

Reporting and Writing for the Mass Media
JLMC 201
Spring 2008

Professor: Dave Saldana
Office: 201 Hamilton Hall
Phone: 294-0503
E-mail: dsaldana@iastate.edu
Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday 1-3 pm, and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION and OBJECTIVES

JLMC 201 is an introduction and practicum in the methods and practices of writing for a mass public audience.

Specifically, the course seeks to provide students with the basic tools: reporting and writing. These skills are the foundation for careers in any field of communications—news, public relations, advertising, and most other fields as well. The ability to collect information, analyze and interpret it, and convey its meaning clearly and concisely are paramount in many professions, and are valuable skills in whatever career you choose.

By the end of the semester, you will know how to develop story ideas, research leads, set up and conduct interviews, write in news format and style, edit your own work and others', and to do all of these things under deadline pressure and to the highest standards of professionalism, ethics and integrity.

Students are encouraged to think creatively about all of these skills, but are cautioned against exercising style at the expense of substance. While a well-turned phrase can add a nice flourish, it is a poor substitute for good reporting. Even the most artful architecture stands on a solid foundation. Likewise, a well-written article requires a solid foundation of reporting.

Though these skills are the primary focus of the class, students also are encouraged to think critically about issues in communications. Fairness, ethics, objectivity, balance, racism, sexism, homophobia, skepticism, hostility, disregard, disrespect... these words are frequently cast about in discussions about the state of mass media. Each of them is important, and none of them should be ignored.

Students will be challenged on their assumptions, pushed to question their biases (acknowledged or not), and, hopefully, will come to understand the integrity with which good journalism is created.

In this pursuit, students are encouraged to speak up. Ask questions, challenge me and one another. So long as these discussions are respectful and professional, nothing is off limits. Personal attacks or other deliberately harmful, abusive or offensive comments, however, will not be tolerated. Repeated violations of this policy will adversely affect your grade. It is not my intent to censor anyone's views, but to prevent one person's prejudices or animosities from interfering with others' educational experience.

This is intended to be a cooperative learning experience. I am not interested in standing before the class and lecturing to a bunch of stenographers. You will learn as much from each other as you will from me, and sharing your experiences, exchanging ideas about what works and what doesn't, is how professionals develop. Participation in class discussions is not only a significant part of your grade; it is vital to your getting the most out of this class.

It is my sincerest desire to see each student leave this class with the wherewithal to be an excellent journalist or communications professional.

CLASS TEXTS AND MATERIALS

Required Texts:

Writing and Reporting News, by Carole Rich, Fifth Edition, 2007.

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law, edited by Norm Goldstein, 2002.

Required Supplies: Green pens, a pocket folder or binder.

BASIC POLICIES AND REQUIREMENTS

I intend to treat you as a professional, and I expect you to act like one. To wit:

1. Attendance is required. This is a crucial course in the journalism and mass communication program. Only the most serious reasons for absence are acceptable, such as documented illness or documented family crisis. Barring an extreme emergency, I must be informed of absences before class, via phone or e-mail. No make-ups will be permitted if this procedure is not followed.
2. You are expected to come to class prepared. This includes reading assigned materials and meeting deadlines. You must complete all assignments on time to pass this course. In the professional world, deadlines are absolute, and this class is no different. Again, this is an issue of professionalism.
3. I am adamant about professional courtesy, to me and to your fellow students. We may disagree on many things, and vehemently at times, but this is no excuse for rude, abusive or offensive behavior. Repeated instances of such conduct will adversely affect your grade.
4. Accuracy is the *sine qua non* of journalism and communications. Reputation is currency in this field, and a reputation for inaccuracy is a career killer. There is no such thing as a minor mistake. Lives are ruined over such things. Inaccuracies in spellings, grammar or facts will result in lower grades.
5. You are expected to read, listen to and watch current news. You should read daily newspapers (I suggest national papers available on-line, like the New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune and Los Angeles Times, as well as the Des Moines Register) in addition to the Iowa State Daily, plus a weekly newsmagazine such as Newsweek or Time. Listen to radio news and view local and national newscasts. Discussion of current events will be a regular component of the class. Quizzes may be given without notice (particularly if I get the feeling people aren't paying enough attention to the news).
6. There will be writing assignments every week, some longer than others. Each will be an important part of your grade. The majority of your grade is based on them. Treat them accordingly.

7. Editing is an important skill in communications. You will be editing other students' articles for style and substance. You must spot mistakes, question assumptions, and challenge unsupported facts and assertions. You will suggest cuts of superfluous information. You will also offer constructive criticism and praise for good work. You will be tough, but fair. You will be skeptical, but supportive. You will be graded on how effectively you edit. These grades will count as much as your written assignments.

8. You must keep the original copy of every assignment. You will need them in order to pass the class. If you do not have them at the end of the semester, you will fail the class, since your final project will be based on your previous work.

9. Be prepared for what's coming up. Deadlines are given well in advance, so you should be setting things in motion early to get your articles done on time. You can set up interviews, do research, and write outlines or drafts long before the deadline. Failure to plan ahead will cause big problems for you, and waiting until the last minute to try to set up an interview is no excuse for failing to finish an assignment on deadline.

10. The purpose of this course is to train you in the tasks of original reporting and writing. Accordingly, quoting or otherwise relying upon websites, magazines, newspapers or other previously published sources is strongly discouraged. They should be used only when all reasonable attempts to contact primary sources is exhausted, and you can demonstrate that you made such efforts. Wikipedia is *not* a reliable source, and is not to be used as a source at any time for any reason.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY

Students are expected to know the University's policies on academic dishonesty.

Honesty is imperative in all communications professions. Breaches of honesty such as plagiarism (using material by another writer without proper attribution) and the invention of any material, including quotations, will result in a grade of "F" for this course. In addition to receiving a grade of "F" for the course, any student charged with an act of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Dean of Students and the All University Judiciary Committee for prosecution.

As a professional, you are expected to act with honor and integrity at all times. Plagiarism is only one form dishonesty. Others are equally punishable, and will bear the same consequences. Following is an illustrative, but not exclusive, list of conduct that will subject you to discipline:

- Fabricating (making up) ANYTHING. This is lying to your readers.
- Taking material from ANY OTHER SOURCE and passing it off as your own. If material comes from a web site, the web site must be cited as the source. If it comes from a press release, cite the press release. If it comes from a book, cite the book. If it comes from a brochure or newsletter, cite the source. Failure to do so is academic dishonesty.

Note: paraphrasing material from another source does NOT make the work your own. You still need to explain to your readers where you got the information.

- Allowing another student to use anything you've written without acknowledging its origin, or otherwise aiding or abetting academic dishonesty.

- Putting quotations around any material that you did not hear a speaker say, without attributing to the original source. You cannot take quotes from a web site or press release and put it in quotations unless you make it clear the information is from that source.
- Misidentifying yourself in order to gain access to a source or in order to persuade a source to talk to you.
- Lying or otherwise attempting to deceive the instructor, including making false claims about absences or late assignments.

FORMATTING

Every assignment must have the following information on the top of the first page:

Name
Class
Assignment
Word count
Headline

Pages must be numbered, and your name, assignment number and headline should be in a header on every page. Text must be double-spaced with 1¼-inch margins. At the end of the article, type “-30-” or “###.”

Every article must be accompanied by an information sheet, including sources used in research and the names and phone numbers of people interviewed. I will contact sources from at least one assignment— you will not know which one— and ask them about your interviewing skills, professionalism, and courtesy. If I find that you have not spoken to any subject whom you present as a personal interview, you will receive an “F” in the class and will be reported to the appropriate authorities for academic dishonesty.

GRADING

Generally, grades will be determined this way:

1. Reporting and writing assignments, news quizzes, and rewrites: 60 percent.
2. Final writing project: 25 percent.
3. Participation/preparation/professionalism: 15 percent

During the semester, students will complete a variety of research, reporting and writing assignments which will be assigned letter grades ranging from “A” to “F.” These grades represent the following:

A: This grade is awarded to truly extraordinary work representing technical, substantive and stylistic excellence. The work is thoroughly researched and reported, the writing is well organized and technically flawless. There are no errors in formatting, grammar or syntax. There are no errors of fact. Transitions between elements of the story are clear and help the reader flow smoothly from one section of the story to another. The story is worthy of publication with minimal editing.

B: This grade is awarded to work that is above average. The research and reporting is thorough, but not as in-depth as work that is awarded the higher mark. The writing may have

some organizational problems and there are minor flaws in technique. There are few, if any, errors of fact, and they do not significantly affect the material. Only rarely does an error in spelling, grammar or syntax mar this work. With a little editing, the work could be published.

C: This grade represents “average” work. It’s “not bad,” but it requires more work before it could be published. There may be factual errors that confuse the meaning of the article, poor structure or organization, inadequate research, and/or a number of spelling/grammar/syntactical errors. This work could not be published without significant editing.

D: This work is clearly below average: too many errors, too little research, or other evidence of shoddy work. Students receiving a below-average grade on more than one assignment are encouraged to make an appointment to discuss how performance may be improved.

F: This is work that clearly demonstrates a lack of effort, understanding or ability to carry out the assignment. Any student who receives this grade must meet with me within a week of receiving it.

Notes on grading:

Don’t be discouraged if your grades aren’t high early in the term. Improvement is expected. If you demonstrate the willingness and commitment to learn and improve, your final grade will reflect your growth. That is, your early shortcomings will be forgiven, and your ongoing commitment rewarded. However, declining grades will also be noted.

Save all your work from this class. It is your guarantee that you are fairly graded and also gives us an opportunity to periodically review your performance. It will also be necessary for your final project.

The Greenlee School requires journalism majors and minors receive a grade of C+ or better in JLMC 201 to meet the department’s English proficiency requirement for graduation.

COMMUNICATIONS

Everyone is expected to have a regular e-mail address and to check it regularly. Additional assignments, readings or reference materials may be distributed electronically between class meetings, and you are responsible for them. I will make every effort to give you plenty of advance notice, but you must make the effort to keep informed.

I will keep regular office hours, and will make myself available otherwise if you schedule an appointment. In emergencies, I can be contacted at home or via email.

I am here to help you. If you believe you need help, or if you want to discuss your grade, I am available. If, however, you make no effort to meet with me to improve your work for the class, don’t expect that your eleventh-hour appeals for clemency will be effective.

Please address any special needs or special accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as you become aware of your needs. Those seeking accommodations based

on disabilities should obtain a Student Academic Accommodation Request (SAAR) form from the Disability Resources (DR) office (phone 515-294-7220). DR is located on the main floor of the Student Services Building, Room 1076.

ASSIGNMENTS

Every week, there will be some writing required. The typical plan is to complete the research before class, and write the article during the lab period. In some instances, the final draft will be due at the beginning of class. This will be determined as the needs of the schedule dictate. They will then be handed out randomly to other students, who will then edit them and return them to me at the beginning of the next class session. I will then read the article and the editing notes and return the articles the following Monday.

If you fail to return any edited article at the beginning of class on Wednesday, you will be docked one full grade on the assignment for each day or partial day you are late; i.e., a “B” will become a “C” after one day, a “D” after two, an “F” after three, and an additional drop will be added for each additional late day. It is not fair to the other student to let your disregard interfere with their education.

Readings are to be done before the class for which they are assigned.

Week of Jan. 14

Mon: Introductions and Course overview

Wed: “What is News?”

Read: Rich Chs.1 and 2.

Week of Jan. 18

Mon: MLK Holiday

Wed: How to create news

Read: Rich Chs. 3 and 4.

Assignment: 400-word rewrite

Week of Jan. 25

Mon: Interviews

Read: Rich Ch.5

Assignment due: Conduct a single-subject interview, write a 600-word news article using at least two quotes

Wed: Writing leads

Read: Rich Ch.7 (skim Ch.6)

Week of Feb. 4

Mon: Building flow and structure

Read: Rich Ch.8

Assignment: Write three lead paragraphs

Wed: Review of coursework

Current events quiz

Week of Feb. 11

Mon: Review of class materials, in-class work

Wed: More review

Week of Feb. 18

Mon: Press releases

Read: Rich Ch.10

Wed: Event coverage

Read: Rich Ch.18

current events quiz

Week of Feb. 25

Mon: Feature writing

Read: Rich Ch.9

Assignment due: 800-word article on a press conference, meeting or other public event

Wed: More on features

Week of Mar. 3

Mon: Obits

Wed: Profiles

Read: Rich Ch.22

current events quiz

Week of Mar. 10

Mon: Spot news

Read: Rich Ch.21

Assignment due: 1200-word, multi-source, three- (or more) interview feature.

Wed: Deadline writing

Read: (skim) Rich Chs. 11 and 12

Assignment: In-class writing exercises

Week of Mar. 17

Spring Break

Week of Mar. 24

Mon: Government affairs stories

Read: Rich Ch.19

Wed: Legal affairs reporting

Read: Rich Ch.20

current events quiz

Week of Mar. 31

Mon: Media Law

Read: Rich Ch.13

Assignment due: 800-word government or legal affairs article

Wed: More on the law

Week of Apr. 7 (VEISHEA week)

Mon: Ethics

Read: Rich Ch.14

Wed: Cultural diversity

Read: Rich Ch.15

Assignment: look at websites of three ethnic, racial or gender-based organization's website, e.g. NAACP, MALDEF, B'nai Brith, ADC, NOW, Lambda Legal Defense, etc., and write a paragraph on each, discussing how their objectives are evident in their formats; i.e., word choice, imagery, etc.

Week of Apr. 14

Mon: One-on-one meetings

Wed: One-on-one meetings

Week of Apr. 21

Mon: no class req'd; lab availability

Wed: no class req'd; lab availability

Week of Apr. 28

Mon: no class req'd; lab availability

Wed: Final projects due (May 1)