

Jour 302 – Public Affairs Reporting

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Public affairs reporting is the staple of journalism. Reporters on the beats traditionally associated with public affairs will cover crime and courts, individuals and institutions, government and the governed. This field requires intellect, integrity, insight and a relentless interest in reporting information that is vital to an informed society. You will pursue stories of tremendous importance by telling people what is going on in their neighborhoods, courthouses, state houses, police stations, hospitals, churches, school boards and other entities that help shape the way we live our lives.

This is not a field for the timid. And this is not a class if you're afraid to ask questions or to tackle assignments that will challenge your patience and interest in journalism.

You should know right away that you'll take on numerous assignments outside of class. In addition to legislative coverage, these will include covering a local government or school board meeting, a trial, a possible ride-along with local police, a trip to the courthouse for a records search and other related work. We'll discuss details and ways to make this work, but you will be expected to show initiative and independence in tackling your outside assignments. You will also be given an off-campus beat to cover, from which you will write at least five stories.

At this level, I expect that you have mastered basic news writing. Now is the time to kick your writing up a notch or two - or three. We will work on gathering information and presenting it in a way that is useful, informative and readable. Good reporting and good writing are not mutually exclusive and reporters who know this frequently find their stories on the front page.

Some of you have had internships already. I expect that you will bring your experience into class discussions and that your work will reflect your skills. We will have more advanced assignments that will provide greater challenges.

A brief word about deadlines: make them. Reporters who can't make deadline often are encouraged to find another line of work. Let me know in advance if there is some urgent reason that you can't turn in an assignment by the assigned deadline, but be warned that exceptions to missing are rare.

I will grade your work closely, and I urge you to pay careful attention to comments I make on your stories. Please let me know if you are not clear about something I've said. Communication is vital to success in this course. I am glad to look at drafts of stories before you turn them in for a grade, just as editors edit stories before sending them through for publication.

Never forget this: Never assume.

BOOKS AND WEBSITES

“She Said,” Kantor and Twohey

“Field Guide to Covering Local News,” Bayles (optional, but helpful)

www.ire.org - look for the story of the week/beat resources, etc

www.powerreporting.com

www.journalism.indiana.edu/Ethics/index.html

The Associated Press Stylebook (online, free)

A good dictionary

Some reporter's notebooks and legal pads

Additional useful websites will be sent to you via email.

ATTENDANCE

You have to come to class. Period. This means you must also be on time for class. Three late starts to class count as a missed class. Let me know in advance if you have to miss a class for a non-emergency. You are responsible for finding out about assignments or material covered in class. You can call me or a classmate. Missing class doesn't mean you can miss a deadline, unless you're dealing with an emergency such as a serious illness or family crisis.

Please keep me informed of such events, if at all possible.

Here are some attendance incentives:

- Miss no classes, and I'll drop your three lowest writing grades. (This could boost you one letter grade at the end of the term.)
- Miss one class and I'll drop your two lowest writing grades.
- **If you miss four classes, you fail the course.**

REQUIRED READING

- Select Twitter feeds, especially the Virginia Mercury
- The Times-Dispatch (select stories)
- The New York Times
- The Washington Post, especially the Virginia politics section, every day;
- The VaNews – a daily summary of Virginia politics (<https://www.vpap.org/vanews/>)

Our focus is on stories that deal with topics related to public affairs. You must be well versed enough to discuss intelligently any major article that appears in any of the above publications or any additional reading assignments. Remember, one way to help your writing and reporting is to read good writing and reporting.

THE CAPITAL NEWS SERVICE

You will be part of a team that provides coverage of the Virginia General Assembly to small news outlets in the state, along with our own web outlet. We are working with Virginia Commonwealth University on this project, so you'll have an excellent opportunity to work with other student reporters as well as professionals. You will get professional clips and terrific experience that will benefit you greatly when you enter the job market.

I will assess your work individually and as a team to determine your grade for this part of the course. Good journalists are competitive, so I look forward to your best efforts to get published.

Your team responsibilities will include producing **at least** five stories of varying lengths each week – depending on news, that could be more - regular Tweets on the UR Capital News Service Twitter account and postings on other social media as news dictates.

BEAT STORIES

After the General Assembly, you will be assigned to be part of a team to cover a beat. You and your team will be responsible for writing at least five stories from your beat. We'll discuss specifics and options in class.

WRITING

This will be a more intense form of writing and reporting for some of you, but don't be discouraged by your early efforts. Good writing doesn't come without practice, so expect to do some rewriting...and more rewriting. You will improve, if you apply yourself. I am available to coach you by e-mail before all of your assignments, unless I tell you otherwise.

Your stories will be published, so be meticulous about accuracy. Be sure to inform all interview sources fully that the interview is for publication, not merely a class exercise.

Presenting fictional interviews, quotes, etc., as factual is an honor code violation, as well as a grave breach of trust with readers, the instructor and you. You will fail the course and be subject to university sanctions if you plagiarize or engage in other unethical behavior. **Honor pledge: You are expected to do your own work for this class unless I tell you otherwise. Failure to do so is an offense with potentially devastating consequences.**

GRADES

I don't give grades -- you earn them. Your work will be graded according to professional standards -- much more so than your other writing classes - but you'll get a little more slack at the start of the course and a lot less as we go along. In other words, if you're doing C or D work early in the semester, I'm looking for A or B work at the end. The grades you get toward the last month or so of the semester are a good indicator of your final mark. For example, if you start out getting Ds and Cs and head into the homestretch with consistent Bs, you're likely to get a B.

Here are some keys to getting a good grade: paying attention to AP style; writing clearly and accurately; using more than one source in stories; spelling correctly; participating in discussions; coming to class; scoring well on quizzes and tests; showing effort and interest.

Here are some ways to get an automatic F: missing deadline; missing an assignment; misspelling a name; writing stories with major factual errors; using only one source in your stories; not participating in class; earning poor quiz and test grades; showing little effort or interest. Also, you will lose five to 10 points if you use the following words in your stories: really, great, very and awesome. Do not use those words unless they are part of a direct quotation. You should know why.

Grading key:

A -- outstanding work that requires minimal editing before publishing.

B -- above average work that requires five or fewer minor editing changes before publishing.

C -- average work that requires substantial editing and no more than one rewriting effort before publishing.

D -- unacceptable work that contains multiple errors and requires extensive editing and rewriting before possible publication.

F -- see the note above.

Making the grade:

75 percent: Writing and reporting assignments

15-20 percent: quizzes, participation, effort, improvement

5-10 percent: special reporting projects

Other grading information:

A+ = 98-100; A = 92-97; A- = 90-91

B+ = 88-89; B = 82-87; B- = 80-81

C+ = 78-79; C = 72-77; C- = 70-71

D+ = 68-69; D = 62-67; D- = 60-61

F = 59 and below

NEWS MEMOS

Email me two, one-page public affairs story by 5 p.m. Monday. Write these like an editor giving an assignment to a reporter. Include what you think the story is, why it's important, what the angle is and how the information can be obtained. Note well: these must be more substantial and detailed than you turned in for News Writing courses.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

This may change as the semester progresses. We will readjust as needed for breaking news of great interest. Please note that lectures are not designed to simply repeat what's in the text or the news; frequently, discussions will be based on topics related to the assignments. In simple terms, you have to do the reading and come to class in order to succeed in this course.

Weeks one through nine: General Assembly coverage, basic beat reporting,
Weeks 10-14: advanced beat reporting, "She Said," general public affairs coverage, investigations, portfolio prep

THE KICKER

I will work with you like an editor on your stories before they are graded. I'll work with you like an editor in my grading. I care about good writing and reporting and I want to teach you to do both well. If you are eager to help yourself improve, I am eager to help you. I am available to help you at most any reasonable hour and plenty of unreasonable hours, too. My office hours are quite flexible, as most of you know by now. Send me an email and we'll set up a meeting. Although my primary focus is to help you to excel in journalism, student experience has shown that this course will benefit you in ways you may not realize right away. My goal is to prepare you to succeed in whatever field you choose after you leave Richmond.