



## Teaching the Introductory Public Relations Course: Pedagogical Recommendations

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**Abstract:** This article explores the foundations and the content areas that ground the introductory public relations course. Examples of two assignments designed to help students think critically, apply knowledge, and improve their writing skills are offered, as well as the identification of several challenges both students and instructors face and a brief discussion of the unique advantages provided by this course.

Heath (2001) defined public relations as “a relationship-building professional activity that adds value to organizations because it increases the willingness of markets, audiences, and publics to support them rather than oppose their efforts” (p. 8). This understanding of public relations, often described as *relationship management*, still is relevant today; however, key words such as “influence” and “engagement” have begun to creep into the industry jargon. Modern public relations, then, is essentially about engaging stakeholders in a relationship that spans across multiple platforms in an effort to influence public perceptions of a client organization. This article highlights some of the concepts and models that ground most introductory public relations courses, content areas often addressed in these courses, assignments that may be of value when teaching the course, and both student- and instructor-centered issues related to teaching public relations.

### Foundations

There is no one theory of public relations. Rather, myriad theories and models have attempted to define public relations. Systems theory emerged early as the primary theoretical framework guiding public

relations. Several scholars (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Long & Hazelton, 1987) have explained that the role of public relations is to enable an organization to adapt to its environment, taking an open systems approach to public relations that is similar to the two-way symmetrical model of communication proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984; see also Grunig, 1984). In their work, Grunig and Hunt identified four models of public relations: the press agency model, the public information model, the two-way asymmetrical model, and the two-way symmetrical model. Of these models, the two-way symmetrical model was considered the most beneficial to public relations as it promoted mutual understanding between organizations and their publics. Grunig and Grunig (2000) and Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002) went on to propose the Excellence Theory, which essentially states that for an organization to be effective, it must behave in a way that solves problems and satisfies both stakeholders and management. Today, despite several proposed models and theories, public relations campaigns often rely on multiple public relations models and theories, and scholars continue to suggest new frameworks for studying public relations, including positioning theory (James, 2015), postmodernism (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015), and transmedia storytelling and narrative transportation theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

While understanding theory is fundamental to any public relations course, the course should provide additional foundational elements beyond theory, which includes a history of the field. This history lesson is important in teaching students the antecedents to what today is considered public relations, such as farm bulletins telling farmers how to plant crops nearly 2,000 years before Christ (Cutlip, 1994) and 19th-century railroad publicity and promotion (Cutlip, 1995). Any history of public relations would not be complete without knowledge of the key figures in the development of modern public relations. These individuals include PT Barnum, who exemplifies the press-agency model, and Edward Bernays and Ivy Ledbetter Lee, both referred to as the “father of public relations.”

Further, students taking a public relations course should have basic knowledge of the models used in creating and evaluating public relations campaigns. The models most often discussed in public relations texts are Jerry Hendrix’s (1998) ROPE model and John Marston’s (1963) RACE model. These models introduce the value of research, planning, communication, and evaluation in building effective public relations campaigns. Lastly, it is crucial that a public relations course introduce the roles of persuasion, culture, and ethics in public relations. This knowledge enables students to decipher persuasion from manipulation, propaganda, and “spin” while also teaching the role of culture in communicating with publics and ways of effectively navigating ethical dilemmas.

## Content Areas

Once students have a solid understanding of the foundations of public relations, students can better define public relations, understand the basic parts of an effective public relations campaign, and engage in discussion and critique of theory. Yet, in addition to these foundations, public relations courses include more nuanced content as well. Topics found across different textbooks include publics (e.g., identifying stakeholders and audiences, determining types of public), audience analysis (e.g., demographics, attitudes/beliefs/values, knowledge, and segmentation), forming communication strategy (e.g., identifying goals, objectives, and appropriate messages), evaluation (e.g., formative and summative), persuasion (e.g., principles of liking, authority, reciprocity, social proof, consistency, and scarcity), writing for public relations (e.g., writing press releases and creating media kits), ethics (e.g., PRSA Code of Ethics, ethical dilemmas, legal versus ethical decision-making, normative ethics, and professional ethics), and the practice of public relations (i.e., careers in public relations).

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## Applied Assignments

The following applied assignments are designed to (a) help students think critically about public relations and apply their knowledge to actual public relations cases and (b) improve student writing skills for public relations.

*Writing for PR.* For this assignment, students are given basic facts about an event and asked to write a press release. The goal is to write a press release that would generate positive coverage of the event in the news media. Students are required to choose the audience for the press release, provide context for the editor or reporter who receives the press release, and provide interesting background information to the editor or reporter, breaking down any difficult concepts. Students write the press release using standard formatting guidelines for press releases and in Associated Press (AP) style. The goal of this assignment is to have students identify their publics and the best ways to reach those publics, as well as how to improve their ability to develop organizational messages that effectively communicate to a public(s).

*Case Studies in PR.* Case studies enable students to learn how public relations works in actual situations. These case studies allow students to critically assess what happens when public relations helps an organization and where mistakes are made when public relations efforts fail. Case study assignments involve determining a theory or model that pertains to the case, identifying publics, analyzing communication, and making suggestions for improvement (when necessary). Case studies can be completed in small groups or individually. While there are textbooks dedicated to public relations case studies (Hayes, Hendrix, & Kumar, 2012; Swann, 2014; Turk & Valin, 2017), case studies also can be found online at PR News ([prnewsonline.com](http://prnewsonline.com)), PR Week ([prweek.com](http://prweek.com)), and PR Council ([prcouncil.net](http://prcouncil.net)).

## Issues to Consider

As in courses across all disciplines, there are four challenges that can arise when teaching public relations. First, students enrolled in public relations courses may be from majors other than communication. It is not uncommon to have students from schools of business, advertising programs, or marketing programs enrolled in the public relations course. This can make it difficult for students to understand the communication and relational components of public relations, seeing it rather as a business tool. Often, even communication majors have difficulty understanding how public relations differs from advertising and marketing. Thus, it is essential to define public relations at the beginning of the course, making sure to emphasize the relationship management purpose of public relations.

Another consideration when teaching public relations is the oft-changing nature of the field. Advances in technology continually alter the ways publics seek information and how organizations provide information. Further, new technologies change the rules for what information is expected from organizations. When high-profile organizations are active online or engage often with their publics through online platforms, it may become the expectation that similar organizations will follow suit. The ever-changing technological landscape makes it difficult to stay abreast of the communication channels being used by various publics. It also means textbook chapters and case studies focused on technology use can become outdated quickly. As a result, instructors may need to provide supplementary information for these chapters and assignments.

Yet another issue for consideration is the difficulty of teaching writing in an already busy course. Writing for public relations is different than writing an APA-style final paper in a communication course. Public

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relations students typically are required to learn AP style, as well as how to write boilerplate information for press releases. In an already busy survey course, it can be difficult to find the time in class to help students with poor writing ability or who have trouble adapting to this writing style. Providing time to work on writing assignments in class, requiring peer reviews, and providing supplementary materials including templates may help students quickly improve their writing skills.

How students understand and adapt to culture also is a consideration in this course. An understanding of cultural communication and the role of culture in communicating with publics is vital to the success of organizational messaging. Knowing how messages can be interpreted by different cultures, and which individuals hold the most credibility in various cultures, helps build organizational credibility and authority and leads to the development of effective messages sent through appropriate channels.

The public relations course also presents unique advantages. While it often can be difficult to engage students in meaningful course-related work outside the communication classroom, the public relations course lends itself to partnerships with non-profit organizations, community groups, and on-campus offices. These partnerships allow students to gain invaluable work experience by providing public relations services to these organizations. This experience helps students build portfolios and can give them an advantage when looking for internships and employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

This article explored the foundations and traditional content areas of an introductory course in public relations, offered two examples of applied assignments, and provided a brief discussion of four issues to consider when teaching public relations. The public relations course gives students the opportunity to apply theory through the development of written materials, case studies, and even public relations campaigns. Many of these foundations and content areas appear in similar courses focused on communication campaigns, such as classes focused on political campaigns or health campaigns. Additionally, the knowledge gained from this course will strengthen student understandings of publics, messaging, message development and dissemination, mass media, and persuasion. This course also allows students to engage in critical thinking and challenges them to think about the ethical and cultural implications of communication. These skills will enable students to be more critical consumers and producers of information.

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