JMC:3460:0001
(3 semester hours)
Arts and Culture Reporting and Writing
Spring 2021 Syllabus

Monday and Wednesday
2:00-3:15

Professor: Don McLeese

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Office/drop-in hours: Monday through Thursday, 12:15-1 p.m.

Or by appointment (email is generally the most efficient way to reach me).

COURSE OVERVIEW

The aim of this course is to immerse the student in arts journalism. Students will develop the skills and sharpen the instincts required for reviewing, criticizing, reporting, profiling and analyzing, and learn to apply their craft to coverage of both the popular arts and the (so-called) fine arts. I believe that such journalism represents a conversation with the culture at large, one that encompasses trends, new releases, classics, awards shows, the
responses of other arts journalists, social media and any other areas where we can
distinguish a creative pulse.

For the purpose of this course, everyone will be encouraged to be a generalist, to develop
a critical range that extends across the spectrum of arts typically covered in mainstream
journalism (from daily newspapers to alt-weeklies to general interest publications to arts
journals to blogs, podcasts and websites). Students can focus more on whatever interests
them most in the longer pieces, employing an expansive latitude in what qualifies as art.
If your journalistic ambition is to explore the “art” of video games, graphic novels, reality
TV, death metal or roadside restaurants, you’ll be permitted to write those pieces in this
class (though your reporting and writing will be judged by the same standards that would
apply if you were reviewing ballet or Shakespeare, not that your tone should be the
same).

You will be required to write a lot of short reviews (in the 350-500 word range), as well
as longer assignments that will extend your reach, range and scope. Occasional
assignments will have all students responding to the same piece of work; most
assignments will allow the students some or considerable leeway in selecting what to
review. By the end of the semester, you will have written a review of each of the
following: movie, TV program, visual art, music performance and/or recording.

In years past, I have also required book reviews and reviews of live theater and/or dance,
but things have changed—in journalism, technology and pandemic upheaval. So you will
be allowed, even encouraged, to stretch your skills over this wider terrain, but no longer
required. I also suspect that some or much that we previously consumed on other
platforms—often involving some physical interaction with other human beings—will
now be streamed. And some interviewing involved in reporting might well be Zoomed.

You will also read a lot of arts journalism and read a lot about arts journalism—-from
critiques of coverage to reviews of reviewers to analyses of the arts and arts journalism in
general. In the process, you will develop a critical eye in regard to arts coverage as well
as to the arts, and you will be encouraged to apply the lessons from the writing of
professional journalists to your own writing. Such readings will be posted on ICON and
assigned in class sessions and/or through announcements.

You will additionally learn from each other, responding to students’ work in class
discussions and workshop sessions, or on ICON discussion threads. You will learn to
recognize the wide range of valid responses to a single work—and to distinguish
between a compelling, provocative response and one that lacks authority.

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 writing deadlines are
concerned, this class will exercise the latitude to respond to current developments, engage
in in-class readings and reviewing exercises, and perhaps even 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 approximate the working relationship of an editor and writers, with class sessions frequently functioning like workshops, story meetings and brainstorming sessions, sometimes as viewing or listening sessions, and rarely like lecture periods.

Perhaps the most important requirement of this course is that you have fun. (That’s an order.) Your writing will be livelier and more engaging. Anyone who treats these assignments as obligations rather than opportunities will never be an arts journalist. This is an all-consuming vocation, not a 40-hour a week job. It’s a privilege to get paid to do what most people pay to do.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication is committed to your academic and professional success. In line with this commitment, we have identified particular learning outcomes that every student should obtain by the time they earn a JMC degree. You can find more information about these learning outcomes here: http://clas.uiowa.edu/sjmc/undergraduate-programs/assessment. We regularly assess the curriculum to determine whether students are achieving these outcomes. This course contributes to the following learning outcomes:

3. Writing and Storytelling Learning Goal
Understand that clear, concise, correct writing is at the heart of journalistic expression and that reporting and communicating it effectively requires a knowledge and achievement of the highest, professionally-accepted standards in all work.

Learning Objective 1: Students will demonstrate the ability to gather factual story elements, and to evaluate and express them in logical, narrative forms for multiple media and audiences.

Learning Objective 2: Students will display the ability to access and analyze data, report facts accurately, research and edit information responsibly and in a manner commensurate with professional standards.

Learning Objective 3: Students will demonstrate the ability to apply above concepts in a manner that is sensitive to audiences across all media.

4. Multiculturalism Learning Goal
To demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups (including communities defined by gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion and sexual orientation) in a global society in relationship to communications.

Learning Objective 1: Students will demonstrate an ability to produce media that serve the needs and interests of diverse communities and reflect their voices and experiences.

Learning Objective 2: Students will demonstrate sensitivity to and understanding of the cultures, histories, perspectives, and socio-economic and political situations of diverse groups.
Learning Objective 3: Students will demonstrate an ability to work with members of diverse groups to engage publicly over issues of community interest.

This class has other, course specific outcomes as well…

- *To sharpen the observational, experiential and communicative skills required to respond to arts and entertainment with more than personal opinion, gut instinct and kneejerk reaction.*
- *To recognize the differences in depth and scope between criticism and consumer reviewing.*
- *To familiarize oneself with a wide range of professional arts journalism, learning what to do (and not) in the process.*
- *To learn how to create and construct engaging critical responses that capture and hold the reader’s attention.*
- *To develop the skills required to write the longer pieces that arts journalism often requires, becoming adapt at interviewing, reporting and analyzing in the process.*
- *To recognize the issues and elements that all arts criticism has in common, as well as the differences inherent in responding to different forms of art and entertainment.*
- *To learn to recognize and engage in valid critical arguments, whether or not one agrees with a particular perspective.*
- *To learn how to develop cogent, coherent arguments and analyses, to sharpen the skills involved in persuasive writing, for use in communications that extend well beyond arts/entertainment journalism or even journalism in general.*

GRADING

Writers are judged primarily on their writing, and so will the students in this class, with 75% of the final grade determined by the grades on writing assignments. Grading will be weighted over the progression of the semester, to reward improvement from beginning to end:

Reviews: 30%
Midterm Profile or Think Piece: 20%
Final Enterprise Trend or Issue Feature: 25%

Review assignments should aim for 350-500 words (I’m less concerned with whether you go longer than if you go significantly shorter.)

For the midterm profile of an artist or someone involved in the arts, or think piece, aim for approximately 1,000-1,200 words. For the final trend, issue or enterprise feature—aim for 1,500-1,750.
For both the midterm and final feature, you will have the option of revising your story to raise your grade on that assignment by as much as a letter. Only students who have presented drafts on time to participate in workshopping and who have turned in their features by deadline will be permitted to revise for a higher grade.

You must engage in interviewing and reporting for either the midterm or final feature, and preferably both. If you write a profile for the midterm, you will be permitted to submit a single-source story, interviewing the subject. The final story should involve multiple interviews, if you are writing an enterprise story, though those who have done a profile for the midterm will have the option of writing a longer think piece for the final story. (If all this seems confusing, don’t worry—we’ll clarify as the semester progresses.)

On all assignments, pieces will be evaluated according to incisiveness, accuracy and effectiveness (the subjective but crucial quality of how the writing grabs this reader and sustains his interest), with points deducted for errors of spelling, grammar or other violations of the Associated Press Stylebook.

Grading standards are based on the standards of the marketplace. An A paper is a publishable piece. (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. With no disrespect intended toward the Daily Iowan or other student publications, these don’t count.) A B paper needs more work on precision, cohesion and/or framing. A C might have a good idea or two but require more substantial revision.

All work is expected to be new and original to this class (no stories previously published elsewhere or written for a different class). You will be encouraged to find outlets to publish your work, since clips will benefit a prospective journalist more than grades, but such work should be submitted here before it is accepted elsewhere. If you are trying to coordinate assignments for this class with work you’re doing for the DI or other publications, let’s discuss. I don’t want to see a review handed in that I’ve already read in the paper, without a prior conversation.

All stories are due by deadline, posted to dropbox (or, occasionally, discussion thread) of the ICON site. Deadlines are crucial for the working journalist, not to be violated unless permission has been negotiated in advance (which it rarely will be in this class, and only in exceptional circumstances). Late papers will be penalized a full letter grade per day. Thus a paper due on Tuesday that would have merited an A will receive a C if it isn’t turned in until Thursday. Again, no revisions will be permitted on those longer assignments if they are turned in late.

The remaining 25% of the final grade will reflect class attendance and participation, presence of mind as well as body. Any ungraded assignments will be included within this grade. On previous syllabi, I have always insisted that attendance is *MANDATORY*. Let me make a confession: As much as I have stressed attendance and participation, and
continue to do so, I use this percentage of your final grade mainly to reward rather than punish.

By which I mean that if the written work comprising the rest of your final grade is consistently at an A level or a B level, I won’t give you a lower final grade on the basis of attendance and performance. So, here’s the deal: I feel that the class is better when you are here and participating. I feel like the level of your engagement seems higher when your camera is on, particularly when you are talking. Even if you have logged in, if your camera isn’t on and you aren’t participating by talking and/or chat-box typing, I have no way of knowing whether you are here or not.

If I know you are here and participating, you will certainly reap the rewards of a better educational experience, and you might well reap the rewards of a (slightly) higher final grade. A student whose writing is a solid B, occasionally a B+, could earn an A- as a final grade by being one of the stronger contributors, by consistently showing up and adding to the discussion.

I don’t have a system of points for how much you talk and type, and I don’t have a rubric. But I know who is contributing and who isn’t. And how much. Along with everything else that has been up in the air during this extended pandemic, our class schedule might be subject to change as the semester progresses. I have listed this as a synchronous online course, which means we all connect to meet at the scheduled times. But we’ll see how this dynamic plays out as we go along. Some class days might find you reviewing something without our meeting, and/or contributing to discussion on an ICON thread.

For extra credit, at the end of the semester, you will have the option of writing a paper (750-1250 words) analyzing your own critical perspective, why you like what you like and don’t like what you don’t like, how you feel the arts function (or should function) within society. Including work from other critics with whom you agree or disagree could help bolster your analysis. Showing how this course has helped shape your perspective (or not) should be a component.

There will be no final exam.

TEXTBOOK

I previously taught this course several times without using any textbook, because there was none on the market that I considered suitable for teaching journalistic coverage of a wide range of arts. We now have one—but I had to write it. The text was largely inspired and shaped by my teaching of this course and interactions with students within it, and I’m happy to be able to inflict the printed version on you.

A couple of notes: My book contract called for a flat fee with no per-sale royalties, so I’m not trying to squeeze any extra nickels and dimes out of you by assigning (you should be able to find used copies pretty cheap). And we’ll augment the journalistic examples in the textbook (and skip some) by assigning the reading of more current reviews and features, ranging far beyond *The New York Times* (though including plenty from the NYT as well).

Now a decade old, this book predated the shift of arts and entertainment journalism to online and multimedia platforms, which we’ll thoroughly cover in class. The book focuses on writing about the arts, responding to them, thinking about them—with principles and processes that have not changed.

**The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences:**

**Teaching Policies & Resources — Syllabus Insert**

*College of Liberal Arts and Sciences*
*Information for Undergraduates Spring 2021*

**Absences and Attendance**
Students are responsible for attending class and for contributing to the learning environment of a course. Students are also responsible for knowing course absence policies, which vary by instructor. All absence policies, however, must uphold the UI policy related to student illness, mandatory religious obligations, including Holy Day obligations, unavoidable circumstances, and University authorized activities ([https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences](https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/attendance-absences)). Students may use the CLAS absence form to aid communication with the instructor who will decide if the absence is excused or unexcused; the form is located on ICON within the top banner under "Student Tools."

**Academic Integrity**
All undergraduates enrolled in courses offered by CLAS have in essence agreed to the College's [Code of Academic Honesty](https://clas.uiowa.edu). Academic misconduct affects a student's related grade and is reported
to the College which applies an additional sanction including suspension. Outcomes about misconduct are communicated through UI email ([https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/academic-fraud-honor-code](https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/academic-fraud-honor-code)).

**Accommodations for Disabilities**

UI is committed to an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (such as a mental health, attention, learning, vision, and a physical or health-related condition) by registering with Student Disability Services (SDS). The student is then responsible for discussing specific accommodations with the instructor. More information is at [https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/](https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/).

**Administrative Home of the Course**

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS) is the administrative home of this course and governs its add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and related policies. Other UI colleges may have different policies for courses offered by that college. CLAS policies may be found here: [https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook](https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook).

**Classroom Expectations**

Students are expected to comply with University policies regarding appropriate classroom behavior as outlined in the Code of Student Life ([https://dos.uiowa.edu/policies/code-of-student-life/](https://dos.uiowa.edu/policies/code-of-student-life/)). This includes related UI policies and procedures that all students have agreed to regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, each student must wear a face mask when in a UI building, including a classroom. The density of seats in classrooms has been reduced, and in some instances, this will allow 6 feet or more of distance while other cases, it may be less. Regardless, wearing a face mask and maintaining as much distance as is possible are vital to slowing the spread of COVID-19. In the event that a student disrupts the classroom environment through the failure to comply with a reasonable directive of an instructor or of the University, the instructor has the authority to ask that the student to leave the space immediately for the remainder of the class
period. Additionally, the instructor is asked to report the incident to the UI Office of Student Accountability, with the possibility of additional follow-up with the student. Students who need temporary alternative learning arrangements (TALA) for a future semester related to COVID-19 should visit this website for more information: https://coronavirus.uiowa.edu/temporary-alternative-learning-arrangements-tala.

Class Recordings: Privacy and Sharing
Some sessions of a course could be recorded or live-streamed. Such a recording or streaming will only be available to students registered for the course. These recordings are the intellectual property of the faculty, and they may not be shared or reproduced without the explicit written consent of the faculty member. Students may not share these sessions with those who are not enrolled in the course; likewise, students may not upload recordings to any other online environment. Doing so is a breach of the Code of Student Conduct and in some cases is a violation of the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

Communication and the Required Use of UI Email
Students are responsible for official correspondences sent to the UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for all communication within or with UI (Operations Manual, III.15.2).

Complaints
Students with a complaint about an academic issue should first visit with the instructor or course supervisor and then with the Chair of the department or program offering the course; students may next bring the issue to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. See this page for more information: https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/student-rights-responsibilities.

Final Examination Policies
The final exam schedule is announced around the fifth week of classes; students are responsible for knowing the date, time, and place of a final exam. Students should not make travel plans until
knowing this information. No exams of any kind are allowed the week before finals with a few exceptions made for particular types of courses such as labs or off-cycle courses: https://registrar.uiowa.edu/final-examination-scheduling-policies.

**Nondiscrimination in the Classroom**
The University of Iowa is committed to making the classroom a respectful and inclusive space for people of all gender, sexual, racial, religious, and other identities. Toward this goal, students are invited in MyUI to optionally share the names and pronouns they would like their instructors and advisors to use to address them. The University of Iowa prohibits discrimination and harassment against individuals on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, and other identity categories set forth in the University’s Human Rights policy. For more information, contact the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity (https://diversity.uiowa.edu/eod; +1 319 335-0705 or (diversity.uiowa.edu)

**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 must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment must be reported immediately. For assistance, please see https://osmrc.uiowa.edu/.

**COURSE CALENDAR**

**Week one**
Mon, Jan 25
Wed: Introduction and syllabus. Initial reviewing discussion and exercises.

**Week two**
Mon, Feb 1: Read AC, Intro and Chapter 1. With a side trip into Aristotle’s Poetics, complete with your own sparknotes cheat sheet
Week three
Mon, Feb 8: Read AC Ch 2 (popular music)

Week four
Mon, Feb 15: Read AC Ch 3 (classical music et al.)
Music reviews due and discussed.

Week five
Mon, Feb 22: Read Ch 4 (visual arts). Discuss differences btw spatial and temporal arts.
Short response on spatial and temporal arts due.

Week six
Mon, March 1: Read intro to Pt II, Ch 9 (profiles) Discuss personality profiles and troubleshooting
Wed, March 3: PIR Guest—Andre Perry, exec director Englert Theater

Week seven
Mon, March 8: Read AC Ch 5 (theater)

Week eight
Mon, March 15: Read AC 6 (film) and film reviews

Week nine
March 22: Read and discuss assigned profiles. Discuss interviewing techniques.

Week ten
Mon, March 29: Workshop profiles. Read Ch 8 (books)
**Week eleven**
Mon, April 5: Profiles due and discussed.
Read ch 7 (television) and discuss TV rvws.

Wed: More profile discussion

**Week twelve**
Mon, April 12: Profiles returned, WILD CARD review (art, theater, book, other to be approved) due.

Wed April 14: NO CLASS. According to the official academic calendar, This instructional break is to provide a brief respite from instruction. No classes, exams, or assignments should be due.
So, in other words, enjoy your spring break!

**Week thirteen**
Mon, April 19: Read Ch 10 (enterprise stories) and epilogue. Brainstorm enterprise stories.

Wed: In class deadline review

**Week fourteen**
Mon, April 26: Workshop drafts for enterprise stories due

**Week fifteen**
Mon, May 3: Final features due and discussed. Optional extra credit discussed.

No Final. Have a great break.