

# News Writing

## COMM 2311 – FALL 2015

Instructor: Charles L. Ehrenfeld  
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Class Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays, 9:30 a.m. – 10:45 a.m., CM 156.  
Office Hours: Mondays & Wednesdays, 9-9:30 a.m., 1:30-4 p.m.; Tuesdays & Thursdays, 9-9:30 a.m., 1:30-2:30 p.m.; Fridays, 9 a.m.-noon; or by appointment.

**Course Description:** This course teaches the fundamentals of writing news for the mass media. It includes methods and techniques for gathering, processing and delivering news in a professional manner.

### Required Texts:

The Missouri Group. (2012). *Telling the Story: The Convergence of Print, Broadcast and Online Media*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition.

The Associated Press. (2015). *The Associated Press Stylebook*.

### Assignments:

1. **Five-minute papers:** Near the end of each class, you will have approximately five minutes to write down what you thought were a few of the main points made on the topic covered that day that you found interesting or other thoughts about the class.
2. **Article Discussions:** You are responsible for finding five articles on a topic or issue in mass communications. Then write a synopsis of the article (1/2-page minimum, 2 page maximum, double spaced, 12-point type) highlighting the main points, and be prepared to discuss your article in class. Include two questions pertaining to the article to initiate a discussion. Good sources for these articles include *The Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, and *Editor & Publisher*. Several can be found online. Articles should not be more than *five* years old and should be about issues or incidents involving *American* media.
3. **Writing Assignments:** Since writing is an important component of this course, you will have five graded writing assignments during the semester, each focusing on developing skills necessary for news reporting. Grading will be based on numerous factors, some objective and some subjective. Organization is important, as is completeness and logical delivery (Each should be double spaced, 1-inch margins, 12-point type).

4. **Exams:** You will have two exams (one mid-term, one final) that cover the material presented in lectures and chapters covered in the texts.

**Course Grades:** The grading scale is:

90-100	A
80-89	B
70-79	C
60-69	D
below 60	F

Your grade will be determined by the following:

Five-Minute Papers (3 pts. each)	72 pts.
Article Discussions (20 pts. each)	100 pts.
Exams (2)	200 pts.
Writing Assignments (50 pts each)	250 pts.
Participation/Initiative**	5 pts.
Quizzes (20 pts. each)	*40 pts.

\*At least 2 announced quizzes; maybe several unannounced

\*\*Good reporters, print or broadcast, need to show initiative in their professional lives. This portion of the grade is intended to reward students who exhibit such initiative in this course. The criteria include, but are not limited to: attending class; being on time for class; participating in a thoughtful manner in class discussions; turning in assignments on time (do not request deadline extensions); taking responsibility for your actions; and not whining.

**Course Objectives:** Upon completion of this course, the student should be able to demonstrate an understanding of the following areas:

- What is news
- Interviewing
- News gathering and verification of facts
- Covering news conferences, meetings, speeches, and breaking or developing news
- Legal and ethical issues facing reporters
- Convergence of news media (print, broadcast and on-line)

**Absence Policy:** Because class participation is essential, missing any more than *three* classes (unexcused absences) will result in your *final* grade being lowered by a full letter grade. Every additional absence will result in your grade being lowered by an additional letter grade. After the fourth absence, you may be dropped from the course (at the discretion of the instructor).

**Deadlines:** ALL deadlines are absolute. You need to get used to deadlines that exist in the off-campus world. Therefore, all assignments will be due at the beginning of each

class, unless changed by the instructor, and any late papers will be penalized harshly. Technical malfunctions (i.e. “My computer ate my homework,” or “My printer crashed”) will not be an excuse for late work.

**Excuses:** Don’t bother to try any. I’ve heard most of them and have used some of them myself. Only deaths of immediate family members (parents, grand parents, siblings – ONLY), or your own, may be considered for an excused absence. Of course, you will need to provide proof (such as the obituary notice). Student athletes, or those participating in other college-sponsored activities that require an absence, will be excused, with prior notice to me and appropriate documentation.

**ADA Statement:** Students with disabilities, including but not limited to physical, psychiatric or learning disabilities, who wish to request accommodations in this class should notify the Disability Services Office early in the semester so that the appropriate arrangements may be made. In accordance with federal law, a student requesting accommodations must provide acceptable documentation of his/her disability to the Disability Services Coordinator. Contact the Disability Services Office in the Student Services Building at 894-9611, ext. 2529.

**Diversity Statement:** In this class, the instructor will establish and support an environment that values and nurtures individual and group differences and encourages engagement and interaction. Understanding multiple experiences and perspectives will serve to challenge and stimulate all of us to learn about others, about the larger world and about ourselves. By promoting diversity and intellectual exchange, we will not only mirror society as it is, but also model society as it should and can be.

**Academic Honesty and Professional Conduct Policy:** The same standards and ethics will apply to students enrolled in this course as apply to news reporters and other media professionals. Violations of these standards will result in a failing grade for the assignment and immediate dismissal from the course will be considered. These standards include, but are not limited to:

1. Plagiarism will not be tolerated. You may not take material verbatim from other sources such as previously published newspaper stories, wire service stories, broadcast news stories, etc... To do so is to plagiarize.
2. Pay strict attention to spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Since the invention of the dictionary and spell checker, there is no excuse for a misspelled word. To allow for a misspelled word to appear in any assignment you submit for a grade is laziness. Any misspelled words or factual errors will be graded harshly.

One of the best ways to improve your writing, as well as your grade, is through revision. You may regain up to half of lost points on most graded writing assignments (excluding any writing for an exam) by revising based on notes on your graded paper. To regain lost points, you may revise your paper, and return the original and the revision (within one week of the day you received the original graded paper).

**Civility Code:** As future journalism professionals, you are to communicate with each other in a professional and civil manner. We all may feel passionately about certain issues; however, passion is no substitute for a solid grasp of the facts and sound, logical reasoning. Disparaging comments about gender, ethnicity, religion, etc... will not be tolerated. Understanding and respecting multiple experiences and perspectives will serve to challenge and stimulate all of us to learn about others, about the larger world and about ourselves.

Disruptive behaviors such as cell phones ringing, leaving and returning to class while in session, arriving late to class, talking with others during lectures/discussions, checking your e-mail or Facebook, sending or receiving text messages, eating or drinking in class, etc... will result in a substantial reduction in the participation portion of one's grade and a request that such students leave the class. Cell phones must remain turned off and out of sight during this class. They may remain "silent" or on vibrate if kept out of sight. They may only be activated in individual extenuating circumstances after consulting with the instructor.

### **Student Learning Outcomes/Competencies -**

1. When planning and conducting interviews, students will:
  - 1.1 Apply techniques for question development
  - 1.2 Differentiate between appropriate interviewing approaches
  - 1.3 Recognize the importance of accuracy
  - 1.4 Recognize what makes a good news source
  - 1.5 Recognize common interviewing errors
  
2. When discussing the convergence of news media, the student will:
  - 2.1 Recognize media differences and similarities
  - 2.2 Differentiate between style differences
  - 2.3 Recognize differing end user needs
  
3. When discussing news gathering and fact verification, the student will:
  - 3.1 Describe characteristics and techniques of computer assisted reporting
  - 3.2 Identify basic news values and news elements
  - 3.3 Apply fact verification techniques
  - 3.4 Apply proper number-use style
  
4. When demonstrating the ability to tell the story, the student will:
  - 4.1 Demonstrate understanding of the inverted pyramid style of writing
  - 4.2 Apply good techniques of attribution
  - 4.3 Compare audience needs and recognize audience differences
  - 4.4 Apply style elements
  - 4.5 Apply good lead writing techniques
  - 4.6 Demonstrate the ability to cover speeches, news conferences, and meetings
  - 4.7 Demonstrate good breaking news coverage

5. When writing any type of news story, the student will:
  - 5.1 Differentiate between print, television, internet, and public relations styles
  - 5.2 Demonstrate knowledge of Associated Press or related style standards
  - 5.3 Demonstrate mastery of grammar, punctuation and spelling
  
6. When discussing legal and ethical issues related to news reporting, the student will:
  - 6.1 Demonstrate an understanding of the ethical values related to news gathering and reporting
  - 6.2 Apply an understanding of the principles of media law
  - 6.3 Compare the public's right to know with the individual's right to privacy

### **Tentative Course Schedule**

**(subject to change at the discretion of instructor)**

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| Aug. 24  | Introduction to the course/Discussion of Syllabus<br>(Exercise: Ordeal by Cheque; if time permits) |
| Aug. 26  | Lecture: On Writing Well<br>(Read: chapter 1)  |
| Aug. 31  | Lecture: Knowing Your Audience   |
| Sept. 2  | Lecture: AP Style<br>(Read: chapter 3; <b>First Writing Assignment Due</b> )                       |
| Sept. 7  | <b>Labor Day!</b>  |
| Sept. 9  | Lecture: Attribution   |
| Sept. 14 | Lecture: Journalistic Objectivity<br>( <b>AP Style Quiz</b> )                                      |
| Sept. 16 | *Student Article Discussions   |
| Sept. 21 | Lecture: Deciding What is News<br>(Read: chapter 4)  |
| Sept. 23 | Lecture: Lead Writing<br>(*Lead Writing Exercises in Class)<br>(Read: chapter 5)                   |
| Sept. 28 | Lecture: Inverted Pyramid/Organizing a Story<br>(* <b>Writing Leads Quiz</b> )                     |
| Sept. 30 | Lecture: Getting Wired & Computer-Assisted Reporting<br>(Read: chapter 6)                          |

**(\*News Story Assignment Due)**

- Oct. 5 Lecture: The Art of the Interview
- Oct. 7 \*Student Article Discussions
- Oct. 12 Guest Speaker for Feature Story
- Oct. 14 Review for Mid-Term
- Oct. 19 **\*Mid-term Exam**
- Oct. 21 Lecture: Ethics  
**(\*Feature Story Due)**
- Oct. 26 Lecture: Writing for the Web
- Oct. 28 \*Student Article Discussions
- Nov. 2 Lecture: The Cops Beat
- Nov. 4 Lecture: Covering the Courts
- Nov. 9 Lecture: Covering Meetings & Speeches  
**(\*Accident Story Due)**
- Nov. 11 \*Student Article Discussions
- Nov. 16 Lecture: Media Law  
(Read: chapter 10)
- Nov. 18 Lecture: The Right to Know  
**(\*Meeting Story Due)**
- Nov. 23 Special Treat
- Nov. 25 **Thanksgiving holiday!**
- Nov. 27 **Happy Thanksgiving!**
- Nov. 30 \*Student Article Discussions
- Dec. 2 Wrap-up day/Review for Final
- Dec. 9 **Final Exam – 8 a.m.**