Feature and Magazine Article Writing, Journalism 202, Fall 2015
Monday-Wednesday: 10:30 a.m. to noon in Weinstein Hall, Room 314.
Mike Spear, Instructor Office: 427 Weinstein Hall
Office hours: 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays.
E-mail for an appointment: mspear@richmond.edu

Course description: You will learn to write a variety of feature stories that range from profiles, travel and human interest to adventure, history and hobbies. You may find writing them challenging in a way that goes far beyond basic news writing. Unlike news stories, features are not driven by time constraints. They require thorough research, interviews and reporting.

In order to prepare you to write features, I will have you read stories by some of the best feature writers in the U.S. These stories can be amusing, dramatic, entertaining, stimulating and even inspiring. They all involve excellent narrative, character development and extensive research. You will need this reading background to be able to understand and write effective features. The best feature writers often use the short story structure -- a beginning, a middle and an end. They use sensory detail, dialog, anecdotes, description and scene setting.

Journalists find it difficult to define what a feature story is. It’s much like the experience Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart had in trying to identify pornography. “I can’t identify it, but I know it when I see it,” he is quoted as having said. The challenge of feature writing is that it allows you to be creative while being wedded to the facts. Your creativeness is directly connected to the extent of your reading background.

Plan to spend significant time outside the classroom collecting information, writing and rewriting. You are striving for fact-filled writing that is useful, inspirational and reveals something about the human condition. Your own personality, interest and writing style will dictate, to some degree, the kind of stories your produce.

Course objective: The goal of this course is to make you skilled feature writers. How far you progress depends on you. Note: If you are not an avid reader, you should know now that this course may be difficult for you.

Follow this procedure for each story:
1. Develop a strong story idea, decide on the best publication and audience and write a query letter to that publication’s editor.
2. Do the reporting, which will include multiple sources.
3. Write and rewrite your draft until you are satisfied with it.

Essay: During the semester you are to pick an essay topic and write 700 words following the structure of the essay. You chose the topic, but clear it with me before your begin. You can start on this at any time.

Subscribe to a magazine of your choice. Here are some to consider: The New Yorker,
Vanity Fair, Harper’s, The Atlantic, Esquire, National Geographic, RollingStone, Sports Illustrated, ESPN magazine, Solon.Com. Let me know by the third class which magazine you have subscribed to.

Texts:
“On Writing Well” by William Zinsser.

Attendance: You must come to class and be on time. If this is a problem for you, then now is the time to drop the class. If you miss no classes during the semester, you cannot fail the class. Also, if you miss no classes, you will get a half-point grade boost at the end. Four class absences will earn you an F for the course. If you bring your cell phones to class, turn them off. Do not text, send emails, or visit Facebook during class.

Grades: Here is what grades means:
A = clearly superior work.
B = good work but needs improvement.
C = average work that need much improvement.
D = seriously flawed.
F = name and factual errors.

You will have three feature stories and one opinion piece during the semester. Each will be graded on (1) the strength of the story idea, (2) the first draft and (3) the final rewrite. In each case, the final rewrite will determine the bulk of your grade. Be sure to put solid effort in your first draft. That will tell me what kind of reporter you are.

One-on-ones: You should try to schedule one of these with me for 10 minutes or so to discuss how the piece of writing you are working on is developing. These are purely voluntary. This individual attention should help with your writing.

Class participation: This is not a lecture class in which you can sit silently and take notes. Discussion is essential. You must speak up. Your willingness to speak up and discuss the issues of feature writing will have a strong influence on your grade. Ask questions if something is confusing to you or doesn’t make sense. If you are shy, get over it. If I sense that you are not willingly engaging in class discussion, I will call on you repeatedly. You cannot “hide” in class. Reporters cannot remain shy. Reporting is all about talking to people and getting information.

Note: All names and facts in your stories should have (cq) after them every time they appear in your story. This means that you have double checked names and facts and they are correct. At the top of your stories, left corner, write the story’s one-word “slug,” the
date, your name and the word count. **Example:**

**Abuse**  
Oct. 12  
Schickelgrueber  
986 words

At the bottom of your story, list all sources and the names of people, title, how they were interviewed and the date interviewed. People interviewed should look like this:

Steve Bisese, vice president for student development, personal, phone number, date.  
Ronald Crutcher, president of UR, phone, phone number, date.

**Additional Note:** You are always writing for publications. **Make this clear to all sources that this is not a class exercise.** You must know that **there are no one-source feature stories.** In fact most feature stories have many sources. A dozen is common.

**Conflict of interest:** You cannot write about or get information from anyone for a story who is in an organization that you belong to.

**Writing, a process:** Writing is not easy. Those who think it is are probably in asylums somewhere. I have never seen a first draft that did not need improving. Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, John McPhee, Joan Didion and Lillian Ross couldn’t do it, and you can’t either. So get used to writing and rewriting until you are almost ready for a straight jacket.

**Plagiarism:** The easy access to sources provided by the Internet has brought about a rash of plagiarism cases on campuses across the country. This involves taking someone else’s words and using them as your own. Not only is this illegal but it is unethical and an honor-code violation. If you are involved in plagiarism on any paper in this course, you will automatically flunk the course. It is fine to use material—narrative, quotes and indirect quotes—as long as you provide sources for each so that it is clear to the reader where the information comes from.

**Food and drink are banned in the lab for obvious reasons.**

**Disability accommodation:** Students with disabilities who have been formally granted accommodations by the University of Richmond Disability Advisor must show their “Disability Accommodation Notice” to me within the first week of class. The student and I will agree on an accommodation in advance for each scheduled major assignment.

**Schedule for your three feature stories this semester:**

Two story ideas for your first story due Aug. 31  
(First draft due in my office on Sept. 16)  
**First story due Sept. 30**
Two story ideas for your second story due Oct. 5
(First draft due in my office on Oct. 14)
Second story due Oct. 28

Two story ideas for your third story due Nov. 2
(First draft due in my office on Nov. 18)
Third due story Dec. 2

Note: Your story ideas should be submitted in detail, showing that you have done enough research to make it clear that the story is valid. That means that they should cover a least a page each with a suggested lead and detail description of sources and why they are important.

Tentative schedule for classes:

Week 1: The anatomy of a feature article
Week 2: Interviewing and curiosity
Week 3: Interviewing, developing characters
Week 4: Leads and endings
Week 5: Descriptive writing
Week 6: Anecdotes
Week 7: Profiles
Week 8: Fall break
Week 9: Scenes and Dialog
Week 10: First-person writing
Week 11: Investigative features
Week 12: Narrative Pace
Week 13: Immersion features
Week 14: Explanatory writing/”How to” features