Josh Siegel in the 1030 section made an interesting request in Thursday’s class. He asked me if there was a way I could boil down what I’ve taught to the essentials. Was he trying to tell me that my course was more noise than it was signal? Maybe, and maybe he’s right. I told him that I’d think about it, and I have, and here’s what I think:

I agree that between the reading, the coursepack, the website, the handouts, the lectures there are a lot of parts in this class in this class, and they may not seem to be moving together in symphony, to use GR’s term. I’d argue that while it may appear to be a chaotic jumble, there is an underlying design to the course. But I can also understand how it might only become visible if you see it from about 30,000 feet up. With everything else you’re doing in addition to the work in this class, I wouldn’t expect any one of you to be in a position see things from that lofty perspective. You are just scratching and clawing from one deadline to the next. I understand.

There have been times when I’ve wondered if I am giving you too much, more than you can possibly assimilate and use. But I justify it because a lot of it you should have been taught earlier in your education, and because for most of you there won’t be an opportunity for you to get it later. This class would be so much easier for you and for me if I had the fifteen weeks in a semester to teach it rather than the ten-week quarter, but, alas, that is not our situation, nor is it likely ever to be. But Josh’s question made me think that if I am to throw so much at you, then I also have an obligation to help youunderstand the design that lies underneath the seeming chaos.

So here goes.

This course is about giving you the tools to package your ideas more effectively. That means, first, being clear about what you want to say: second, saying what you mean; and third, saying it in ways that are compelling and memorable.

In order to do that, you need to be clear in your own mind what you want to say, and the course tools taught to help you with that are the situation analysis, the free write, the ‘content’ step in ‘content, clarity, correctness’, and the creativity chapters in *Presentation Zen*.

The course tools for the second part, to say what you mean, are first, the message strategies summarized on p. 26 in the coursepack: second, the clarity and correctness steps in which I shared ideas about formatting, paragraphs, an effective sentence writing: and third, the theme I’ve been developing in the last couple of weeks about signal vs. noise, maximum effect, minimum means.

The third part, communicating in compelling and memorable ways, particularly when the communications challenge is a persuasive one, is not possible unless you’ve already succeeded in the first two steps, but it’s the part that I think is the most fun and the most interesting. And it will differentiate you from the hackers and journeymen communicators out there against whom you will be competing. Most business communications in the work world are awful to mediocre, and there is a tremendous opportunity for you to stand out if you can master even a few of the skills I’m teaching in this class.

What are those skills? First developing and using your emotional and social intelligence; second, thinking proactively, and developing a strong, personal (yang) communications style; third, using figures of speech and other rhetorical tools; fourth, adopting a Presentation Zen aesthetic when making oral presentation.

That’s pretty much it. The rest of the course—the assignments, the drill sheets, the quizzes, the joke telling, the group work, the oral presentation—are simply opportunities for you to, learn, practice, and master these skills.

So this is my best response to Josh’s request: The essence of the course is in the three steps: know what you want to say, say what you mean, and say it memorably. In preparing for the in-class midterm next week, ask yourself where, in the seeming chaos of all the details, does any one detail fit in this three-part scheme. Maybe that will help bring some order to the chaos. Maybe not. But remember, it’s not just about memorizing the material to pass the test; it’s about understanding it well enough so that you might actually use it.

And so of course, I’m giving you this midterm not to torture you, but to give you the opportunity to reacquaint yourself with the material presented earlier in the quarter so that you might see how it connects to what we’ve been talking about more recently.

It. is. all. connected.

And the Persuasive Talk and the Business Plan presentation are also opportunities for you—dare I hope for it?—to actually use what you’ve been taught.