As each team finished a question, we handed them the next question and then kept a running tally of team results on the blackboard. With a class size of more than forty students, we found that researching the Internet works more quickly when all of the students are not at the same web site. So we began each team with a different question and then rotated the questions as the answers were handed in. Also, since each team was simultaneously working on different questions, they were not tempted to look at other student stations to see what the other teams were doing. This exercise was exciting for the students, who eagerly searched for materials and then raced with the answers to the front of the room to get the next question, as if in a relay race. By the end of the class, all teams had successfully answered all questions, and students knew how to use their search engines.

#### 4. Peripheral Activities

##### (1) Establish e-mail early

A big hit of the class was when we allowed each student to establish her own e-mail account. We chose Microsoft Hotmail® accounts for our class. Although there are several free e-mail sites, we found that Hotmail was the simplest one for students to sign up for. This task takes up a full class period, but it was a huge success. Many students later said that this was an exciting part of the class. Most students do not have Internet access at home. Establishing an Internet e-mail account gives students practice in computer and Internet skills and allows them to access personal e-mail from any computer anywhere that has Internet access. Having their own e-mail accounts also permitted the

students to communicate with us during the week if they had questions about their assignments.

## (2) Electronic greeting Cards

Under the umbrella that greeting cards are a form of mass media, we taught the students how to send electronic greeting cards (<http://www.bluemountain.com/>). This proved to be one of the most enjoyable exercises for them. During Christmas time we introduced the students to electronic greeting cards that played several Christmas tunes (<http://www.night.net>). This site also provided the English written version of each song. We also showed students how to find song lyrics.

## (3) Chat room

In addition, we began a private “chat room” where the students could converse live with each other via the Net.

## (4) Discussion groups (“News groups”)

We showed students how to access discussion groups about subjects of their choice. We directed them to a discussion browser (<http://www.dejanews.com/>), where they could type in the topic of their choice and find bulletin-board-type posts. For example, students could find a group that was posting messages about origami, or their favorite foreign actor, Brad Pitt. However, we did not think this exercise was a successful venture. It was found to be difficult for the students to understand most of the issues, and they could not post to a discussion group without giving their e-mail addresses. Further study and development must be done before utilizing discussion group formats in the classroom.



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### (5) In-class visit by child with homepage

One of the most revelatory experiences for the students was when an 11-year-old child from America visited the class and took the students on a tour of her Internet homepage. The child took photographs of the class, and by the following week these photos had been incorporated into her homepage ([www.startline.com / japan](http://www.startline.com/japan)). Many of the students in their final evaluation comments of the class stated that this child's visit had affected them the most. As one student stated in her evaluation of the class, "The fact that even a child could have a homepage" had really opened her eyes to the possibilities of the Internet.

## 5. Exposure to Mass Media Sites on the Net

### (1) Mass media web sites

Numerous mass media web sites are available on the Internet. We have found that CNN seems to be the most comprehensive media site. The list which we provided to our students included the following most well-known sites:

<http://ajr.newslink.org/>

<http://www.seattletimes.com/news/>

<http://www.texnews.com/>

<http://www.usatoday.com/>

<http://www.nytimes.com/>

<http://www.cnn.com/>

<http://www.cbsnews.com/>

<http://www.abcnews.com/>

<http://www.reuters.com/news/>

<http://www.dallasnews.com/>

In addition, we also showed students how to find any newspaper in the world, such as in London or Australia, as well as small newspaper sites, such as <http://www.andovernet.com>, which is a typical small newspaper in Andover, Kansas. By comparing the organization of a small newspaper with that of a large corporation such as CNN, students could see the common elements of all mass media sites on the Internet: news, features, advertising, sports, editorial, etc.

We also took the students to several Japanese mass media sites. Several of these sites were in English and Japanese. Although we did not focus on Japanese news sites, they were available to each student in two languages. Subsequent exercises led them to compare the organization of several news sites in Japan and to summarize the common elements of each site. The Japanese news sites included:

Asahi.com

<http://www.asahi.com/english/english.html>

The Daily Yomiuri

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/index-e.htm>

Japan News Stand---Japan on line

<http://www.asiadrasons.com/japan/news/>

The Japan Times

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/>

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<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/topnews.html>

### The Mainichi Newspapers

<http://www.mainichi.co.jp/index-e.html>

### Japan Stock Exchange

<http://www.asiadragons.com/japan/finance/stockmarket/japanlink.shtml>

One of the benefits of introducing students to these newspaper sites was emphasized in the students' evaluation comments at the end of the course. Many of them said they had never regularly read a newspaper before, but they had now become interested in reading the newspaper daily.

## (2) Show business sites

Since the students appeared to be interested in movies, we took them to several movie business sites where they could view articles on the latest movies and even upcoming movies. One of these sites was Disney (<http://www.disney.com>), which was of particular interest to students, who loved exploring all its links.

## 6. Learning to Write in a Journalistic Style

### (1) Objective writing

This is an important part of mass media writing style, but it was the hardest to teach in the class. Most students found it difficult to comprehend. This area of the instruction had to be repeated several times. Gradually the students grasped the concept that objective writing consists of facts only, whereas subjective

writing includes opinion. Careful attention was given to different types of writing styles.

After giving students preliminary instruction on the “6 W’s (Who, What, When, Where, Why and How Many) of newspaper writing, the students were sent to CNN’s web site (Cable Network News) where they explored categories of world news, politics, health, environment, and show business. They each selected nine stories and then filled out worksheets to answer the “who, what, when, where, why, how many” of each story. In this way, even before they wrote their own stories later, they could recognize the essential elements of factual writing. This exercise made them quickly familiar with objective reporting and the “inverted pyramid” style of news writing.

In another assignment, students were given “facts” of a fictitious news story about an exchange program between Japanese and American high schools. The students were asked to rearrange the facts into a news story, placing the most important facts first, using “inverted pyramid” style. (Inverted pyramid is a term used by journalists meaning to place the most essential facts of a story at the beginning, with the least essential facts at the end.)

To underscore the meaning and importance of attribution in news stories, we used our instructional monitors and clicked to several news stories on the Internet, highlighting quotations with attribution. Students could soon grasp that attribution means naming the source, in forms such as “he said” or “according to.” They also learned that the only opinions that can be put in objective news stories are opinions which are quoted and attributed to someone (as opposed to a subjective story, where an author expresses his own opinions freely).

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In their own writing exercises, which came only after the students had been thoroughly exposed to news stories at the web sites of small, medium and large newspapers on the Internet, students were assigned to interview each other. We asked the students to pair off into twos and interview each student about the Mass Media Internet class itself. We did this for several reasons. One was to give them a chance to conduct a media interview; second, we wanted them to put into practice the 6 W's and the use of quotations with attribution; and third was to gain some feedback from the students as to the progress of the class. Each was given reporter guidelines on how to conduct an interview. Careful attention was given to being an objective reporter.

The students also reported on cultural events in their hometowns during the year. Using a digital camera and instructional monitors placed between every two students, we "edited" their stories in front of them, just as an editor would mark a reporter's copy. We removed the students' names from the papers to prevent individual embarrassment, but we showed no mercy — just as an editor does not — in correcting their stories and making them read more smoothly. We had further exercises on tightening their writing into the streamlined style of mass media writing.

## (2) Subjective Writing

In teaching about subjective styles of writing, we led the students to the editorial pages and personal opinion columns of several newspaper web sites. Thanks to the historical resources of the Internet, we could expose the students to some of the most famous editorials of all time, including the famed "Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus" editorial published in *The New York Sun*

in 1897 (<http://texnews.com/1998/opinion/santa1224.html>). The students also looked at personal opinion columns at both small and large newspapers throughout the world.

## 7. Conclusion

### (1) Final Assignment

The year's final assignment was to report and write on "Coming of Age Day" in Japan both in objective and subjective styles. Thus, students had to write two articles about one event. Students had to demonstrate that they could objectively report a story (facts only), and that they could also write a personal column or editorial (opinion) about the same event. Most of the students performed the task adequately, and we noticed that their writing styles were more sophisticated than we had expected. We assumed that intense exposure to professionally written stories had positively affected not only their English but also their writing abilities.

### (2) Exit questionnaire

We handed out a questionnaire to help us to better understand the level of teaching for the mass media class. Students were not required to put their names on the paper and were given free rein to critique the class. Students gave very helpful feedback; they told us what they liked and did not like. Although a teacher would like to make mass media all fun, one must take into consideration that mass media nevertheless requires hard work to learn all there is to know about media writing style. It is necessary to have a balance between the "hard work" of mass media writing, and the "fun" of using the Internet.

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### (3) Ever-changing Media

The world of Internet is an ever changing media. It is not like a textbook that never changes with the passage of years. The Internet is a fluid textbook. A teacher must be up-to-date on each web site. Some of the sites we utilized during the beginning of our class are not in existence now or have changed their appearance. Careful research is required at the start of each class. We often had to make last-minute decisions on what to teach because of the quickness of changes to media web pages that we were utilizing. Also, what worked today may not work next week. By our second year of teaching this class, we realized that the initial McDonald's exercise which we had used the first year was probably too simple for students who probably by now had had some exposure to the Internet because of the speed with which use of the Internet has spread throughout Japan. Our hunch was right—our new class knew much more about computers than our previous class. We realize that last-minute preparations for mass media classes are often not easy, but that is just the nature of the Internet. Internet is a fast-paced world; and constant access time is a must for keeping abreast of the changes. One thing is certain, however: exposure to the Internet improves students' language and writing skills.