

March 21, 2017

TO: Professor Doug Maynard, Interim Chair, Digital Media & Journalism

CC: Professor Kathryn Kurtz, Digital Media & Journalism

FROM: Professor Lisa Phillips, Associate Professor, Digital Media & Journalism

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RE: Professor Kathryn Kurtz (Class Observation, DMJ 230, Journalism 1, February 28, 2017)

Dr. Kurtz started class by handing back a writing assignment to the students with brief, one-on-one exchanges highlighting writing and copy editing issues. She took attendance and gave students a heads up on the topic of the day, the inverted pyramid, a common point of focus for an introductory journalism class. She reviewed expectations for homework assignments and recapped the previous class, which had focused on reporting with numbers on local budgets and financial issues.

In Dr. Kurtz's lesson on the inverted pyramid, she passed out a handout on the basic components of a news story. The handout was detailed and helpful, briefly defining eight key terms such as "lead" and "attribution." She explained the classic "plot triangle" of storytelling, with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Then she showed the students a triangle turned upside down, inverted pyramid style, as a way to underscore that journalism often took a different approach. Terms from the handout were arranged from top to bottom on the image to show students the organization of an inverted pyramid news story. She then explained the differences between the plot triangle and the inverted pyramid, using a clever made-up example of a news story about a man using a pack of Dobermans to rob a bank.

Professor Kurtz provided regular opportunities for discussion and questions. The students considered what the best strategies would be for starting the story. She encouraged several of the quieter students to participate by walking closer to them, a great strategy in a computer lab classroom. Professor Kurtz brought up important historical context, explaining how the inverted pyramid structure emerged from telegraph technology used during the Civil War. She also made engaging connections to the today's technology by pointing out that "a lead is like a tweet."

To supplement her discussion, she played two videos on lead writing and inverted pyramid structure.

Class time concluded with a writing exercise. She asked students to write an article about the rollback of an Obama-era measure to keep guns out of the hands of some mentally ill people. She put some notes on the board about the issue and told students to research the topic on their own. She briefly and effectively recapped a number of journalism concepts she had clearly introduced earlier in the semester: the need for balance; the prohibition against using the first person; and delayed identification.

After class, I reviewed with her a number of strategies that could enhance the classroom experience for her students:

1. The Journalism 1 class periods are long—an hour and 50 minutes—in part to allow time to foster a writing lab/newsroom-in-training environment. Students started a writing exercise at the end of class, after several concepts had been introduced. I suggest Professor Kurtz pace her classes so that her lecture focuses on one specific concept, skill or skill set, then students have a chance to put what she's teaching into practice with a writing exercise. Then she can discuss the results and move on to a new topic or activity. Journalism 1 is a class with a steep learning curve, and it can be helpful to provide new material in smaller doses.
2. In in-class writing exercises, Dr. Kurtz may consider playing "spokeswoman" and give students the opportunity to take notes themselves, a core skill of journalism that students often don't get enough of a chance to practice. She might want to consider using more basic examples for students to work with at first. Letting students write up an inverted pyramid story on her "Dobermans used to rob bank" example would have made a great initial exercise.
3. It is challenging to teach in a computer lab, with every student sitting behind a large screen. At any given point about a quarter of the class had non-class related material onscreen. This is not Professor Kurtz's fault! But she may want to consider more pointed strategies for managing the potential for student distraction, such as a "monitors off" policy when students should be focusing in front of the room. She could also use Blackboard in addition to the overhead projector to present course material and examples, so that students can follow along on their own screens.
4. Dr. Kurtz should address clarity of approach. The concept of her inverted pyramid exercise was absolutely on target in her comparison of the classic plot triangle and the upside down triangle used to organize news stories. But the point was obscured somewhat when she listed all the terms from the handout on top of the upside down triangle. The concept would have been clearer if she focused on using the image to emphasize that the organization of a news story should be from the most important information to the least. The definitions could be discussed separately, as they apply to a variety of article forms, not just the inverted pyramid.

In conclusion, I enjoyed observing Dr. Kurtz's class. She struck me as a caring instructor. We met after class, and she was receptive to my suggestions. It would be worthwhile for her to solicit additional feedback on her course materials and teaching strategies from her colleagues in the department and at the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC). I suggest that she follow up with another observation next semester.