Course description

This course will put you to work as a feature writer. Through the semester you will learn to report and write articles in a range of lengths and styles, suitable for publication in newspapers, magazines, and websites. To become a good writer, it is essential to become a good reader. So while we report, plan, organize, and write stories we will also read some of the best feature-length contemporary journalism. We’ll study these stories for craft techniques that you can apply to your own work. You’ll also learn how to pitch stories to editors and the related realities of “selling” your work – whether you are working for a publication or as a freelancer.

Course objectives

The goal of this class is to make you ready to take on and successfully complete feature assignments for a newspaper, magazine or website. In doing so, we’ll also work on refining your interviewing and research skills for reporting in-depth stories. To succeed, plan on devoting an average of 10 to 14 hours each week to include preparing for and participating in class, studying course-related materials and completing assignments. Try as much as possible to do something related to this class every day – whether it’s working on a writing assignment or simply pushing yourself to read and analyze a story on a topic with which you are unfamiliar. This professional literacy and discipline is critical to the journalistic writing life.

Texts and media

Readings as assigned and distributed by the instructor.
Online subscription to The New York Times.

Readings

For each class session, relevant magazine and newspaper articles, book chapters, and web links will be posted to Blackboard.

Assignments and Course Requirements

Blackboard Responses: 10 percent
You are required to complete all assigned readings and post a brief response to them (200-300 words) on Blackboard by 5 p.m. on the day before class. In your responses, you may analyze the pieces you read, applying ideas from class discussions to these readings. You must also pose at least three questions related to the reporting or writing of the piece that may be tackled during the class session on the following day. You will be graded (check, check minus, check plus). Late entries will receive no grade. Your graded responses will be returned to you at the end of each week.
Participation: 15 percent
Attendance and active participation are essential for you to do well in this course. Vibrant participation – comments, questions, criticisms – will allow all members of the group to benefit from the exchange of ideas. The class discussions will also allow us all to sharpen our own ideas and techniques for good feature writing. Attendance and punctuality are critical: For every three classes that you miss, your final grade will drop by one letter grade. If you end the semester with a perfect attendance record, you will receive extra credit for the course. Three late starts will count as an absence.

Two feature articles: 25 percent
Twice during the course, you will report and write shorter feature articles, including a personality profile. Before you begin your reporting and writing you will be required to pitch your idea to me and get my approval.

Short writing exercises: 15 percent
You will periodically be required to complete short writing assignments in class or at home, which will be graded. Your final story outline is graded as one of these short writing exercises.

Final piece: 35 percent
At the end of the semester, working in a reporting team of two or three, you will submit a 3,000-word piece on a topic of your choice. It should be a story that you can easily report from the Richmond area.

Writing guidelines
You are required to meet all deadlines on the syllabus without exception. If you foresee trouble meeting a deadline, you must inform me at least one week in advance and we will discuss whether an extension might be useful or possible. A late submission without any warning will not be read and will receive an F.

On the first page, in the upper left corner please include your name, a one or two-word “slug,” or title description, the date and the word count. This can all be done in the “header” space on a Microsoft Word document.
Example:

Kapsidelis
Horses
10/16/19
1005 words

Please include page numbers at the top right of each page. Name your Word document this way: KAPSIDELIS_HORSES-10162019.doc

Grading
Grades are performance-based and your work will be evaluated according to entry-level professional standards. Criteria include accuracy, clarity, correct use of language and AP style, thoroughness, conciseness, meeting deadline and the absence of libel, bias, and editorial opinion. You also are expected to participate in class. Grading will be more tolerant at first and become tougher.

Grading key:
A = Publishable as is; meets entry-level professional standards.
B = Publishable with minor editing.
C = Needs substantial editing or contains serious errors.
D = Requires extensive rewriting or contains multiple errors.
F = Unpublishable, incomplete, or contains misspelled name, factual errors or attribution errors.

Pluses or minuses will be given if you’re close - or far - from the letter grade. They also may be
added to your grade based on effort, progress, participation, extra credit and attendance. The
plus grade generally recognizes work that is above grade level, and the minus grade generally
recognizes work that isn't quite up to grade level. However, a minus grade can also represent a
boost -- for example, a student who has a C+ but has demonstrated enterprise and made great
effort at improvement could earn a B-. That means a student with A work could end up receiving
an A- as a result of poor attendance, excessive tardiness, poor effort and participation.

Numerically, the grades will be broken down like this:
A+ = 98-100; A = 93-97; A- = 90-92
B+ = 88-89; B = 83-87; B- = 80-82
C+ = 78-79; C = 73-77; C- = 70-72
D+ = 68-69; D = 63-67; D- = 60-62
F = 59 and below

**Academic honesty**

Observe the honor code. You need to properly attribute all the sources you use in your stories. All
work submitted should be done by the student in preparation for this specific course. (You may
not, for example, hand in a story for this class that you are also using in another course.)
Evidence of plagiarism and cheating of any kind will result in immediate
“F” on the assignment and this may be reported to the university administration for further
consideration. If you have difficulty understanding how to cite sources or have questions
concerning any of the above contact me immediately.

**Disability accommodation**

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
for each scheduled major assignment. You must meet with me at least one week prior to any
deadline to discuss your accommodation.
Important dates and deadlines

Sept. 4 by 5 p.m.: Proposed subject for first 1,000-word feature story
Sept. 27 by 5 p.m.: First story
Sept. 30 before 5 p.m.: Pitch three ideas for topic of final, 3,000-word story
Oct. 4 by 5 p.m.: Final story pitches
Oct. 9 by 5 p.m.: Pitch on proposed 1,500-word profile subject
Nov. 8: Profile story
Nov. 11: Draft final story outline by 5 p.m.
Nov. 15 by 5 p.m.: Final story outline
Dec. 13 by 5 p.m.: Final story

Weekly schedule

WEEK 1 – Introduction
Aug. 27: Introduction to the course
Aug. 29: The features of a feature

WEEK 2 – The anatomy of a feature article
Sept. 3: Understanding structure
Sept. 5: Creating structure
Due Sept. 4 by 5 p.m., Proposed subject for first story, 1,000 words

WEEK 3 – Time as a story element
Sept. 10: Creating Timelines
Sept. 12: Narrative and movement

WEEK 4 – The people in your stories
Sept. 17: Interviewing for features
Sept. 19: Translating experiences into narratives

WEEK 5 – Descriptive writing
Sept. 24: Describing scenery, objects, people
Sept. 26: Description in narrative
Due Sept. 27 by 5 p.m.: First story.

WEEK 6 – Scenes and Dialogue
Oct. 1: Scene and point of view
Oct. 3: One-on-one meetings
Due Sept. 30 by 5 p.m.: Pitch three ideas for final story topic
Due Oct. 4 by 5 p.m.: Final story pitches

WEEK 7 – The Profile
Oct. 8: The idea of the profile
Oct. 10: Situating the central character
Due Oct. 9 by 5 p.m.: Pitch on proposed 1,500-word profile subject

WEEK 8
Oct. 15: FALL BREAK
Oct. 17: Discuss profile, final story topics in class

WEEK 9 – Explanatory writing
Oct. 22: Distilling information
Oct. 24: Explaining complex processes

WEEK 10 – Investigative features
Oct. 29: Researching records and trends
Oct. 31: Cultivating sources

WEEK 11 – Immersion journalism
Nov. 5: The writer in the story
Nov. 7: Reporting day
**Due Nov. 8 by 5 p.m.: Profile story**

WEEK 12 – In-class, one-on-one meetings
Nov. 12: Class meetings
Nov. 14: Class meetings
**Due Nov. 11: Draft final story outline by 5 p.m.**
**Due Nov. 15 by 5 p.m.: Final story outline**

WEEK 13 – Editing
Nov. 19: Editing your own work
Nov. 21: Photography, illustrations, and graphics

WEEK 14 – Pitching your work
Nov. 26: Pre-reporting and adapting ideas
Nov. 28: Thanksgiving break

WEEK 15 – Pitching your work, Part II
Dec. 3: Contacting editors, analyzing markets and writing a pitch
Dec. 5 – Wrap-up

**Final story of 3,000 words due on Dec. 13 by 5 p.m.**