University of Iowa: School of Journalism and Mass Communication
JMC:3490:0EXW

Feature Reporting and Writing
Fall 2018 Syllabus

(3 semester hours)
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Office hours: MW 12:30-2:00
Or by appointment

COURSE OVERVIEW

I have been teaching courses online for a few years, but this is only the second time I have taught this course in the manner that is known as “asynchronous.” That’s a fancy term that means we don’t meet at the same time on the same days, as my other online courses have.

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?

When we first experimented with this format last fall, the course worked great, with students interacting on the discussion board and in workshop sessions as effectively as they might in a classroom. I expect no less this time through, and I believe that constant contact is the key. I anticipate posting some guidelines early each 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, 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.

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. For the third feature, students should aim for a length of 1000-1250 words. For the fourth
feature, students should aim for a length of 1500-2000. I am less concerned with your going longer than with stories that are much shorter.

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), participation on discussion boards and workshop groups, and interaction with the professor.

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

Feature & Magazine Writing (3rd edition is most recent, but 2nd is also fine) by David E. Sumner and Holly G. Miller

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 (CLAS) is the administrative home of this course and governs its add/drop deadlines, the second-grade-only option, and other policies. These policies vary by college (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook).

Electronic Communication
Students are responsible for official correspondences sent to their UI email address (uiowa.edu) and must use this address for all communication within UI (Operations Manual, III.15.2).

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 mental health, attention, learning, vision, and physical or health-related condition) by registering with Student Disability Services (SDS). The student should then discuss accommodations with the course instructor (https://sds.studentlife.uiowa.edu/).
Nondiscrimination in the Classroom
UI 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 at diversity@uiowa.edu or diversity.uiowa.edu.

Academic Integrity
All undergraduates enrolled in courses offered by CLAS have, in essence, agreed to the College's Code of Academic Honesty. Misconduct is reported to the College, resulting in suspension or other sanctions, with sanctions communicated with the student through the UI email address.

CLAS Final Examination Policies
The final exam schedule for each semester 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 final exam information. No exams of any kind are allowed the week before finals. (https://clas.uiowa.edu/faculty/teaching-policies-resources-examination-policies.)

Making a Complaint
Students with a complaint should first visit with the instructor or course supervisor and then with the departmental executive officer (DEO), also known as the Chair. Students may then bring the concern to CLAS (https://clas.uiowa.edu/students/handbook/student-rights-responsibilities).

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 must uphold the UI mission and contribute to a safe environment that enhances learning. Incidents of sexual harassment
COURSE CALENDAR

Week one (8/20)
Introduction and syllabus. Read FW Pt I, Zinn, Intro and Pt 1

Week two (8/27)
What is your story? What is your voice?
FW Pt II, Zinn Pt 2

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

Week four (9/10)
“Story” returned. Personal essay brainstorming on discussion board. FW 4, Zinn Pt III

Week five (9/17)
Personal essay due (on Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions

Week six (9/24)

Week seven (10/1)
Descriptive story due (Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions.

Week eight (10/8)
Assignment returned. Read posted profiles. Read FW Pt IV (concentrate on profile chapter)

Week nine (10/15)
Brainstorm profile subjects

Week ten (10/22)
Workshop profile drafts. Read FW Pt V

Week eleven (10/29)
Profiles due (Monday). Read and discuss posted submissions. Read FW 8

Week twelve (11/5)
Profiles returned and optional revisions due (TBA) Brainstorm enterprise stories. FW Pt VI

**Week thirteen (11/12)**  
Work on enterprise stories. Read posted examples.

**Week fourteen (11/19)**  
Thanksgiving break.

**Week fifteen (11/26)**  
Workshop enterprise stories

**Week sixteen (12/3)**  
Final enterprise stories due and discussed this week. No final exam—stories returned and optional revisions due during finals week.