University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication  
JMC:3490:0EXW  
(4 semester hours)  
Feature Reporting and Writing  
Fall 2017 Syllabus  
Professor: Don McLeese  
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Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday: 1-1:45; 3:15-4 or by appointment  

COURSE OVERVIEW  
Welcome to the grand experiment! I have been teaching courses online for a few years, but this is the first time I have taught one that is “asynchronous.” That’s a fancy word that means we don’t meet at the same time on the same days, as my previous online courses did.  

Instead, you will read the assigned material at your convenience, keeping pace with the syllabus, conduct “discussions” and workshopping sessions through online ICON posts, communicate with me through email (and appointments and office visits) and submit assigned pieces by the deadline through ICON.  

Any questions?  

Because this is a shakedown cruise for this particular course, I am reserving the right to make adjustments as we go along, through weekly posts that will help guide you through the material and the assignments. I anticipate posting these early in the week, as commentary on assigned reading and writing, in reflection of where we’ve been and where we’re going.  

I may well be emailing you daily, or at least so often that you consider it spam. I want to make sure that none of you feel like you are floundering in isolation, and I want to make sure the course encompasses all that we would include if we were in a classroom or otherwise meeting as a group.
And the more feedback that I receive from you on these, the better we all will be. (You’ll see that a percentage of your final grade reflects class participation, though such participation in this case will be totally online—in response to posts from other students, from me and on discussion topics.) I want to hear what’s working for you, and what isn’t.

Other than the format, the course is very similar in focus to the version I have previously taught in the classroom. Its aim is to help the student develop the skills and sharpen the instincts involved in researching, reporting, writing and publishing feature 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. What does the reader need to know? Why should the reader care about this at all?

Here are some of the 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.

Without abandoning the role relationships of professor and student, this course will attempt to generate the give and take of an editor and writers. Even more so than in the classroom versions of the course, much of the learning will take place through one-on-one interaction between each student and me, as we proceed from the original idea through various drafts to produce the best version you can write.

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.

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GRADING

Writers are judged primarily on their writing, and so will the students in this class, with 80% 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 (descriptive story on visiting someplace and enticing someone to do the same): 10%.

3rd feature (personality profile): 20%.

4th feature (enterprise story): 40%.
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, submitted through ICON. 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 the two longer pieces in response to suggestions on the graded paper. (Some papers will also be workshopped before the initial grade.) For the final two 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, 20% will reflect class participation. Included within this evaluation will be any ungraded written assignments (e.g. the “tell me your story” introductory exercise).

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

21st Century Feature Writing by Carla Johnson (Pearson)

On Writing Well (30th Anniversary Edition) by William Zinsser (Quill/HarperCollins)

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 https://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 The University of Iowa is committed to providing an educational experience that is accessible to all students. A student may request academic accommodations for a disability (which includes but is not limited to mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related conditions). 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. Reasonable accommodations are established through an interactive process between the student, instructor, and SDS. See https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/ for information.

Nondiscrimination in the Classroom The University of Iowa is committed to making the classroom a respectful and inclusive space for all people irrespective of their gender, sexual, racial, religious or other identities. Toward this goal, students are invited to optionally share their preferred names and pronouns with their instructors and classmates. 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, diversity@uiowa.edu, or visit diversity.uiowa.edu.

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.

COURSE CALENDAR

Week one (8/21)
Introduction and syllabus. Read FW 1-2, Zinn, Intro and Pt 1

Week two (8/28)
What is your story? What is your voice?
FW 3, Zinn Pt 2

Week three (9/5)
“Tell me your story” story due (on Tues, with Labor Day Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions. Zinn Pt 3

Week four (9/11)
“Story” returned. Personal essay brainstorming on discussion board. FW 4, Zinn Pt 4

Week five (9/18)
Personal essay due (on Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions

Week six (9/25)

Week seven (10/2)
Descriptive story due (Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions.

Week eight (10/9)
Assignment returned. Read posted profiles. Read FW 5-6

Week nine (10/16)
Brainstorm profile subjects

Week ten (10/23)
Workshop profile drafts. Read FW 7

Week eleven (10/30)
Profiles due (Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions. Read FW 8

Week twelve (11/6)
Profiles returned and optional revisions due (TBA) Brainstorm enterprise stories.

Week thirteen (11/13)
Work on enterprise stories. Read posted examples and FW 9-11

Week fourteen (11/20)
Thanksgiving break.

Week fifteen (11/27)
Workshop enterprise stories

Week sixteen (12/5)
Final enterprise stories due and discussed. No final exam—stories returned and optional revisions due during finals week.