COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course puts you to work as a freelance journalist. Through this semester, you will be in a continuous cycle of pitching, writing, editing, rewriting, publishing and promoting news and feature stories in a variety of publications just as any professional freelance writer would be. For many of you, this course will offer the first practical experience in publishing that will make your work available to a large global reading audience. Many of the stories you will write for this course will appear in The Collegian, the major student-run news publication at the University of Richmond, but you will also propose stories to other editors and contribute to their local, regional and national publications. Regardless of where it is published, your work and your name will become part of the public record, available to millions of people through news archives and searchable online databases. As a result, some of you might even receive notes from strangers critiquing or admiring your work from around the world. All this is part of the work of professional journalism. You might view this course as your opportunity to build a portfolio of work that you might present to publishers, potential employers and graduate schools in the near future.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

To be successful in this course, you should expect to devote an average of 10 to 14 hours each week to prepare for class, participate in class sessions, study course related materials, and complete course assignments. In this course you will write news and feature stories and publish as many as possible in local, regional and national publications. You will practice and perfect the craft of formulating intelligent and compelling ideas for stories and pitching them convincingly to editors. The ability to spot a story where others don’t is what can truly set you apart as an exceptional journalist, and this course provides ample opportunity to refine this important professional skill. You will also learn to work through the process of editing and rewriting while responding to critiques of editors and colleagues. Through this process you will learn to craft better first drafts and become highly attuned to your potential readers’ expectations and needs.
ASSIGNMENTS & COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Writing assignments: 50 percent
Those of you employed at The Collegian (or any other recognized publication), as editors will be required to publish at least 4,000 words over the course of the semester. All others are required to publish at least 5,000 words.

There is no minimum number of stories that you must publish in order to meet this threshold. A 5,000-word feature story published in a local magazine near the end of the semester will do the job just as well as ten shorter 500-word pieces published through the course of the semester at a campus newspaper.

First drafts count for nothing. It is only when you have managed to work through the piece over one or many rewrites to an editor’s satisfaction that your work will count for this course. If you fail to work through a piece with an editor, you may need to take the story to another publication or discard it and start from scratch.

The word count will be calculated on the basis of words assigned, not words published. In other words if you are assigned 500 words by an editor but they end up publishing only 300 words due to limited space or some other constraints, you will still get credit for 500 words, as long as you meet or exceed the word-limit in your initial submission and the story is eventually published.

You will be graded on the version of the story approved by your assigning/immediate editor, not the version that is eventually published after going through the copy-editing, graphics and design production processes. At the same time, I may decide that a specific publication does not warrant credit if I am not satisfied with the writing or editing process. I may also award extra word-credit for publishing in prominent and competitive publications with larger audiences.

You will be graded according to the following standard (as published by the Poynter Institute):
A: Publishable in current form with few or no revisions
A-/B+: Publishable with minor work
B: Solid elements; will be publishable with some rehabbing
B-/C+: Some serious flaws but other strengths; will be publishable with reasonable work
C: Major flaws; needs overhaul before being publishable
D: Critical errors; could not be considered publishable without dramatic change
F: Work not completed, lacks merit over-all, was late, or misspelled a personal or business name.

You are required to meet all deadlines without exception. A late submission, even if it might be entertained by editors and even get published, will not be read by me and will not count towards fulfilling the course requirements.

Send your stories as email attachments in a Microsoft Word document. On the first page of each assignment use a “slug” in the upper left corner, listing your name, a one- or two-word description of the piece, the date, and the word count.
Example: Richards – scholarships – 1/16/16 – 1005 words
Name your Word documents to include your last name, a one- or two-word story description, and the date in the MMDDYYYY format.
Example: HENRY_Story4_01222014
Story ideas: 25 percent
Generating and writing up ideas for stories is an integral element of your work in this course. Your prospects for doing well hinge on your ability to think of good, and original, ideas and present them in a compelling manner to editors.

Each week, you are required to send out short queries to editors at The Collegian or at other publications enquiring about their interest in ideas for news or feature stories. Each query should be no more than 250 words, and for it to be successful it should aim to do the following: 1) convey the basic story idea, including the major characters and conflicts or trends 2) demonstrate why it is important story for readers to know about and 3) demonstrate why you specifically are the right person to write about it and your unique and special approach to the subject. Pre-reporting – something as simple as phone call to a relevant source in the story – can make all the difference in the quality of your pitch and can demonstrate your edge in reporting. You must CC/ BCC me on these query letters on the email address provided at the top of this syllabus, and keep me posted on any progress or follow-up. The more story ideas you send out each week the better the chances that you will get assigned a story that will allow you to meet your requirement for the course.

Each week, you will be graded on your pitching on a check-plus/ check/ check-minus scale. If you are able to demonstrate your ability to effectively execute all three parts of the pitch outlined above, you will receive a check-plus. If you are able to do only two, you will receive a check. Successfully executing only one element of the pitch will result in a check-minus. If you are unable to successfully demonstrate the ability to do any of the above, you will receive a zero. The more queries you send out in a given week, the better the chances that you will be able to successfully demonstrate each of the three elements of successful pitching and earn a check-plus for the week.

Active class preparation and participation: 25 percent
Showing up to appointments is the only way to succeed in this line of work. During our routine class sessions we will work on essential elements of the craft of pitching, reporting and writing. We will also use class sessions to workshop pieces that are in progress as well as pitches and query letters. All these readings materials will be distributed in advance through Blackboard and you will be required to read these drafts and critique them carefully before coming to class. Attendance and active participation in these classroom activities is essential to succeeding in this course. You are required to attend all class sessions. For every three sessions that you miss, your final grade will drop by one full letter grade.

ACADEMIC HONESTY AND DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION
Observe the honor code. Cite and credit all of your sources accurately. All work submitted should be done by you in preparation for this specific course. You may not, for example, hand in a story for this class that you are also preparing for another course. Evidence of plagiarism or cheating of any kind will result in an “F” on the assignment and this may be reported to the university administration for further consideration. Contact me immediately if you have difficulty understanding how to cite sources or have questions concerning any of the above.

Students with disabilities who have been formally granted accommodations by a University of Richmond Disability Advisor must show their “Disability Accommodation Notice” to me within the first week of the academic term. The student and I will agree upon an accommodation in advance of each scheduled major assignment. You are encouraged to meet with me at least one week prior to any major deadline to discuss your accommodation.