

News Writing, Journalism 201, Fall 2009

(No prerequisite for this course)

Tuesday-Thursday. 9 a.m. to 10:15 a.m.

Weinstein Hall, Room 418

Mike Spear, Instructor

Office: 427 Weinstein Hall

Hours: 2 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Monday and Wednesday

E-mail for appointments

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Journalism requires exacting and precise work. In this course, you will learn the fundamentals of gathering, organizing and writing news stories on deadline according to professional standards. The course concentrates on good writing and accurate reporting. During 14 weeks, you will learn:

--What news is.

--How to avoid common usage and grammar problems.

--How to interview.

--How to research story information.

--How to write factual information in a clear, concise, accurate and logical manner— by writing and rewriting often before turning stories in for grades.

--How to avoid bias and libel.

If you apply yourself in this course, you will have entry-level skill to enter the media world.

Course Texts:

- **“Reporting for the Print Media” by Fedler, Bender, Davenport and Drager (latest edition) Oxford University Press, New York, 2005.**
- **“On Writing Well” by William Zinsser, Harper Collins, New York, 1990.**
- **“Straight Talk: Listen Carefully: The Art of Interviewing,” M.L. Stein and Susan F. Paterno, Iowa State University Press, 2001.**
- **New York Times. (<http://www.nytimes.com>)**
- **The Collegian and a good dictionary.**

Reading: Read the Times daily. There will be a newspaper quiz at the beginning of class each Tuesday throughout the semester. The questions will come from the Times and The Collegian of the previous week. You are urged also to read critically and analytically such dailies as the Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post and national news magazines, most of which are now on the Web.

Writing: Writing is a craft. Learning to write and report well is like learning to play a sport well. With instruction and practice you will get better. In order to help you develop your skill, I will grade your work closely. The evaluations are aimed at helping you. Study them closely and follow AP style.

Attendance: It is essential that you miss no classes. You can get hopelessly behind quickly. Also, you will miss what goes on in class along with assignments and quizzes, which means zeroes on these unless you provide an official excuse. If you are forced to miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what the assignment is from me or a classmate and complete it when it is due. Emergencies requiring you to miss class should be discussed with me before the class to be missed if that is at all possible. Only in cases in which the nature of the emergency precludes advance notice will an after-the-fact excuse be accepted unless you have an official excuse.

Note: If you miss no classes, I will drop your two lowest class work or homework grades during the last critical five weeks of class. This can mean a whole letter grade improvement for the course. If you miss only one class, I will drop one.

Deadlines: No late assignments will be accepted. Part of learning to be a journalist is meeting deadlines. Use your time efficiently. Media editors are not tolerant of writers who can't meet deadlines. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of doing all homework on time. Diligence at this can easily boost your final grade one letter higher.

Punctuality: You are expected to be in class on time. Each class will start promptly. If you cannot get to class on time, please drop the course now.

Copy preparation: Double space all copy. On each page, write your name in the upper left corner of the page, the slug word (one word) for the story under that and the page number under that. It should look like this:

Smith
Smuggle
Page 1

Write “**more**” at the bottom of each continuing page. Use the symbol # at the end.

Spelling: The inability to spell is a disease of our time. If you are gravely ill with this, get a cure quickly. Most computer programs will help you with this. One cure is to live with a dictionary and then “flag” or mark every word you are unsure of as you write. If you don't flag words immediately, you will forget about them. Then go back and look each up when you finish writing. Also, use spellcheck on your computer, but remember that it is limited. Misspellings can be fatal in this course. For every misspelling in any assignment, you lose 10 points. Be warned early. Take heart also; if you write well, you will earn plus points.

F Words: These involve misspellings and usage errors that will bring you an automatic “F” on **any paper** during the semester. F words are spelled correctly here. Learn them or they will haunt you: **accommodate, occurred, a lot, receive and its** (meaning possessive). Note: It’s only means it is. You will lose 10 points every time you use **great, really, very** and **awesome**. Consider these ambiguous qualifiers banned for the semester and for life except in direct quotations. Why? They weaken your writing.

Grades: Your work will be evaluated according to professional standards regardless of your personality, appearance or experience. Grades are based on performance. They are not given, they are earned. Criteria include accuracy, clarity, simplicity, completeness, conciseness, precise use of the language, proper use of AP style and the absence of bias, libel and editorial opinion. I know that you are starting with little or no experience, but I expect you to progress to a level of competence as rapidly as possible. Grading will be tolerant at first. Once the material has been covered, tolerance will fade.

Grades Meanings:

- A=Publishable as is; meets professional standards.
- B=Publishable with minor editing.
- C=Needs substantial editing or contains serious errors.
- D=Requires extensive rewriting or contains multiple errors.
- F=Un-publishable or contains misspelled name or factual error.

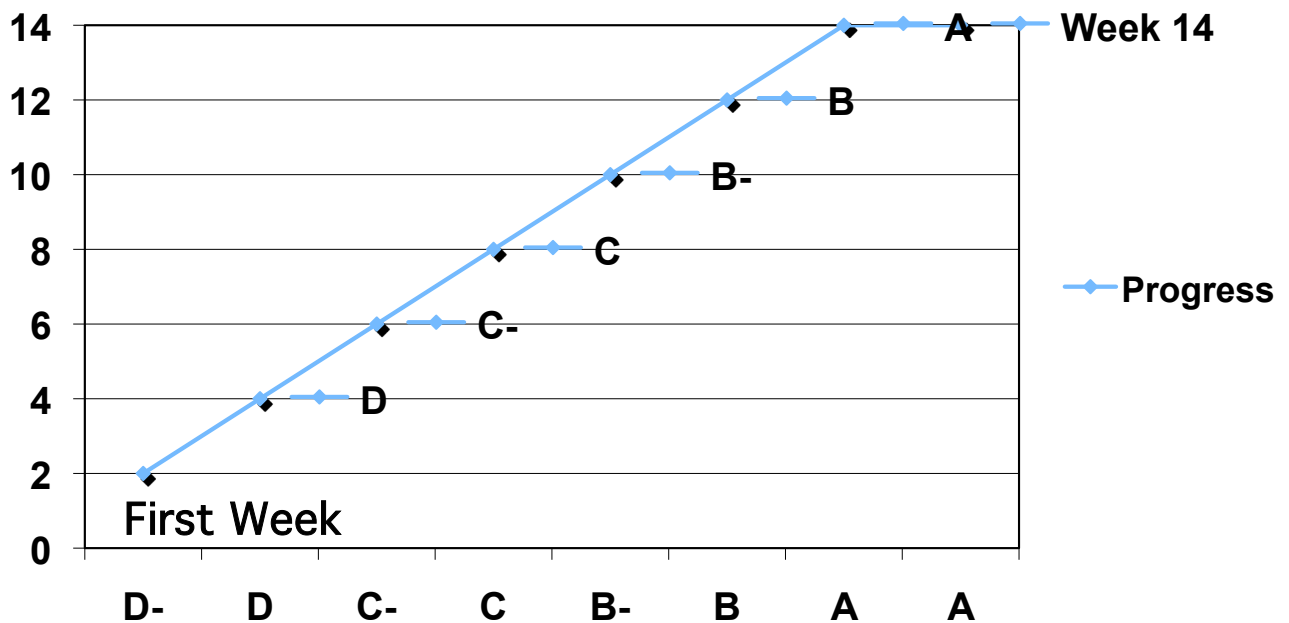
Course grades will be weighted approximately this way. Note carefully:

Class work, homework	= 60 percent
Midterm	= 5 percent
Final	= 20 percent
Progress	= 5 percent
Style, Grammar & Usage Bk.	=10 Percent

Progress is based on an evaluation of your work during the semester, taking into account your application of principles, meeting deadlines, attendance and class participation. F papers often occur early in the course because you have been careless with names or facts. “Fs” at this point in your development are not fatal, but you should be concerned and quickly learn to deal with the weakness indicated.

Note: The quality of your work toward the end of the course will be a strong indicator of the course grade you will receive.

Remember, an important part of what I’m looking for in your final grade is progress. I imagine a fever-line chart for each of you that spreads across 14 weeks on the vertical leg of the chart. Grades are A, B, C, D along the bottom. If you start the course doing D- or C-level work, I would expect you to be doing B- or A-level work at the end. The fever-line should move steadily upward across the 14 weeks. With this in mind, it should be apparent to you that the level of work you are doing in the last five weeks of the course will be a key indicator of your grade.



For example, if you have pulled yourself out of the doldrums of D-level work and are doing consistent B-level work during the last five weeks of the course, you will get a B for the course — unless you screw up the final exam. The final exam will give you the opportunity to put together all the things that you have learned in this course. You must give it your best effort.

Don't assume anything: Accuracy is critical. Any paper containing a misspelled name or a big factual error will receive an "F." If your interview subject says his name is "Smith," always ask him how he spells it. The first time you don't, it might be "Smythe." Be especially careful of such names as **Philip, Matthew, Elliott, Shawn** and **Allen**, which can be spelled many ways.

E-mail coaching: I will coach you by e-mail on your homework in the following manner: For homework assigned on Tuesday for Thursday, you have until 3 p.m. Wednesday to get your best homework draft to me by e-mail for comment. (**Note the emphasis here on best. Do not send me a sloppy rough draft.**) For Tuesday homework, assigned on Thursday, you have until 3 p.m. on Sunday to get your best draft to me. I do this because I can help you more effectively while you are writing than I can after the fact. Those who take advantage of this usually end up making at least a letter grade higher for the course than they would have otherwise. There are no rewrites for papers in this course.

Exams: There will be a midterm exam, which counts for 5 percent of the final grade, and a final exam, which counts for 20 percent. Anything covered in class or in assigned readings may show up in either or both.

AP Quizzes: I have prepared an Associated Press abbreviated style guide for this class. On it will be everything you need to know about AP style this semester. There will be an AP style quiz almost every Tuesday during the semester, starting Sept. 8. It will include not only AP style items, but any style, usage and grammar items we have covered up to that point.

“The Art of Interviewing” quizzes: It is essential that you learn all you can about interviewing. You are responsible for reading two chapters a week in the Stein-Paterno book for six weeks. A quiz will be conducted each Thursday, **starting Sept. 3. It will cover Chapters 1 and 2. The other quizzes will be as follows:**

Chs. 3 & 4, Sept. 10 Ch. 9, Oct. 1
Chs. 5 & 6, Sept. 17 Chs. 10 & 11, Oct. 8
Chs. 7 & 8, Sept. 24

Story Ideas: These help you learn to think like a reporter. Each of you is required to submit one story idea each Thursday that is campus-related. You are to write the story idea using this format:

Part 1. My story idea this week is...

Part 2. It is important because...

Part 3. Sources for this story are the following...

Note: There is nothing wrong with submitting a story idea based on rumor. Simply go through the same procedure. When you get to sources, give the names of those who might be able to provide information.

These story ideas will be due at the start of class each Thursday. **Send them to me by e-mail.**

Here is an example of an acceptable story idea: (Be sure to always include the headings Parts, 1, 2 and 3 as they appear here.)

Part 1: Grade inflation is an issue involving colleges and universities across the country. Even the best schools are afflicted by it. Students say they are paying big bucks to go to school and that they deserve the grades whether they earn them or not. Duke and Harvard reportedly scarcely ever give grades below B. The same goes for other good schools. Why is this? What are the reasons for it? How is this trend affecting UR?

Part 2: This story is important because if grade inflation is occurring at Richmond, students should know about it and faculty and administrators should be asked about it.

Part 3: Go to the Internet, the Times, and or Lexis-Nexis and see what has been written about this in recent months for background. Then interview students, faculty members and administrators at UR about their views on this. Interview for detail and specifics. Be sure to interview members of the UR academic council and the dean of the school of arts and sciences, Andy Newcomb, the provost, Steve Allred, and the university president, Ed Ayers.

Style, grammar and usage book: During the semester, you will put together your own style, grammar and usage book. It will contain specific information about style, grammar and usage that you and I will develop in class. Make a Style, Grammar and Usage Book heading on your computer and store this information there alphabetically as we discuss it in class. I will ask for a printout of these on **Nov. 19**, and I will grade them on neatness, clarity of explanation and example, accuracy, enterprise and thoroughness. This book will come in handy to you long after you leave college in whatever job you take that involves writing. You are urged to insert any other bits of information (I call this enterprise) into the book that will help your writing. Enterprise will be rewarded when I

grade these. This is an easy way to get an A. You can start work on this at any time. You do not have to wait for me to cover it in class.

Final Exam: Your final exam will be a campus-related story. I prefer that you write a story that has national implications, that you will localize to this campus. The story must be suitable for publication. You may start working on the final at any time during the semester. It has to be turned in by the end of the exam period for this class. **While you are gathering information for the story, do not fail to mention to interviewees that you are writing for publication.** If you have a problem coming up with a story idea, I have a huge story idea folder in my office for you to go through. Come by and take a look at any time. You must give me a typed description (of at least one page each) of two possible final story ideas on **Oct 22**. In this, you should tell me what your stories are, why you think they will be of interest to campus readers and what approach you plan to take. Once selected, the story must have at least eight campus interview sources (but more will be looked on with much favor). It must show evidence of library background research, either from newspapers and magazines or computer databases, the Internet— or all of these.

If you miss the Oct. 22 deadline, you will automatically lose five points on your final exam. On **Nov. 17**, I must see at least a three-page, well-written draft of your story. If you fail to meet this deadline, it will cost you 10 points on your final. The final version of your story is due on exam day. You may turn it in early.

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.

An important final word: You will quickly learn that I will go out of my way to help those who show that they want to help themselves. Proficiency at journalism skills and high grades are earned by thought and work. If you stay in journalism, or go into any work that involves writing, you will quickly realize the value of this course. I am available at any reasonable hour to help you. Take the initiative to ask questions or to talk about anything you are not sure of.

Pledge: Write: I have not given or received help on this work. Then sign your name.

Proposed Class Schedule:

Week 1 Chapter 5 Leads

Week 2 Leads

Week 3 Chapter 7 Body of a News Story

Week 4 Chapter 8, Quotes and Attribution

Week 5 Quotes and Attribution

Week 6 Chapter 9 Interviews and Polls

Week 7 Interviewing
Week 8 Chapter 17 Speeches and meetings
Week 9 Chapter 12 Communications Law
Week 10 Chapter 13 Ethics
Week 11 Handling first- and second-day news stories
Week 12 Chapter 14 Specialized types of stories
Week 13 Chapter 20 Feature Stories
Week 14 Review

Fall Break begins after classes on Oct. 9; classes resume Oct. 14.
Midterm will be on or about Oct. 6.

Last day of classes is Dec. 4.

Bonus: Any story written without “to be” verbs during the semester will automatically get a 10-point grade increase. These are “to be” verbs: is, are, was, were, am, be, been, and being. They can also be found in contractions such as it’s, they’re, you’re, wasn’t, weren’t, and aren’t.

HELPFUL WEB SOURCES:

JOURNALISM RESOURCES:

<http://www.reporter.org/>

REPORTERS COMMITTEE FOR FREEDOM OF THE PRESS:

<http://www.rcfp.org/>

THESAURUS:

<http://www.thesaurus.reference.com>

ELEMENTS OF STYLE: & BARTLETT’S QUOTATIONS

<http://www.bartleby.com/bartlett>

CENSUS BUREAU:

<http://www.census.gov/pubinfo/www/news.html>

FEDERAL AGENCIES:

<http://www.fedworld.gov/>

INTERNSHIP LIST:

<http://www.asne.org/kiosk/careers/interns.htm>

NOTABLE CITIZENS:

<http://www.s9.com/biography/search.html>

CAMPAIGN FINANCE:

<http://www.campaignfinance.org/>

FIND A PERSON:

<http://www.switchboard.com/>

COMMON ENGLISH ERRORS:

<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/errors.html>

USEFUL SITES:

<http://www.robertniles.com/>

<http://www.searchsystems.net>

This is one of the best sites for finding public records. It has everything from the names of sex offenders to legislative documents.

CALENDAR for Quizzes and due dates

- 1. Newspaper quiz each Tuesday**
- 2. Stein-Paterno quiz each Thursday**
- 3. Story ideas due Thursday (e-mail)**
- 4. AP quizzes will be on Tuesdays**
- 5. SGU books due Nov. 19**
- 6. Final story ideas due Oct. 22**
- 7. Final 3-page draft due Nov. 17**