

COMM 421: Writing and Reporting across News Platforms

Autumn 2010

Tuesday/Thursday 11:30 a.m.-1:18 p.m. JR 342

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Office hours: M/W, 12-2 p.m.; T/TH, 2-5 p.m., and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this course is to teach you to write simply, concisely and effectively for all media platforms. Developing your “news judgment” also will be keenly important. The course will include lectures, discussions, guest speakers and extensive writing assignments in the classroom and out in the “real world.” Most stories will be written or produced with the OSU campus audience in mind. For this class, that means writing, as well as and recording sights and sounds for the Web, or a TV or radio broadcast.

Think about the potential *Lantern* audience, including undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, university officials and staff, local residents and even members of the Ohio General Assembly. What would inform and be important to those readers? No matter what the subject, always remember there often are many sides to a story and your job is to cut through the noise and expose the truth. That can be difficult to do, but this class will help provide you with the necessary foundation, including clear writing, interviewing and fact-checking skills. We'll also talk about ways to ensure that your stories are fair and include proper attribution to reputable sources. For example, if there's a legal matter involved, did you talk to lawyers representing all sides? If you quote someone who says less than positive things about another person or group, did you attempt to get a response? Did you somehow verify the person on the other end of that "tweet" or e-mail is really who they say they are? If the answer to either of those scenarios is No, you're not doing your job.

You will be writing/editing in some form every class. Good writing means re-writing, often many times. You will need to re-write your outside-of-class story assignments to hone your skills and improve the pieces. We'll discuss this process extensively in class.

In this class, we will become our own newsroom. You'll see meetings listed below. These are great opportunities to bolster that participation grade, bounce ideas off your colleagues and get a feel for how stories can evolve over the course of seconds/minutes/days/weeks and months.

COURSE GOALS

By the time this class is over, you should be able to write/produce a variety of news stories in various media platforms. That includes seeking publication in *The Lantern* or other outlets.

REQUIRED READINGS

Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law (2009 preferred); available at local bookstores
Reporting for the Media (9th edition); Bender et al; Oxford Press; available at local bookstores
Other assignments will be available online or on hold at the library.
All readings should be done prior to the assigned class period.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

To best prepare for this class and those news quizzes, read the online versions of *The Washington Post*, *NY Times*, *USA Today*, *Columbus Post-Dispatch*, CNN, Fox News and *The Lantern* every day. Other great journalism resources include *The Poynter Institute*, *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Editor and Publisher* magazine. Read as much as you can from as many different sources as you can. The more you read, the better you'll report and write.

GRADING CRITERIA

20% Midterm
20% News Stories and Re-writes
25% Feature/Final Project
15% Speech story, including re-write
10% News Quizzes
10% Participation

Letter Grades will be assigned on following point system:

A: 94-100
A-: 90-93
B+: 87-89
B: 84-86
B-: 80-83
C+: 77-79
C: 74-76
C-: 70-73
D+: 67-69
D: 60-66
E: below 50-59

MIDTERM

There will be one midterm exam. It will cover everything that has occurred in class from lectures to news and AP Style quizzes to readings and other assignments. The format will include multiple-choice questions, short answers and an essay. If you know that you will not be in class on the day of the exam, let me know as far in advance as possible and a make-up exam can be given early but no more than a week later. If you miss the exam due to unexcused absence, you will receive a 0.

WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS:

All assignments should be typed, double-spaced and turned in at the beginning of class. **ALL OUTSIDE CLASS ASSIGNMENTS MUST INCLUDE A CONTACT LIST WITH PHONE NUMBERS AND E-MAILS FROM YOUR SOURCES. I WILL CONTACT SOME OF THESE SOURCES THROUGHOUT THE SEMESTER** No handwritten stories will be accepted. Please keep a file of your work so that you can look back at your old assignments and get an idea of progress you're making and areas you need to improve. Please bring that portfolio of your work whenever you meet with me to discuss progress.

NEWS STORIES AND REWRITES

The subjects of these stories early in the semester will be determined by you, but must be approved by me. Almost anything that can be considered "news" somewhere in the OSU community is fair game. One exception: do NOT cover a speech as you will be doing that later in the semester. Also remember, this course focuses on the basics of newswriting and reporting, so keep the stories simple. That means no one should propose coverage of an OSU basketball game or writing an investigative piece on corruption in the dining hall! Covering an intramural game would be fine. Writing a profile, as long as the subject is willing to take the time needed so you can get the story, also would work. Cover a meeting in the dorms, write about a new

student group or a local business. Write about the weather. Be creative, but remember to **KEEP IT SIMPLE** and to get the ideas approved by me in-person, in-class or via e-mail.

Good writing means re-writing, often many times. That is why you'll rewrite all of your stories at least once. Rewrites mean more than simply fixing errors in punctuation or grammar. They often entail more reporting and can mean a complete revamp of the original piece. The goal is for the finished product to merit a spot in *The Lantern* or other media outlet.

FEATURE/FINAL PROJECT

The topic is up to you, but must be approved by me by Feb. 9. Choose one of the following:

- 600-word print feature, but must include multimedia ideas for photos, graphics, audio, video, etc., and at least 4 sources, 3 of which require phone or in-person interviews;
- Produce a 90-second audio or video broadcast, complete with script;
- Combine the media in a roughly 400-word story paired with 45-second broadcast, audio or video.

SPEECH STORY

This story is your chance to show everything you have learned about news coverage. Go beyond the speaker's text and paint a "word picture" for your audience. **DON'T BE A STENOGRAPHER!** Set the scene, interview audience members, outside experts, and the speaker before and after the event, if possible. Like the earlier assignments, I must approve the speech you select in advance. The speech story re-write is particularly important because it will be the last writing assignment of the quarter besides your final project. It's your chance to showcase your reporting, writing and editing skills. Make the most of it.

For all assignments, points will be deducted on assignments using the following system:

Errors in fact: 15 points

Misspelled names: 15 points

Missed ledes: 5 points

Unclear writing: 5 points

Grammatical errors: 5 points

Misspelled words: 5 points

Punctuation and style errors: 1 point

Rules for Ledes:

All news ledes should be no more than 35 words, and every word, including 'the, an, a' counts. Most ledes should be one sentence and in active voice.

Beyond the Lede:

Keep your sentences short. Most paragraphs should be no more than two sentences.

NEWS QUIZZES

The news quizzes will be multiple choice and short answer, drawn from the news sources recommended. I **STRONGLY** urge you to at least skim those various news Web sites at least once a day. AP Style quizzes will be in the same format and based on specified sections of that text.

ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION

Attendance and participation are required. To be successful in this class, you need to participate. That means asking questions, offering respectful opinions on story ideas discussed in the "421 newsroom," and suggesting helpful edits in small groups and to the class as a whole. Good newsrooms thrive on the collegial interaction between reporters, editors and increasingly, their audience. Our class will do the same. Points will be deducted for anyone making disrespectful comments about another person or idea. Don't surf the Internet,

play computer games or send non-course e-mail during class. Points also will be deducted from your participation grade if you are observed doing these things.

ALL STUDENTS MUST MEET WITH ME AT LEAST ONCE OUTSIDE OF CLASS TO DISCUSS YOUR PROGRESS, FEATURE PROJECTS OR ANYTHING ELSE ON YOUR MIND. IF OFFICE HOURS DON'T WORK, IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SET UP A MEETING WITH ME AT ANOTHER TIME! If you fail to meet with me at least once during office hours or by appointment as outlined above, your participation grade will be lowered by a full letter grade.

EXTRA CREDIT

There will be many opportunities for anyone who wants to do Extra Credit assignments.

HOW TO SUCCEED IN THIS CLASS:

Be on time.

Have your homework completed and ready to turn in.

Read The Lantern and the other news organizations' Web sites noted earlier. Listen to at least one news broadcast every day.

Ask questions when you don't understand something.

Express yourself when you do understand something.

Bring all tools of the trade to every class; books, writing utensils, a notebook, digital recorder, batteries, etc.

Spell check.

Don't just spell check...**PROOFREAD** and **SELF EDIT!**

Reading stories aloud can be a great exercise. If you stumble over a sentence or paragraph, chances are it can be simplified and improved.

POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

DEADLINES

The importance of deadlines cannot be stressed enough. If the deadline for an assignment is 1 p.m., that means the copy must be in my hand by 1 p.m. Leave enough time to print and proofread your work. Self-editing is a skill many journalists (and writers in general) fail to maintain over the course of a semester...or a career.

MISSED/LATE ASSIGNMENTS/STUDENT ABSENCES

Excused absences are rare and include emergency situations beyond your control (i.e., an urgent medical condition). In the unusual case of an emergency, it is your responsibility to inform me prior to class or as soon as possible after class to let me know about your absence. You also will need to provide official written documentation for the absence (e.g., a note from a doctor). Non-emergency excused absences may include university-sponsored activities (e.g., required travel for sporting events). Excuses for these kinds of absences must be presented in advance of the absence. No excuses or documentation will be accepted more than one week after the absence.

In-class assignments, such as news and AP Style quizzes, missed for an unexcused absence may not be made up and will mean an automatic 0 for those assignments. Homework assignments not submitted because of an unexcused absence may be turned in late, but will be marked down a minimum of one letter grade. Please contact me via e-mail, or by phone, as far in advance as possible if you know you will be late or absent. Unless I respond to you before that class starts, the absence will be considered unexcused. Nothing will be accepted more than one class late unless extreme circumstances are involved and documented, i.e. you are in the hospital.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT: For journalists, being honest and ethical is fundamental. Academic misconduct, such as plagiarism or fabrication, will not be tolerated. The Ohio State University's *Code of Student Conduct* (Section 3335-23-04) defines academic misconduct as: "Any activity that tends to compromise the academic integrity of the University, or subvert the educational process," Examples of academic misconduct include (but are not limited to) plagiarism, collusion (unauthorized collaboration), copying the work of another student, and possession of unauthorized materials during an examination. Ignorance of the University's *Code of Student Conduct* is never considered an excuse for academic misconduct, so I recommend that you review the *Code of Student Conduct* and, specifically, the sections dealing with academic misconduct at http://studentaffairs.osu.edu/resource_csc.asp.

If I suspect that a student has committed academic misconduct in this course, I am obligated by University Rules to report my suspicions to the Committee on Academic Misconduct (COAM). If COAM determines that you have violated the University's *Code of Student Conduct*, the sanctions for the misconduct could include a failing grade in this course and suspension or dismissal from the University. If you have any questions about this policy or what constitutes academic misconduct, please contact the instructor or visit the COAM web page at <http://oaa.osu.edu/coam/home.html>.

NOTE CONCERNING ATTENDANCE WHILE HAVING FLU-LIKE SYMPTOMS:

Students should NOT attend class while ill with influenza. Students with flu symptoms will be asked to leave class. The illness and self-isolation period will usually be about a week. It is very important that individuals avoid spreading the flu to others.

Most students should be able to complete a successful quarter despite a flu-induced absence. If you are absent due to the flu, you will be provided with a reasonable opportunity to make up missed work. Completion of all assignments and exams assures the greatest chance for students to develop heightened understanding and content mastery that is unavailable through the weighting process. The opportunity to complete all assignments and exams supports the university's desire to enable students to make responsible situational decisions, including the decision to avoid spreading a contagious virus to other students, staff, and faculty, without endangering their academic work.

Students with the flu do not need to provide me with a physician's certification of illness. However, ill students should inform me (but not through personal contact in which there is a risk of exposing others to the virus) as soon as possible that they are absent because of the flu.

STATEMENT ABOUT DISABILITY SERVICES: Students with disabilities that have been certified by the Office for Disability Services will be appropriately accommodated, and should inform the instructor as soon as possible of their needs. The Office for Disability Services is located in 150 Pomerene Hall, 1760 Neil Avenue; telephone 292-3307, TDD 292-0901; <http://www.ods.ohio-state.edu>

COMM 421: REPORTING & WRITING ACROSS NEWS PLATFORMS
DAILY SCHEDULE
Winter 2010
Tuesday/Thursday 11:30 am - 1:18 pm JR 342

WEEK	DATE	TOPIC	READINGS/EXERCISES	WHAT'S DUE
1	T 1/5	Introduction to Class	Reviewing the basics of newswriting. Review syllabus. News quiz.	Send me a 300-word e-mail explaining what you hope to get out of the course and your writing strengths/weaknesses. Honesty is appreciated.
	Th 1/7	Using news judgment: Journalists are NOT stenographers!	Chapter 1, Journalism Today; Chapter 6, Selecting and Reporting the News. In-class writing. Write a short story on deadline. News quiz.	Study for AP Style quiz #1. News outline due.
2	T 1/12	Writing ledes—the 5 W's and How! AP Style quiz	Chapter 2, The Basics: Format, Copy Editing and AP Style; Chapter 3, Grammar and Spelling. AP Style quiz. News quiz.	News story due.
	Th 1/14	More on ledes/headlines and their importance in the 24/7, global news cycle.	Chapter 7, Basic News Leads; Chapter 8, Alternative Leads. In-class headline/tweet and lede writing. News quiz.	Study for AP Style quiz #2.
3	T 1/19	Putting the story together-- what is this inverted pyramid thing and is it relevant?	Chapter 9, The Body of a News. Story AP Style quiz. News quiz. Edit re-writes in class.	News re-write due.
	Th 1/21	Journalism-speak. Avoiding jargon and keeping it simple.	Chapter 4, Newswriting Style; Chapter 5, Language of News. News quiz.	Re-submit news re-write. Study for AP Style quiz #3.
4	T 1/26	It's all about style. Knowing the basics.	AP Style quiz. News quiz.	Outline news story #2.
	Th 1/28	Writing/broadcasting/reporting/tweeting on deadline. More on the power of headlines.	Peer editing. News quiz.	Second story due. Study for AP Style Quiz #4.
5	T 2/2	Objectivity; Observation vs. Opinion.	Editing the work of a "pro." AP Style quiz. News quiz.	Bring examples of observation and opinion in news stories to next class.
	Th 2/4	Interviewing and attribution.	Chapters 10, Quotes and Attribution; Chapter 11, Interviews. First meeting of the 421 newsroom. Putting it all together, discussing feature ideas in groups and as a class	Bring feature idea to class.
6	T 2/9	Covering meetings/speeches in the Digital Age.	Chapter 15, Feature Stories. Discuss feature ideas	Deadline for approval of Feature project idea. Study for Final AP Style quiz..
	Th 2/11	Possible guest speaker on staying ahead in a "modern" newsroom.	Be prepared to take notes on speech given in class and file on deadline. Final AP Style quiz. News quiz.	Second story re-writes
7	T 2/16	Story evolution/beat coverage.	The 421 newsroom midway meeting. Midterm review	Study for midterm
	Th 2/18	Midterm	Midterm	Midterm

8	T 2/23	Broadcast style and writing for the Web. Let's blog!	Chapter 21, Ethics	Outline of Final project due
	Th 2/25	Blogs, social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and their role in the newsroom.	Third meeting of the 421 newsroom.	Speech story due. Prep for broadcast in next class.
9	T 3/2	Possible guest speaker to discuss writing for the Web.	Be prepared to read a 1-minute broadcast in front of the class; must include news from at least 3 of the following areas: politics, sports, entertainment, weather, crime, health, international affairs. You may also prep a 1-minute digital video that we can watch, but permission for that is needed in advance. Everyone must turn in scripts.	Blogs should be updated to note work on outside-of-class stories and feature project.
	Th 3-4	More on writing for the Web and blogs.	In-class editing of professional work. Continue broadcasts. News quiz.	Speech rewrite due. Bring an example of a multimedia project you admire to class.
10	T 3/9	What have we learned and where do we go from here? What will the newsroom of the future look like?	Multimedia discussion. What works? What doesn't and why? Review class blogs. News quiz.	Be prepared to discuss a blog, Twitter feed or other Web site you read for news or enjoyment. If you don't read any, find one and be ready to do a roughly 1-minute pitch that gets others interested. Self-promotion is becoming a bigger part of journalism every day...for better or worse
	Th 3/11	There is no perfect story...but we should always keep trying.	Edit the editor! Last meeting of the 421 newsroom.	Feature/Final project due.
FINALS WEEK				