

**Jour 201, News Writing  
Weinstein 418  
MWF 10:30 to 11:20 a.m.**

**Instructor: Tom Mullen  
x6048/270-2499  
[tmullen@richmond.edu](mailto:tmullen@richmond.edu)**

Writing and reporting news stories is fast-paced, demanding work. You will find out why in this course and learn how to do it well for any news media platform. If you apply yourself, you will be a better writer by the end of the semester and will be able to put that skill to use in more ways than you might imagine.

This is a challenging course because of skills required to be a good and ethical news writer. 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. My office hours are quite flexible – just send me an email and we can arrange a convenient time to meet.

**Never forget this: Never assume.**

### **At the bookstore**

"Reporting for the Media," by Fred Fedler, ninth edition

"The Elements of Style," by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White

"The Associated Press Stylebook"

"Talk Straight, Listen Carefully," by M.L. Stein and Susan Paterno

"On Writing Well," by William Zinsser

A good dictionary

Some reporter's notebooks and legal pads.

You must read the online editions of the Richmond Times-Dispatch and the New York Times every day; The Collegian every week; and other periodicals as assigned.

## Attendance

You have to come to class. Period.

If you miss, you'll fall behind. You don't want to fall behind in this course. We don't have time to wait for you to catch up. This means you must also be on time for class. Get used to meeting a deadline. Three late starts to class count as a missed class. **If you miss six classes, you will fail the course.**

Let me know in advance if you have to miss a class for a non-emergency. You are responsible for finding out whatever assignments or materials were covered in class. You can call a classmate or me. 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.

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.

## Reading

Read the Richmond Times-Dispatch every day. All of it - not just the sections you like. Read The New York Times. Almost all if it (I'll tell you what your focus should be). Read The Collegian. All of it. We will have frequent and unannounced quizzes based on reading these news sites. If you miss the quiz, you can't make it up.

It's a good idea to also read as many different news sites as you can, as well as news magazines such as Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report.

One way to help your news writing is to read good news writing. We'll spend time in class discussing and critiquing a wide range of stories.

## Writing

Good writing doesn't come without practice. You'll write something in class almost daily. And then you'll rewrite it . . . and rewrite it again. . . and rewrite it again.

You'll do most every kind of news writing in this course. Some of it will make you want to bite your nails and pull your hair out. Most of it will be more pleasant.

Do not be discouraged by your early efforts. 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.**

## Grades

I don't give grades - you earn them. Your work will be graded according to professional standards, with more tolerance at the start of the course and less as we go along. In other words, your progress will be a good part of your final grade. 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 good indicators 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:** 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; missing a deadline; misspelling the following: accommodate, occurred, a lot, receive and its (as a possessive). Remember, It's only when it is. 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. Ask me why.

**Second chances:** You get one shot at rewriting an F grade. That effort is due by the next class period. You must submit the original along with the rewrite. The rewrite counts one grade lower than it might otherwise have earned. In other words, if you turn in an A rewrite, it goes in the book as a B.

**Grading key:**

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

B -- above average work that requires four 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.

**Other grading information:**

Numerically, this is how I will break down your grades:

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

Pluses and minuses may be added to your grade based on the following: extra effort - or lack thereof; progress - or lack thereof; excellent class participation - or poor participation; completed extra credit work of B or better; tardiness. The plus grade generally recognizes work that's a bit higher than grade level. The minus grade is often for work that is just below grade level, but can also be used to recognize enterprise and achievement. For example, a student with letter grade of C+ who has shown progress, enterprise, etc., can get boosted to a B-. Conversely, a student with A grades who doesn't participate in class, shows up late, etc., can wind up with an A-.

### **Making the grade:**

60 percent: Writing assignments, in class and out;

25 percent: midterm (5 percent) and final project (20 percent);

10 percent: quizzes, news tips;

5 percent: participation, effort

We will have frequent quizzes on news events, AP style, "Talk Straight" and other writing-related matters. Some quizzes will be announced in advance.

### **NEWS TIPS**

To get you used to thinking like reporters, you will turn in two campus-related story ideas every Wednesday **at the start of class**. Write these like an editor giving a news tip 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. I'll turn these in for possible follow-up by The Collegian. You may e-mail these to me in advance of class.

### **FORMATS**

Double-space all of your stories. On each page, write your name in the upper left corner, the slug (a one-word description of the story) and the page number, like so:

**Mullen**

**Riot**

**Page 1 of 1** (or Page 1 of 2, Page 2 of 3, and so on)

If you have more to write at the end of a page, write (MORE) at the bottom. Use either the symbol # or -30- at the end.

Major assignments must be submitted by email as attached files in the Microsoft Word format, as well as hard copy. Your articles may be published on-line, so be

meticulous about accuracy. Be sure to inform all interview sources fully that the interview is for publication, not merely a class exercise

A list of full names, phone numbers and email addresses of any source quoted, paraphrased or cited must accompany each of your stories. **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. Plagiarism is grounds for failure in this course and possible university sanction.**

### **Final project**

Your final project is to write a substantial, campus-related news story that may be published in The Collegian or elsewhere. Please remember to remind people you interview that the story may be published. In professional terms, your final exercise would be described as a project story or investigative piece.

The story must have at least eight sources, more if you can. You must demonstrate background research from some combination of libraries, news sites, magazines and computer databases. Start early.

You'll need to turn in a one-page description of your story by Oct. 1. I want you to tell me why you think your story is worth pursuing and how you plan to do it. I'll get that back to you with my comments within a week.

By Oct. 21, turn in at least a three page rough draft of the story. I'll get that back with my comments within a week.

The final version of the story is due by final exam day, but you may turn it in earlier.

Remember, I will work with you on your stories at every step. On most assignments, I will coach you by e-mail before your work is due. Ask for assistance and you will receive it. Don't wait until the last minute.

**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.

**Late assignments:** I don't accept them without specific prior approval, so if you turn something in without that, it's a zero. Assignments are due at the start of class.

**Tentative class schedule:** This may change as the semester progresses. You'll have a number of out-of-class assignments, and we'll also have several guest speakers throughout the semester.

From *On Writing Well* read:

Week 1 -- Chapters 1 and 2

Week 2 -- Chapters 3 and 4

Week 3 -- Chapters 5 and 6

Week 4 -- Chapters 7 and 8

Week 5 -- Chapters 9 and 10

Week 6 -- Chapter 23

Expect a short quiz weekly on material from this book.

From *Talk Straight* read:

Week 7 -- Chapters 1 and 2

Week 8 -- Chapters 3 and 4

Week 9 -- Chapters 5 and 6

Week 10 -- Chapters 7 and 8

Week 11 -- Chapters 9, 10 and 11

Expect a short quiz weekly on material from this book.

The order from the **Fedler** text may change. Please read the chapters assigned before class and **be prepared to lead part of a class discussion on each topic.**

Week 1 -- Chapters 1 and 2 (basics, grammar and spelling, basic leads)

Week 2 -- Chapter 3 (newswriting style); Chapter 4 (language of news); Chapter 5 (selecting and reporting the news, sample story writing)

Week 3 -- Chapter 6 (leads); Chapter 7 (alternative leads); deadline writing

Week 4 -- Chapter 8 (body of stories); follows; deadline writing

Week 5 -- Chapter 9 (quotes and attribution); Chapter 10 (interviews); deadline writing

Week 6 -- Interviewing; Chapter 11 (obituaries); improving your writing

Week 7 -- Review; Chapter 12 (speeches and meetings)

Week 8 -- Speeches and meetings; improving your writing; **midterm**

Week 9 -- Chapter 13 (specialized stories); Chapter 15, (public affairs reporting)

Week 10 -- Chapter 15 (public affairs: police reporting, courts, government, political reporting)

Week 11 -- Chapter 15, (politics); Chapter 16 (Internet)

Week 12 -- Chapter 14 (feature writing)

Week 13 -- Chapter 19 (working with PR); Chapter 20 (communications law)

Week 14 -- Chapter 21, ethics; review and **final exam**

## **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 I want to teach you to write well. If you are eager to help yourself improve, I am eager to help you.