

Course Rationale: We currently live in an era saturated with crises and disasters. We recently experienced the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to economic, structural, and social upheaval. The killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer sparked nation-wide protests and questions about systemic racism within law enforcement organizations. Two airline crashes, one that caused 181 deaths and another that resulted in the deaths of all 157 people on board, led to the grounding of the Boeing 737 MAX airplane amid questions about its safety. Dozens of individuals have alleged illegal sexual behaviors against leaders of the entertainment and political arenas, including Harvey Weinstein, Bill Cosby, Jeffrey Epstein, Russell Simmons, Matt Lauer, Andrew Cuomo, Kevin Spacey, and recent presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Universities are not immune from crises as a number of high-profile colleges were recently or are currently embroiled in sexual assault scandals, including Baylor University, Michigan State University, Pennsylvania State University, Utah State University and Ohio State University. Finally, recent years have witnessed Hurricanes Nicole, Julia, Dorian, and Rita, and earthquake in Afghanistan that killed over one thousand people, chemical explosions, mass shootings, train crashes in Spain and Canada, coal mining tragedies, bridge collapses, and allegations of racial discrimination at several high-profile companies.

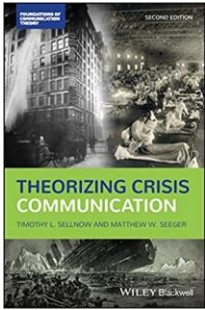
Communication plays a central role in crisis planning, real-time crisis response, and post-crisis recovery and sensemaking. In fact, we might argue that how we understand the terms “disaster” and “crisis” hinges on social constructions of these words. We are in a time unlike any other in which stakeholders can utilize social media to create crises for organizations and individuals, and those same groups can use social media to respond instantaneously. Considering crises and disasters are situated in communication, the purpose of this course is to develop a theoretical and practical understanding of crisis (and disaster) communication. At the course’s conclusion, students should have a basic understanding of the dimensions of crisis phenomena that are of interest to communication scholars and have an advanced knowledge of the theoretical, applied, and empirical approaches taken toward those phenomena.

***Course Objectives:**

1. To enhance your understanding of what constitutes a crisis, particularly from an organizational perspective.
2. To enhance your understanding of the stages of an organizational crisis and salient activity within these stages.
3. To enhance your understanding of seminal theories of crisis communication, including but not limited to:

organizational legitimacy & stakeholder theory	the IDEA model
organizational learning	sensemaking
situational crisis communication theory	framing theory
communal coping	apologia (image repair)
focusing events	significant choice
4. To develop skills for understanding, analyzing, and critiquing an organization’s (or individual’s) response to a crisis situation.
5. To enhance your understanding of the experiences of actual crisis/disasters managers.

*See Appendix for a graph of how the course objectives, activities, and assessments will be linked this semester.



REQUIRED TEXTBOOK AND READINGS:

Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2021). *Theorizing Crisis Communication* (2nd Ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Additional readings will be posted on Canvas or distributed in class. These are not “optional readings.” They are relevant to the lecture material, the course assignments, and to the exams. **You are responsible for ensuring that you access copies of all Canvas readings.**



Course Format and Canvas:

It is my objective to make this course enjoyable, and to get you familiarized with crisis communication, from theoretical and applied perspectives. Each week we will read textbook chapters, articles, and/or case featuring crisis-related material. We will use lectures, activities, guest speakers, and discussions, for exploring and applying what we learn from our readings. I pledge to provide quick and efficient communication as well as meaningful and timely feedback on work that you complete. For example, I will read all of your homework/written assignments and provide feedback about your writing and content. At the same time, it is your responsibility to raise issues when they occur-not at the end of the course. I want you to have a positive learning experience but ultimately the course will give you back what you choose to put into it in terms of time and effort.

Also, please keep in mind that due to the nature of the crises that will be covered and analyzed in the course **you may feel a personal connection to some of them**; please feel free to speak with me if you have any concerns regarding the examples that we use for our case studies.

Technical difficulties with Canvas are the responsibility of the student. For this course, I will use Canvas for recording grades, absences, announcements, posting assignment information, messaging, etc. If you encounter technical difficulties during the semester, you need to contact the Canvas Technical Support Desk:

UIT Help Desk: [UIT Student Help Desk site](http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm) (<http://www.unt.edu/helpdesk/index.htm>)

Email: helpdesk@unt.edu

Phone: 940-565-2324

In Person: Sage Hall, Room 130

Walk-In Availability: 8am-9pm

Telephone Availability:

- Sunday: noon-midnight
- Friday: 8am-8pm
- Monday-Thursday: 8am-midnight
- Saturday: 9am-5pm

For additional support, visit [Canvas Technical Help](https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10554-4212710328) (<https://community.canvaslms.com/docs/DOC-10554-4212710328>)

ASSIGNMENTS

I. Exams: There will be three online exams given during the term, including the non-cumulative final exam. The format of the exams will be multiple choice, true-false, and matching. Each exam is worth 75 points toward your course grade. The purpose of these exams is to ascertain that you understand the concepts presented. See Course Schedule for Exam dates.

Note 1: There are no makeup exams. If you miss an exam, you lose the points associated with it. The only exceptions are due to documented sickness, death in the family, or some other catastrophe. I am very unlikely to allow you to take an exam after the scheduled time if you do not contact me *prior* to the exam.

Note 2: I will only count your top two exam scores toward your grade.

II. Term paper proposal. For information about this assignment, please see the **Assignment Instructions packet.** (20 pts.)

III. Term paper (Organizational/individual crisis response analysis): For information about this assignment, please see the **Assignment Instructions packet.** (150 pts.)

IV. Presentations of term paper key findings: For this assignment, you will inform your classmates about your key findings from your term papers in a 5-minute presentation. For information about this assignment, please see the **Assignment Instructions packet.**

V. Homework/discussion assignments: On eight occasions this semester, you will have a chance to earn 10 points for successfully completing a reading quiz or homework assignment. There will be NO makeup opportunities for these assignments and all must be completed by the given deadline. I will give one additional homework/discussion assignment and let you drop your lowest score.

Total points breakdown

Exams (2x75)	150 pts.
Term paper proposal	20 pts.
Term paper	150 pts.
5-minute presentation of term paper	50 pts.
8 reading quiz/homework assignments	<u>80 pts.</u>
Total	450 pts.

Grade determination

The points in this class are based on the assignments discussed above. Your final grade is based entirely on the sum of those points assigned in the class, and I will adhere rigidly to those points. The points correspond to the following university guidelines: an A is reserved for excellent work; a B is for above average performance; a C is awarded for average work; a D simply means passing, and an F indicates below average, non-passing work. Points-wise the grades will be categorized as follows: 405-450 = A; 360 – 404.5 = B; 315 – 359.5 = C; 270 – 314.5 = D; 0 – 269.5 = F

Extra Credit:

During the semester, you will have opportunities to earn extra credit (XC) for (a) participating in research projects by department faculty or graduate students, or (b) attending meetings related to COMM department organizations/events. Details for those opportunities will be announced as they arise and participation is strictly voluntary. Students who choose to not participate will not be penalized. Please note that extra credit opportunities are offered to all students in the course – I will not customize the number of extra credit opportunities to individual students. XC opportunities will be worth 5-10 points each and will be added to your final point total. The maximum number of XC points any students can receive is 20.

Course policies

ADA Policy: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Accommodation (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one’s specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time, however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid any delay in implementation. Note that students must obtain a new letter of accommodation for every semester and must meet with each faculty member prior to implementation in each class. For additional information see the [ODA website \(https://disability.unt.edu/\)](https://disability.unt.edu/).

Attendance: Attendance is taken at the beginning of class using a seating chart. A student is expected to arrive on time and be present for the entire class period. To allow for illness or other unforeseen situations, students in the course are allotted three absences. Excused and unexcused absences count the same, with the one exception being university-related absences, e.g. debate team, college athletics, etc. Each absence beyond the limit will result in **your final course grade being lowered by 10 points per**

absence (e.g. from 435 to 425 for one excessive absence). Excessive absences caused by **serious** health problems will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. You will be counted absent if you do not sign the attendance sheet. If you are too late, and miss the attendance sheet, you will be counted as absent. Cases where someone signs in for another student will be treated as academic misconduct cases.

Late work. Except under the most extreme circumstances (and documentation of those circumstances is required), no late homework assignments will be accepted. If you encounter an emergency situation, it is best to communicate with me about it earlier rather than later. It is not fair to others who met the deadlines if I accept yours late. Also, no longer are technology problems reasonable excuses for late papers. **I suggest knowing technology well enough and allowing ample time in case of problems.** Before attempting any written assignment, please see the course packet for instructions and grading criteria. All assignments must be turned in by the due date or they will be considered late. **For the term paper only, late papers** will be graded for half credit. This is a severe penalty, but is better than zero points (plus, you get feedback on the assignment). It is not fair to others who met the deadlines if I accept your assignments late. I will not accept either of these assignments more than one week late.

Academic Dishonesty. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, and sabotage. A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions ranging from admonition to expulsion from the University. Of particular concern in a course with written and oral assignments is the issue of plagiarism. Plagiarism is defined by Webster's (1989) as "the appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and thoughts of another author, and representation of them as one's original work" (p. 1100). In other words, plagiarism is stealing. You must cite your sources accurately and consistently in both your oral and written assignments. Penalties for plagiarism will vary according to severity and will range from a failing grade to prosecution through the University System. Please note: Your term paper will be uploaded to turnitin.com.

Acceptable Student Behavior: This course is designed to foster and maintain a positive learning environment. Your active participation during discussions will be encouraged and questions or comments at any time during lectures are welcomed. Importantly, all comments and responses should be friendly and respectful of the other students in the class. Diversity of perspectives is critical to a liberal arts education so you are free to share viewpoints which may differ from others in the class. Again, please do so in a respectful way and support your responses with evidence and data. Finally, class will begin promptly at the scheduled time. If extraordinary circumstances exist that require some deviation from these policies (e.g., family emergency), please email/message me. I know many of our students work, are parents, or are caregivers to others so I am happy to work with you on scheduling issues. Please feel free to share any further suggestions for maintaining a positive learning environment that you may have.

Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at www.unt.edu/csrr

Writing quality assumptions. Every assignment you turn in must be of quality, both in content and style. I will not accept papers with significant grammatical and typographical errors. I expect you to take advantage of the programs that guard against such errors; however, there is no substitute for good proofreading. Papers, particularly on the essay assignments must conform to APA standards. I will provide models of exemplary papers from past classes as resources.

Completing the Course. Students are expected to complete all assignments for this course during the semester. Assigning a grade of “incomplete” is rare, and in order to request an “I,” the student must meet these requirements: a) The student must have completed at least 75% of the course assignments; b) The student must be passing the course; c) There must be an unforeseen and compelling reason why the course cannot be completed on time (usually a medical or military reason); and d) The student must present a plan for completing the assignments within the time period specified in the catalog.

Crisis Contingency. In the event of the university closing for weather-related reasons or illness outbreak, please refer to Canvas for instructions about how we will proceed.

Using technology in class. You may use laptops or tablets in this class to consult online readings or to take notes. However, any other use of these devices and the use of cell phones is prohibited. Place your phone on mute before you come to class.

What does research tell us about technology and class participation?

- “For the most effective learning and remembering, it was better for students to write or draw by hand versus typing out notes.” (Askvik, 2020)
- “Electronics are a major distraction in class and disrupt class discussion. There is literature that supports this claim, one of which includes: Fried, C.B. (2008). In-class laptop use and its effects on student learning. *Computers & Education*, 50(3), 906-914.”
- “(The technology companies) knew tech was addictive from early on. The warning signs were pretty clear. (The social media companies) design their technology to have social validation loops — the whole use of ‘likes’ is designed from the ground up to be addictive. They know intermittent reinforcement is more likely to push people to use it over and over again.” – Bradshaw & Kuchler, 2018

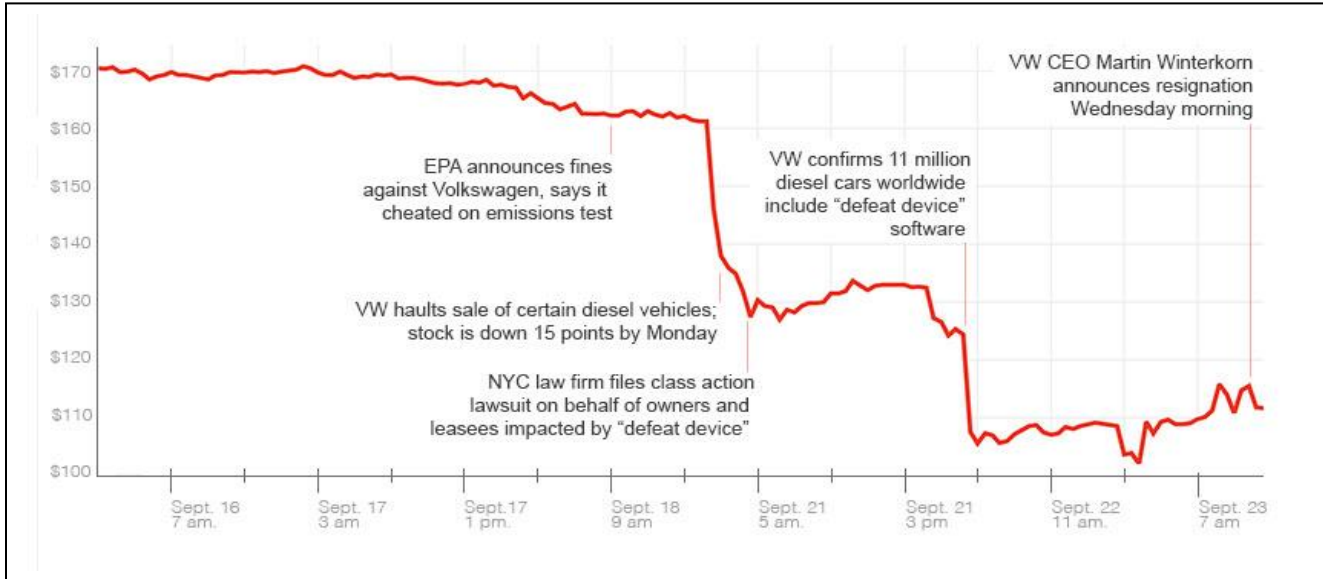
The Communication Studies Library is a valuable resource for students taking COMM courses. The library is located in GAB 318 and is staffed by COMM majors who can assist students with their projects and papers. The library has a large, searchable collection of scholarly books, e.g. *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, which are especially helpful for writing assignments. You can work in the library and/or the library staff can copy chapters from books so that you can work on them at home.

To make a reservation or request a scanned copy, email untcommlibrary@gmail.com. Our current catalog of books and handbooks is located on the communications Studies Website:

<https://communication.unt.edu/research/library>

First week drops: The instructor reserves the right to drop students who do not participate in first week activities if other students are attempting to add the course.

Poor organizational response to crisis can cost companies millions, as Volkswagen learned in 2015.



Tentative Course Schedule & Key Dates

With some exceptions, we'll generally follow the order of the book. I'll keep you updated on what to read each week through in-class and Canvas announcements.

- Ch. 1: Introduction to Crisis Communication
- Ch. 2: Theorizing about Crisis and Crisis Communication
- Ch. 4: Theories of Communication and Crisis Development
- Ch. 5: Theories of Communication and Crisis Outcomes
- Ch. 7: Theories of Crisis Communication and Legacy Media
- Ch. 8: Theories of Social Media and Crisis Communication
- Ch. 9: Theories of Influence and Crisis Communication
- Ch. 6: Theories of Communication and Emergency Coping and Response
- Ch. 3: Theories of Communication and Warning
- Ch. 10: Theories of Communication and Risk Management
- Ch. 11: Theories of Crisis Communication and Ethics
- Ch. 12: Applying Theories of Crisis Communication

Key Dates:

- **Feb. 28 at noon – March 1 at noon** - online Exam I
- March 9 – Discuss term paper proposal assignment
- **March 13-18 – SPRING BREAK**
- March 24 – Term paper proposals due
- **April 4 at noon – April 5 at noon** - online Exam II
- April 6 – Term paper assignment workshop
- April 21 at 11:59 p.m. – Term papers due via Canvas
- April 25 – Crisis response analysis (term paper) presentation workshop
- May 2 & 4 – 5-minute presentations of crisis response analysis (term papers)
- **May 9 at noon – May 10 at noon** – online Exam III



Appendix

Learning Outcome	Activities to Support Learning	Assessment of Learning
To enhance your understanding of what constitutes a crisis, particularly from an organizational perspective	Assigned readings; guest lectures; lecture; class discussions; written or video case studies.	Homework assignments; discussion posts; exams; Organizational/individual crisis response analysis
To enhance your understanding of the stages of an organizational crisis and salient activity within these stages.	Assigned readings; lectures; Class discussions; written or video case studies.	Homework assignments; discussion posts; exams; Organizational/individual crisis response analysis
To enhance your understanding of seminal theories of crisis communication.	Assigned readings; Class discussions; lectures; written or video case studies.	Homework assignments; discussion posts; exams; Organizational/individual crisis response analysis
To develop skills for understanding, analyzing, and critiquing an organization's (or individual's) response to a crisis situation.	Assigned readings; lectures; Class discussions; written or video case studies; review of a particular organization or individual's response to a crisis (or disaster).	Homework assignments; discussion posts; exams; Organizational/individual crisis response analysis
To enhance your understanding of the experiences of actual crisis/disasters managers.	Guest lectures; Q&A of guest speakers.	Exams

Credits; thanks to the following scholars who shared their syllabi with me, which helped form this syllabus: Anne McIntosh, Carol Mills, Joseph Giomboni, Burton St. John, Tamara Burk, Donna Elkins, Christopher Caldiero, Michael Pagano, Nikolaos Linardopoulos, Kristina Drumheller, Mark Congdon, Andrew Pyle, Jennifer Gregg.