

Equity & Communication Syllabus

76-327/727 Spring 2026 | Mon & Wed · 9:30-10:50 | Doherty Hall 2105

Instructor Basics	Zoom	Office hours
Dr. Joanna Wolfe (she/her) Baker Hall 245J jowolfe@cmu.edu	Zoom link for class and virtual office hours: https://cmu.zoom.us/my/jowolfe	Schedule at https://calendly.com/jowolfe (Default is virtual unless meeting right after class)

Overview

Communication is always embedded in power relationships, with unstated social rules that govern who is able to say what when. The exact same sentence spoken with the exact same body language and intonation can often elicit different reactions depending on the speaker's appearance. But communication also offers us a tool for rewriting oppressive social scripts. In this class, we will look both at inequities built into our communication and strategies for overturning these inequities. The focus will be on **practical actions** that you can take to improve your school, workplace, and communities.

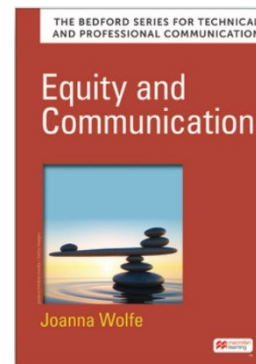
Learning Objectives

- Increase your knowledge about socially produced inequities and how they are manifested and reproduced in everyday communicative acts. You probably came into this course knowing about certain inequities, such as the fact that women make less than men for doing the same work or that whites and Asians have higher college graduation rates than other groups, but you probably don't know all of the mechanisms that go into producing these inequities and make them resistant to change. This course will give you insights into how sexism, racism, ableism and other -isms work.
- Examine how different identities intersect to produce unique challenges (and in some cases opportunities) for individuals facing multiple forms of social discrimination.
- Increase your knowledge about actions that change the status quo in small—and sometimes large—ways. Many of the actions in this class assume an incremental approach towards equity as the accumulation of multiple small, local changes.
- Identify and evaluate the elements of written and spoken communication that need to be considered regarding equity and integrate multiple and apparently contradictory communication approaches.
- Think creatively about ways we can make our schools, workplaces, and communities more equitable.
- Read research and perspectives from a range of disciplines—including psychology, communication studies, sociology, business, education, sociolinguistics, and design—and popular media and examine this research through the lens of communication.
- Have fun experimenting with some hands-on research that should help you better understand and appreciate how the research we read applies to the real world.
- Improve your oral and written communication skills through class discussion and presentations of your work.

Course Materials

There is a required online textbook: [Wolfe, Equity and Communication 1e: 9781319610494](#) (\$20). Profits from book sales at CMU go to a CMU scholarship fund. If the \$20 cost is prohibitive, the Dean of Students has [emergency support funding](#).

Other course materials consist of readings, videos, and podcasts. All materials with exception of the textbook will be available on Canvas.



Assessments

There are different ways to think about assessments. You can think about them in a competitive way that requires you to learn the rules of the game for earning points in this class. Or you can think about assessments more collaboratively, as learning opportunities that you and I shape together. In this latter mindset, you approach assignments as guidelines designed to help you gain new knowledge and experience, but you also feel empowered to modify those guidelines to give you the best experience possible. In this view of assessment, if a task seems like “busywork” and you don’t see the purpose of it, you redefine the task to fit your own goals, or you reduce effort on it and invest that effort in another element of the class. In other words, I don’t want you to do something only because you want a grade. Everything you do, you should see how it is expanding your knowledge or skills—if it isn’t, step back, figure out what you do want, and talk to me.

Here are the main learning opportunities we will have:

Everyone:

Two take-home, open-notebook exams:

The goal for the exams is for you to spend some time reviewing your notes and readings, reinforcing, consolidating, and synthesizing what you learned. I want these to be as low-stress as possible while still motivating you to review your notes. You’ll take these exams at home, at a time that is convenient for you. I’ll give you a mix of short answer and essay questions that I believe should take you 80 minutes (the length of a regular class meeting) to complete and you’ll have 160 minutes to complete them. If class is going well and everyone is regularly showing up prepared, I will likely give you an option to substitute your attendance/daily work grade for the second exam.

Many students prefer the timed exam to a traditional paper and find it a good way to focus on content without the pressure of sounding original or having perfect expression. However, some students find the timed nature stressful. If this is you, you can either ask for more time on the exam (good reasons to ask for more time include a disability, whether documented or undocumented, speaking English as a second language, or just test anxiety) or you can ask to be given an untimed paper assignment. We will review these options when we get closer to the exam.

The exam is meant to demonstrate your understanding of key course concepts and readings. You should be able to paraphrase content in your own words. Copying quotations and using AI to generate your response do not demonstrate understanding.

Observation/Interview Project.

This project is intended to make our class readings “real” by collecting and analyzing your own communication data. You are encouraged to construct a hypothesis and see if the small amount of

pilot data you collect supports this hypothesis. If you choose the observation route, you will observe and record a conversation, meeting, or other oral event and analyze a 20-minute section of it (alternatively, you can analyze a pre-recorded meeting, such as a city council meeting or arguments to the Supreme court). If you choose the interview route, you will find or create some prompts for individuals to observe and then interview them about their perceptions. The deliverable for this project will be a 2-3 page handout and 6-8 minute informal presentation of your project to the class.

Bias-reduction artifact project

In this project, you will do some research into a group or context that we have not covered in depth and create an artifact (a poster, video, letter to the editor, etc.) intended to reduce bias against this group or in this context. Your artifact should clearly and deliberately implement the research-based anti-bias strategies we cover in class. This project has four components for 9-unit students and an additional fifth component for 12-unit students.

- Summary/synthesis of the unique issues faced by this group or context
- Artifact (poster, video, editorial, brochure, blog post, etc.). This will be graded on concept rather than execution.
- Reflection/Justification of the artifact, including your theory for change
- Informal presentation of your research and artifact concept to the class
- 12-units only: Evaluation Proposal describing a small study that could test whether or not your artifact is effective.

Additional requirements for 12-unit students

Three informal reflections on OPTIONAL readings

Throughout the semester, there will be readings marked as “OPTIONAL.” These are readings that don’t quite make the cut for assigned homework, but that do inform my lectures and understanding of the topic. In some cases, I will review these readings in class; others, I will not.

At three different points in the semester, you should **email me** an informal reflection of approximately 700-1,000 words reflecting on 2-3 of the optional readings for a week (Note: I have Google drive notifications turned off, so please be sure to send me an email even if you are submitting a Google doc). Your reflection should summarize what you find most important in the readings, connect them to other readings and discussions for the class, and suggest what their implications are, and/or offer critiques.

The first two informal reflections should be submitted before we return from Spring break. The final reflection should be submitted before the last week of class. Reflections not submitted on time will receive an automatic zero.

Additional Meeting and Requirements for the Bias Reduction Artifact

Schedule at least one individual meeting with me outside of regular class time to discuss the evaluation proposal for your final project. (See also the additional requirements for the “Bias Artifact”)

Daily work, attendance, and participation:

This will be a discussion-based class with lots of small activities and discussion prompts. I will frequently give you small assignments to turn in. Often, I will just give you prompts to prepare informally and expect you to have something to say if called on. I want to hear what you think! There is so much that is uncovered and that we don’t know. I want to hear your ideas and learn from your unique perspectives and experiences. The class doesn’t work if you don’t prepare.

You will earn points each class just for showing up on time and prepared. These will be distributed as follows:

Points	Criteria
2	Full participation
1	Zoom or incomplete participation. Incomplete participation includes <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being unprepared• Using unrelated technologies in class• Arriving late• Leaving class during groupwork
0	Absent, or disruptive participation.

If you receive less than full credit for participation, I will note the reason why on Canvas. If you disagree with what I have marked or if there are extenuating circumstances, please come talk to me.

If you do need to miss class or show up unprepared, please email me as soon as possible since your presence, absence or participation level may change my class plans. I understand that there may be a day that you are overwhelmed with other work and need to put this class on the back burner. If that is the case, just read the abstracts for the readings, and come to class, but email me first so I know not to call on you or to depend on you in a group activity.

Your two lowest participation or daily work grades will be automatically dropped.

Even if you are absent, you are still responsible for any assignments due that class period and, of course, you will still be assessed on material you missed.

Zoom Attendance

Attending class on Zoom is less effective than attending in-person. That said, do not show up for class if you are sick or think you might be contagious! If you want to attend on Zoom, email me in advance and use my personal zoom room (<http://cmu.zoom.us/my/jowolfe>). You will receive one (out of two) daily participation points for Zoom attendance.

Biweekly(ish) informal reflections

Every 1-2 weeks I will ask you to submit an informal reflection on our class readings and discussions. The goal of these reflections is to (1) give you a chance to ask questions or raise topics that you may not feel comfortable broaching in class, (2) influence the direction of the class by sharing what interests you, and (3) reflect on and synthesize what you have learned.

To submit these reflections, you will create a Google doc and make me an editor. Title your Google doc Equity & Comm Reflections – [YOUR NAME] (Replace “YOUR NAME” with your actual name). Add each new reflection to the top of your Google doc. Please note that I do not receive notifications from Google drive, so if there is something time sensitive you need me to see, send me an email).

Reflections should be approximately 150-300 words. Share something that puzzles you, something that you feel we haven’t discussed sufficiently in class, or just something from our readings or discussions that interests and excites you. There will always be a specific assignment posted on Canvas for when I am expecting a reflection so that you don’t miss it.

Late work, extra flexibility, and other exceptions

If you need some extra flexibility around a deadline, I can usually work to accommodate you if you contact me in advance. However, late work that is not approved in advance will be awarded 75% credit if submitted within three days of the due date and 50% credit thereafter.

If you experience extenuating circumstances (such as an acute mental health challenge, a death in the family, or a hospitalization) and need additional flexibility, please contact Student Affairs to consult about the situation and authorize them to contact me (and your other professors).

Note: Your two lowest class participation grades or daily work grades will be automatically dropped.

Grade Scale

Even as I want you to focus on your learning and your individual development rather than your grade, I realize that everyone here has lots of things competing for their time and grades are one way to incentivize you to make this class a priority at least some of the time. So here are the points I will be assigning.

Students taking the course for 9 units

<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Approximate Deadline</i>
Midterm Take-home exam	25%	Feb 27
Observation/Interview Project	15%	Mar 16
Bias Reduction Artifact: Final Project	20%	Apr 27
Final Take-home exam	15%	May 1
Daily work & participation	25%	Ongoing

Students taking the course for 12 units

<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Approximate Deadline</i>
Midterm Take-home exam	20%	Feb 27
First Two Informal Reflections (3% each)	6%	Mar 9 (last date)
Observation/Interview Project	10%	Mar 16
Third Informal Reflection	3%	Apr 20 (last date)
Individual Meeting on Final Project	1%	Apr 24 (last date)
Final Project	25%	Apr 27
Final Take-home exam	10%	May 1
Daily work & participation	25%	Ongoing

Here is our grade scale:

A+: 98-100% A: 93-97% A-: 90-92%
 B+: 88-89% B: 83-87% B-: 80-82% etc., with <60 = R

Undergraduates follow the university rule of not being assigned + or – (90-100 = A, 80-89 = B, etc)

Managing the day-to-day

Time & Workload:

I put the anticipated time I expect each reading and task to take on our daily schedule (which is on Canvas). I shoot for this time to be 2-3 hours of preparation for each class meeting. If you are regularly spending more time than this, talk to me. That said, I occasionally mess up. I'll give you opportunities to let me know if my time estimates were particularly wonky for a given class.

Schedule and Readings:

The schedule of daily readings is on Canvas. With the exception of the Equity and Communication textbook, all readings are available on Canvas. If you find a broken or missing link, please email me so that I can fix it. If you are the first person to email me, you will get a metaphorical gold star. ★

I typically don't release the "to do" list for each class until a week or two in advance. This is because I adjust things as we go along and often scale things down. Let me know if this creates a problem for you and I can publish Canvas earlier.

Optional Readings:

I frequently list optional readings on the syllabus for students who might like more on a given topic. You are encouraged to peruse these and use them as a starting point for developing your final project. Students taking the course for 12-units will write reflections on optional readings at four points of their choosing throughout the semester (see "Informal reflections").

Speaking in class:

My vision is that every person in the class will talk every class period. Talking in class raises your adrenaline, helps you pay attention, and gives you a stake in what direction our conversations take. If I need to, I will call on you, though I prefer that you volunteer when you are comfortable or genuinely have something to say. I often tell you what questions I am going to ask in advance so it is easy to prepare. If you are someone who isn't comfortable talking, then volunteer early to answer one of the pre-prepared questions.

If you are someone who loves to talk—thank you! You make the class more interesting. But please understand that there may be times when I ask you to hold back to make sure that we hear from everyone. Some people need just an extra second or two to think before they respond to a question. My goal is to mix things up so I appeal to multiple learning styles. If you are concerned about the participation component of the class, let me know. There are multiple ways for you to contribute to the class discussion.

Names & Pronouns:

I plan on asking everyone to share pronouns. If I use the wrong pronoun with you, please correct me. Likewise, please correct me if I mispronounce your name. I have a slight auditory processing disorder and dyslexia that sometimes makes it difficult for me to pronounce unfamiliar names. If you have a name with an unusual pronunciation (for English speakers), I would love a link to a sound file with the correct pronunciation so I can practice it. I have a clumsy tongue so I may not get it quite correct, but I want to get as close as possible.

What to call me:

I prefer that you use she/her pronouns and call me by my first name (Joanna) to emphasize that I don't have all of the answers and that, when it comes to many of the questions you will raise, you and I are

equals. While I know a lot about the research that exists out there, I am constantly humbled by how much we don't know. I want you to feel empowered to propose new ideas, to interrogate assumptions, and to ask questions I don't know the answers to. I think it's easier for you to do this if you treat me like a fallible human being rather than an all-knowing authority and that's easier to do if we use first names. That said, I will totally answer to "Dr. Wolfe" or "Professor" and not make you feel weird.

Policies

Email Policy:

Because I want you to be successful in college as well as life, I require that all email correspondence with me be professional. This means you should phrase requests politely, proofread your emails, and show respect for my time. If you send me an unprofessional email, I will ask you to revise it before I will respond. That said, you may use my first name and assume that I know who you are. I simply do not want to see you practicing bad communication habits that will cause trouble for you in other contexts.

Respect for Diversity:

It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups.

Please keep in mind that all of us are imperfect. We all make thoughtless or inconsiderate statements from time to time—and we all should want to do better. I sometimes mispronounce names, use an incorrect pronoun, or make statements revealing the limitations of my perspective. Your classmates may do the same. Please bring such incidents to my attention and give me an opportunity to improve. If you do not feel comfortable talking to me about something that occurs in class, you may contact the **Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion**: csdi@andrew.cmu.edu, (412) 268-2150.

Use of AI:

Broadly speaking, AI use in this class falls into two categories: (1) using AI to edit and refine writing, and (2) using AI to generate content. With the exception of exams, using AI to edit for clarity, organization, and coherence is permitted and does not need to be disclosed. In contrast, any use of AI to generate content must always be disclosed.

If you use AI to generate content, include a note at the beginning of your assignment specifying which AI tools you used, the prompts you provided, and how you evaluated the accuracy of the generated content. Be aware that much of the general information about equity available online is inaccurate. Because AI systems are trained on this material, they are often unreliable with respect to course content. Failure to disclose the use of AI to generate content will result in a zero on the assignment, a report to the CMU academic integrity office, and possible additional consequences.

AI should not be used for take-home exams, even for editing. The exams assess your understanding of the material rather than writing quality, so using AI offers no advantage.

Acting with Academic Integrity:

Any work that you submit should be your own work (i.e., not borrowed/copied from any other source, including our assigned readings and your classmates). When using other people's ideas to substantiate

your own, please properly cite the original source. We will review proper citation procedures in class, and you should ask for clarification whenever needed.

Any act of cheating or plagiarism will be treated in accordance with Carnegie Mellon's Policy on Academic Integrity, which can be found here: <http://www.cmu.edu/policies/student-and-student-life/academic-integrity.html>. Depending upon the individual violation, students could face penalties ranging from failing the assignment to failing the class.

Religious Observance:

If you have a conflict between a religious holiday and a graded assignment, please contact me in advance so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability and have an accommodations letter from the Disability Resources office, I encourage you to discuss your accommodations and needs with me as early in the semester as possible. I will work with you to ensure that accommodations are provided as appropriate. If you suspect that you may have a disability and would benefit from accommodations but are not yet registered with the Office of Disability Resources, I encourage you to contact them at access@andrew.cmu.edu.

Incomplete Grades:

University policy states the following about Incomplete grades:

“Carnegie Mellon students are expected to complete a course during the academic semester in which the course was taken. However, if the instructor agrees, a grade of ‘I’ (incomplete) may be given when a student, for reasons beyond his or her control, has been unable to complete the work of a course, but the work completed to date is of passing quality and the grade of incomplete provides no undue advantage to that student over other students.

In awarding an ‘I’ grade, an instructor must specify the requirements for completing the work and designate a default letter grade where no further work is submitted. Students must complete the required course work no later than the end of the following academic semester, or sooner if required by prior agreement. The instructor must record the permanent grade by the last day of the examination period of that following semester, or Enrollment Services will administratively assign the default grade.” (via <https://www.cmu.edu/policies/student-and-student-life/grading.html>)

A student requesting a grade of “I” in a Department of English course must meet the above conditions, including having completed a sufficient amount of course work (at least 50%, ideally 70%). The student should be completing the same work that everyone else in the course will complete. There must be a written contract, available from the instructor, that shows agreement about what work needs to be completed, the deadline by which the work should be submitted, and what the default grade will be should the work not be submitted by the deadline. Cases in which a graduating student requests an “I” grade must be discussed by the instructor and the department head.

Make Time for your Mental and Physical Health

Universities are in general vibrant communities, places of tremendous vitality and richness that offer abundant opportunities for meaningful work and play. This abundance brings with it the challenge of maintaining a healthy, balanced life – a life characterized by productive tension among such competing needs as work and play, sleep and wakefulness, solitude and sociability. All members of university

communities – students, staff, and faculty – have the responsibility to promote balance in their lives by making thoughtful choices.

Temporary imbalances are unavoidable, but long-term imbalances cannot be sustained. If you find that you are unable to maintain a healthy balance, please come talk to me. We can discuss ways the class workload might be temporarily modified to get you back to a place of equilibrium. I am also happy to share with you my own personal struggles maintaining a healthy balance. I struggle from chronic depression and have a broad understanding of trauma and learning disabilities (both my own and others'). I like to think that my time on this planet has given me some wisdom and insight about how to balance and manage these chronic issues in my quest for fulfillment. I am happy to discuss my experiences with you.

Please also be aware that Counseling and Psychological Services (CaPS) is here to help if you experience academic stress, difficult life events, or trouble just making it through the day-to-day: call [412-268-2922](tel:412-268-2922) and visit their website at <http://www.cmu.edu/counseling/>.