University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
19:122:EXW (4 semester hours)  
Magazine Reporting and Writing  
Spring 2012 Syllabus

Mondays and Wednesdays  
3:30-5:20

Professor: Don McLeese  
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(email is a far more efficient way to reach me than any of the phone numbers posted above, which I rarely answer and only sporadically check for voice mail.)

Office hours:

in Des Moines:  
Thurs.: 4:30-5:30, 8-9  
(or by appointment)

online:  
MW: 2:30-3:30

in Iowa City or by phone: by appointment

Because of the logistics of my online/distance arrangement, times for face-to-face meetings might be less regular than you’re accustomed to with other professors (particularly for those of you in Iowa City). I will be in Iowa City at least one Friday a month for morning faculty meetings (and student appointments I can schedule in the afternoon).

For those who can meet in Des Moines, I have far more flexibility than my office hours indicate. And I’m obsessive (pathological?) about email, so I think you’ll find that
connecting with me is easier than with those professors who might restrict access to the mandatory three office hours per week.

**COURSE OVERVIEW**
The aim of this course is to help the student develop the skills and sharpen the instincts involved in researching, reporting, writing and publishing magazine articles. Through conceiving, pitching, researching, organizing, shaping and revising (and revising and revising) a variety of material, you will have the opportunity to do work that is important to you as well as marketable to magazines (and other freelance features outlets). While improving your ability to write clearly and to gather information responsibly, you’ll have the chance to discover and develop your journalistic voice.

Although there are story formats that we will survey, there is no magic formula for crafting a great story, nor a set of rules to memorize. Instead, the process of writing each story involves dozens to hundreds of decisions (intuitive or otherwise), questions for which there is no single correct answer. As we learn our craft through osmosis and trial and error, each story teaches us the best way to tell it.

Questions writers need to ask themselves: What makes this a story worth telling? What is the point of it? What viewpoints need to be included within it? How should the story be researched? Who should be interviewed? Where should the story start? How should it end? How long should it be, and how should that space be filled to sustain the reader’s interest? What tone should the writer adopt? What is the writer’s attitude toward the topic? Is it a fair, objective story? (Should it be?) What sort of relationship does the writer develop with the reader?

A related set of considerations informs the marketing process: What sort of publication (print, web or whatever) features articles such as this? What is the hook that will grab an editor’s attention? What sort of reader is the piece likely to attract? Who is this reader? What does he or she know? What does he or she want to know? How long will the article take to complete? (And how much will the writer need to be paid to make that time cost effective? Or is there some sort of value that the writer might receive through the publication in lieu or in addition to payment?)

This course will also reflect the radical changes in the journalism marketplace, the ways in which the Internet has made it possible to publish your own work, promote yourself, and research and brainstorm story ideas. Blogging, Facebook and Twitter have become crucial tools in helping a writer progress from amateur to professional, while providing creative outlets along the way.

I will not insist that you maintain a blog. But I will encourage those who have one to use it and share it in this course. (Please send links to me and I’ll post them on ICON.) And I would encourage those who don’t have one to start one—which is advice given by practically every visiting professional in recent years. In the professional marketplace,
what you publish (either on your own or through others) is who you are. Your work is far more important in your professional advancement than your grades.

In addition to writing a lot, the best way to develop as a writer is by reading a lot—reading critically, from a writer’s perspective, conscious of all the decisions involved, responding to what works and what doesn’t (and why). Students are encouraged (and expected) to read voraciously, to devour everything from newspapers (where shorter articles might inspire ideas for longer magazine features) to general interest magazines to special interest publications, to the work of fellow students (your peer group as well as your competition).

As an integral part of the course, each student will be required to select at least one story to discuss in class (or one blog), a discussion that will also include the philosophy and personality of the publication. We will schedule these as the semester progresses, with the student who is presenting sharing a link or an attachment for other students to read in advance of the class discussion. Students can also write an analysis reflecting this assignment for extra credit.

Flexibility of mind is a crucial attribute in a journalist and one that will be encouraged here. Though we will generally adhere to the syllabus as far as textbook reading assignments and writing deadlines are concerned, this class will exercise the latitude to respond to current events, engage in in-class readings and exercises and accommodate guest speakers as their schedules permit. Just as the working journalist often has no idea when starting work that morning what assignments might come during the day, each class period should include the possibility of surprise and spontaneity, rather than conforming to a syllabus etched in stone.

Without abandoning the role relationships of professor and student, this course will attempt to generate the give and take of an editor and writers, with class sessions frequently functioning like workshops, story meetings and brainstorming sessions and rarely like lecture periods. The online dimension of this class makes it all the more contemporary, as there are editors with whom I’ve enjoyed a close working relationship for years or even decades, and all our exchanges have been online. Many of the editors with whom I’ve worked most closely and regularly I wouldn’t recognize if we passed on the street.

Being a feature writer isn’t something you do a few hours a day or learn over the course of a semester. It’s a way of life. It’s the manner in which you connect with the world, interpret it and respond to it, turning the totality of your experience into journalistic possibility. Story ideas are everywhere, and this course will encourage you to generate more ideas than you could possibly complete as stories.

If you can make a living writing about what interests you most, renewing your curiosity with each assignment, you’ll never find a better career. And if you enjoy what you do and have fun with your writing, your stories will reap the reward.
GRADING

Writers are judged primarily on their writing, and so will the students in this class, with 70% of the final grade determined by the grades on writing assignments. Grading will be weighted over the progression of the semester, both to reflect the greater length and ambitiousness to which the assignments build and to reward improvement from beginning to end:

1st feature (personal essay): 10% of final grade.
2nd feature (service/how-to): 10%.
3rd feature (personality profile): 20%.
4th feature (enterprise story): 30%.

Most story assignments will be preceded by a query or pitch letter, to which the professor will respond by approving the story topic and treatment or with suggestions for modification or a request for a different story proposal. The query is a crucial part of the shaping and focusing process, and we’ll be brainstorming these as part of the process of brainstorming story ideas.

Completed stories will be evaluated according to their overall effectiveness (the subjective but crucial quality of how the writing grabs the reader and sustains his interest), with points deducted for errors of spelling, grammar or other violations of the Associated Press Stylebook.

For the first feature, students should aim for a length of 500-750 words. For the second, 750-1000 words. For the profile, 1000-1500 words. For the final feature, students should aim for a length of 1500-2000. (Graduate students should be at higher end or above on length, particularly with the last two assignments.)

Grading standards are based on the standards of the marketplace. An A paper is a publishable story. (If I give you a C on an assignment and you can show me I’m wrong by finding a quality outlet to publish the piece, I will change that grade to an A. I will also determine what qualifies as a quality outlet.) Clean copy is a baseline standard. Both editors and general readers figure if you can’t be trusted with spelling a name right (look it up! even if you’re 95% sure), capitalize correctly or standardize your punctuation, you’re too careless to be trusted with the big stuff.

I’d like to share with you something from a syllabus by the late David Foster Wallace—genius novelist, gifted teacher, suicidal depressive:

“If you are used to whipping off papers the night before they’re due, running them quickly through the computer’s Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense and having the professor accept them ‘because the ideas are good’ or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one’s ideas and the quality of those ideas’ verbal expression, and I will not
accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding.

You can consider those standards my own (though, have no fear, I am not a suicidal depressive).

Upon request, each student must be able to provide a list of sources consulted and subjects interviewed (with contact information). The professor reserves the right to request additional materials, including tapes or transcripts of interviews. All work is expected to be new and original to this class (no stories previously assigned or published elsewhere or written for a different class).

All stories are due in the ICON dropbox before the BEGINNING of class on the deadline date. (Occasionally I'll request that assignments be submitted even earlier, so I have the chance to look them over before class discussion.) Deadlines are crucial for the working writer, not to be violated unless permission has been negotiated in advance (which it rarely will be in this course, and only in exceptional circumstances). Late papers will be penalized a full letter grade per day. Thus a paper due on Monday that would have merited an A will receive a C if it isn’t turned in until Wednesday.

Since rewriting is an integral part of the process of magazine writing, students will be allowed, and frequently encouraged, to revise a piece in response to suggestions on the graded paper. (Most assignment drafts will also be workshopped in class before the initial grade.) For the final three assignments, you will have the option of revising your story to raise your grade by as much as a letter. Only students who have presented drafts on time to workshop and who have turned in their features by deadline will be permitted to revise for a higher grade.

Of the remainder of the final grade, 30% will reflect class attendance and participation, presence in mind as well as body. Prompt attendance (i.e. at the start of the class) is MANDATORY, and active discussion improves the class dynamic as well as your grade. Included within this percentage will be the story/blog presentation and discussion, query letters and any other ungraded written assignments (e.g. the “tell me your story” introductory exercise).

If you have to miss a class, are going to be late or need to leave early, let me know in advance. And if an assignment is due on a day that you have to miss, you’re still responsible for getting it in on time (or earlier).

Some of the closest calls in final grading are deciding between A/A-, A-/B+, B+/B etc., with the decision typically determined by class performance and extra credit (see below).

For extra credit, any student can write an analytical essay (1000 or so words, 4-5 pages) on the article or blog you’ve presented for discussion in class, using that analysis as a springboard for a reflection of what you’ve learned in this course.
There will be no final exam.

**TEXTBOOKS**
Feature & Magazine Writing by Sumner and Miller (Wiley-Blackwell)
On Writing Well (30th Anniversary Edition) by William Zinsser
(Quill/HarperCollins)

Books are available at the IMU Bookstore.

**Administrative Home**
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences is the administrative home of this course and governs matters such as the add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other related issues. Different colleges may have different policies. Questions may be addressed to 120 Schaeffer Hall, or see the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

**Electronic Communication**
University policy specifies that students are responsible for all official correspondences sent to their University of Iowa e-mail address (@uiowa.edu). Faculty and students should use this account for correspondences. *(Operations Manual, Ill.15.2. Scroll down to k.11.)*
Accommodations for Disabilities
A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet privately with the course instructor to make particular arrangements. See www.uiowa.edu/~sds/ for more information.

Academic Honesty
The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences expects all students to do their own work, as stated in the CLAS Code of Academic Honesty. Instructors fail any assignment that shows evidence of plagiarism or other forms of cheating, also reporting the student’s name to the College. A student reported to the College for cheating is placed on disciplinary probation; a student reported twice is suspended or expelled.

CLAS Final Examination Policies
Final exams may be offered only during finals week. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. Students should not ask their instructor to reschedule a final exam since the College does not permit rescheduling of a final exam once the semester has begun. Questions should be addressed to the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Curriculum.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint
Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit the instructor, then the course supervisor, and then the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident. See the CLAS Student Academic Handbook.

Understanding Sexual Harassment
Sexual harassment subverts the mission of the University and threatens the well-being of students, faculty, and staff. All members of the UI community have a responsibility to uphold this mission and to contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment should be reported immediately. See the UI Comprehensive Guide on Sexual Harassment for assistance, definitions, and the full University policy.

Reacting Safely to Severe Weather
In severe weather, class members should seek appropriate shelter immediately, leaving the classroom if necessary. The class will continue if possible when the event is over. For more information on Hawk Alert and the siren warning system, visit the Public Safety web site.

*These CLAS policy and procedural statements have been summarized from the web pages of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and The University of Iowa Operations Manual.

COURSE CALENDAR

Week one
Mon, Jan 16: No Class. MLK day.

Wed, Jan 18: Introduction and syllabus. Tell me your story.
For Mon.: Read Zinsser, ix-45. Write your story (500-750 words).

**Week two**
Mon, Jan 23: Submit and discuss your stories. (This is a warm-up exercise that won’t be graded.)

For Wed: Read F&MW, vii-38. Find a newspaper story (or news story from a website) that could be expanded into a magazine feature and present it (sending a link or attachment to the discussion page) to discuss

Wed, Jan 25: Brainstorm ideas for expansion of newspaper items into magazine features. What is a story? What are its elements?
For Mon.: Read Zinsser, 132-147

**Week three**
Mon, Jan 30: Introduction to the personal essay (writing assignment # 1).
Brainstorm ideas for personal essays.
For Wed.: F&MW 103-156. Go to the Resource Center or library and browse through Writers Market—discover a publication that might be a potential market for your work and be prepared to tell the class about it (name of pub, what it’s looking for, what it pays, etc.)

Wed, Feb 1: Brainstorm personal essays, discuss ideas and strategies, as well as potential markets.
For Mon: Write personal essays.

**Week four**
Mon, Feb 6: PERSONAL ESSAYS DUE and discussed.

Wed., Feb 8: Discuss query letters and the magazine marketplace, brainstorm on service/how-to story (writing assignment #2). Discuss personal essays.
For Mon: Read Hamilton 144-174, Zinsser, 116-131. Write query letters for feature assignment (letter needs to be written to a specific person at a specific publication, unless there’s a website query process).

**Week five**
Mon, Feb 13: Personal essays returned. Queries due and discussed.
For Wed: Read Zinsser, 49-94.

Wed, Feb 15: Troubleshooting on assignment #2, discuss examples.
For Mon: drafts due to workshop assign # 2

**Week six**
Mon, Feb 20: Workshop assign # 2
For Wed: revise assign #2
Wed, Feb 22: SERVICE/HOW-TO ARTICLE DUE and discussed
For Mon: Read Zinsser, 95-115, F&MW, 39-72

**Week seven**
Mon, Feb 27: Service article discussed and returned. Discuss social networking as a journalistic tool (for reporting, publicizing, publishing).
For Wed: Read Zinsser, 147-192, write query for personality profile.

Wed, Feb 29: Queries for assign #3 due. Introduction to interviewing and researching. The art and craft of the interview, how to prepare for and conduct one.

For Mon: Revise assign # 2 (optional)

**Week eight**
Mon, March 5: Optional revisions of assign # 2 due. Troubleshooting on personality profiles.
For Wed: Drafts of personality profile due for in-class workshopping.

Wed, March 7: Workshop profiles.
For Mon, March 19: Write profiles.

**Week nine**
Mon, Mar 12 and Wed, Mar 14: NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK

**Week ten**
Mon, Mar 19: Profiles due and discussed.
For Wed: Read F&MW, 157-205

Wed, Mar 21: Brainstorm enterprise story ideas-- finding the focus and the market for your story idea.
For Mon: Read Zinsser, 193-230, F&MW, 234-284

**Week eleven**
Mon, Mar 26: Profiles returned
For Wed: Write queries, F&MW, 285-304

Wed, Mar 28: Queries for enterprise stories due and discussed. Features that work and why.
Tips on making the longer feature flow and cohere.
For Mon.: Revise profiles (optional).

**Week twelve**
Mon, Apr 2: Optional profile revisions due. Discuss stories/blogs you’ve selected.
For Wed.: Write an outline and list of potential sources for third assignment.
Wed, Apr 4: Workshop outlines and source lists, Discuss stories/blogs you’ve selected.
For Mon: Read Zinsser, 230-304

**Week thirteen**
Mon, Apr 9 and Wed, Apr 11: Troubleshooting—who’s stuck, where and why? Discuss stories/blogs you’ve selected.

For Mon: Drafts of final features due for workshopping.

**Week fourteen**
Mon, Apr 16 and Wed, Apr 18: Workshop final features.
For Mon: Write final features.

**Week fifteen**
Mon, Apr 23: Final features due and discussed.
For Wed: Read posted final features.

Wed, Apr 25: Final features discussed.
For Mon: Read posted final features.

**Week sixteen**
Mon, April 30: Final stories discussed and returned. Anyone who wants to revise needs to submit the final version by Mon., May 7. Student evaluations of this course.
For Wed: Write optional extra credit essay.

Wed, May 2: Famous last words. Extra credit due.

No Final. Have a great summer.