University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication

JMC:3490:0EXW (4 semester hours)

Feature Reporting and Writing

Fall 2015 Syllabus

Mondays and Wednesdays
1:30-3:20

Professor: Don McLeese
E336 Adler
515-770-3894 (cell)

donald-mcleese@uiowa.edu

Office hours: Friday 12:30-1:30, after 2:45 (by appointment)
Online: Mon-Thurs: 9-10
Or by appointment

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 selling 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 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 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? How long will the article take to complete? (And how much will the writer need to be paid to make that time cost effective?)

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.

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 this end, all students will be required to read The New New Journalism, which comprises q-and-a interviews with top nonfiction writers on their craft, with MAP students leading discussions on individual journalists that they select from the book. (Undergrads can do the same 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.

Being a magazine 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 and/or twitter/facebook/social network reported): 15%.
3rd feature (personality profile): 20%.
4th feature (enterprise story): 30%.

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 and second features, students should aim for a length of 500-750 words. (Grad students, 750-1000.) For the third feature, students should aim for a length of 1000-1250 words. (Grad students 1250-1500.) For the fourth feature, students should aim for a length of 1500-2000. (Grad students 2000-2500.)

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.)

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 on the deadline date (typically the Sunday before Monday’s class), as an attachment to the ICON site. 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 Sunday that would have merited an A will receive a C if it isn’t turned in until Tuesday. If you have extenuation circumstances, which won’t likely be accepted as an excuse, please let me know BEFORE the deadline. No editor cares to learn after the fact why an assignment is late.

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. (Some papers will also be workshopped in class before the initial grade.) For the final three journalistic 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, 25% 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. Included within this evaluation will be any ungraded written assignments (e.g. the “tell me your story” introductory exercise).

If you can’t be here, are going to be late or need to leave early, let me know in advance.

There will be no final exam.

STUDENT COURSE OBJECTIVES:

*To learn how to employ storytelling techniques—description, dialogue, character development, narrative momentum—in human-interest journalism.
*To explore the types of feature-story formats and the magazines and websites that publish them.
*To develop tone and voice in one’s writing that will engage the target readership.
*To achieve storytelling depth through interviewing, reporting and researching.
*To learn that writing is mainly a process of revision (and revision and revision).
*To write stories that are both personally meaningful to the student and marketable to a general readership

TEXTBOOKS
Required
On Writing Well (30th Anniversary Edition) by William Zinsser (Quill/HarperCollins)
Writing Your Way by Don Fry (Writer’s Digest Books)

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Policies and Procedures

Teaching Policies & Resources — Syllabus Insert

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 Academic Policies Handbook at
http://clas.uiowa.edu/students/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, III.15.2, k.11).

Accommodations for Disabilities

A student seeking academic accommodations should first register with Student Disability Services and then meet with the course instructor privately in the instructor's office to make particular arrangements. See http://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/ for more information.

Academic Honesty

All CLAS students or students taking classes offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty: "I pledge to do my own academic work and to excel to the best of my abilities, upholding the IOWA Challenge. I promise not to lie about my academic work, to cheat, or to steal the words or ideas of others; nor will I help fellow students to violate the Code of Academic Honesty." Any student committing academic misconduct is reported to the College and placed on disciplinary probation or may be suspended or expelled (CLAS Academic Policies Handbook).

CLAS Final Examination Policies

The final examination schedule for each class is announced by the Registrar generally by the fifth week of classes. Final exams are offered only during the official final examination period. No exams of any kind are allowed during the last week of classes. All students should plan on being at the UI through the final examination period. Once the Registrar has announced the date, time, and location of each final exam, the complete schedule will be published on the Registrar's web site and will be shared with instructors and students. It is the student's responsibility to know the date, time, and place of a final exam.

Making a Suggestion or a Complaint

Students with a suggestion or complaint should first visit with the instructor (and the course supervisor), and then with the departmental DEO. Complaints must be made within six months of the incident (CLAS Academic Policies 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 Office of the Sexual Misconduct Response Coordinator 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 Department of Public Safety website.

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**COURSE CALENDAR**

**Week one**

Mon, Aug 24: Introduction and syllabus.
For Wed.: Read Zinsser obit on ICON and book introduction. Read Fry ch one.

Wed, Aug 26: Discussion of reading and story ideas.
For Mon.: Tell me your story: Write a 2-3 page (500-750 word) story about yourself, send to ICON dropbox on Sunday. (This is a warm-up exercise that won’t be graded.)

**Week two**
Mon, Aug 31: Discussion of your stories.
For Wed: Read Zinsser, Part I, ch 1-3; ch 14 “Writing About Yourself: The Memoir;”
read Fry ch eleven

Wed, Sept. 2: Discussion of personal essay and brainstorm ideas.
For Wed: Write personal essay (writing assignment # 1) due Tues, Sept 8.

**Week three**
**Mon, Sept 7: No class. Labor Day.**

Wed, Sept 9: Personal essays discussed.
For Mon.: Read Zinsser, ch 13 “Writing About Places: The Travel Article;” read Fry ch tw0-three

**Week four**
**Mon, Sept 14: Personal essays discussed and returned.**
For Wed: Read Fry ch four-five and be prepared to discuss story ideas generated from and/or researched on social networking sites.

Wed., Sept 16: Brainstorm story ideas for service article and/or articles researched through social networking.
For Mon: Read Zinsser Part I, Ch 4-7, Fry ch six, articles assigned

**Week five**
**Mon, Sept 21: Discuss how-to articles and other reading.**
For Wed: Write drafts to workshop.

Wed, Sept 23: Workshop assign #2 drafts.
For Mon: Assign #2 stories due Sunday; prepare to discuss on Monday

**Week six**
**Mon, Sept 28: Discuss assign #2.**
For Wed: Read Zinsser, Pt II, ch 8-9

Wed, Sept. 30: Discuss reading and assign #2
For Mon: Read Zinsser PT II, ch 10—Pt III ch 11, Fry ch seven

**Week seven**
**Mon, Oct 5: Assign #2 returned; optional revision due the following Monday. Brainstorm profile assign #3.**
For Wed: Read Zinsser, 12 “Writing About People: The Interview” and assigned profiles

Wed, Oct 7: Discuss assigned profiles
For Mon: Read Fry, Ch eight

**Week eight**
Mon, Oct 12: Assign #2 revisions returned. Discuss interviewing techniques and brainstorm possibilities for personality profile. Discuss NNJ
For Wed:

Wed, Oct 14: Final brainstorming and troubleshooting on personality profile
For Mon: Workshop drafts for assign #3

**Week nine**
Mon, Oct 19: Drafts for assign #3 due and workshopped
For Wed: Fry, ch nine

For Mon: Write personality profile, assgn #3, due Sunday

**Week ten**
Mon, Oct 26: Personality profiles due (on Sunday) and discussed.
For Wed: Read Zinsser, Ch 15-17

Wed, Oct 28: Personality profiles discussed, brainstorm queries for long form features – finding the focus and the market for your story idea for longer features.
For Mon: Queries for long-form feature discussed. Read Zinsser, Ch 18-19.

**Week eleven**
Mon, Nov 2: Profiles returned
For Wed: Read Zinsser,

Wed, Nov 4: Discuss NNJ and longer features.
For Mon: Read Zinsser, Pt IV. Write optional revisions.

**Week twelve**
Mon, Nov 9: Optional profile revisions due. Discuss enterprise stories
For Wed.: Read Fry, ch 10

Wed, Nov 11: Read and discuss enterprise stories, troubleshoot yours.
For Mon: Read Fry ch 11-12.

**Week thirteen**
Mon, Nov 16: Final troubleshooting on enterprise stories
For Wed: write final feature workshop drafts

Wed, Nov 18: Workshop final features.
For Mon, Nov 29: Drafts of final features due.

**Week fourteen**
No class. HAPPY THANKSGIVING
**Week fifteen**
Mon, Nov 30: Final features due (on Sunday) and discussed.

Wed, Dec 2: Continue discussion of final features.

**Week sixteen**
Mon, Dec 7: Final features returned. Anyone who wants to revise needs to submit the final version to ICON by Mon., Dec 14.

Wed, Dec 9: Debriefing and famous last words

**No Final. Have a great holiday break.**