Advanced Writing/Public Affairs Reporting  
Spring 2013  
J395 (07990)

Classes: MW 12-1:30, CMA 4.316

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Description:

Students will focus on the skills needed to identify and do advanced journalistic writing/public affairs reporting in a democratic society. Attention will be paid to identifying and developing “reporting beats” tied to public affairs, public officials. Workshop-style training will be led by the instructor, with input from other professional reporters and editors. In particular, students will have regular access to a veteran reporter-editor from The Dallas Morning News. Students will form two-person reporting teams. This is a required course for masters degree candidates on the Professional Track in the School of Journalism.

Objectives/Goals:

- Think critically about what “public affairs journalism” means.  
- Grasp the mechanics of public affairs stories.  
- Immersion in, and familiarity with, a public affairs beat/topic.  
- Develop and hone techniques for longer news stories.  
- Examine issues of ethics, fairness and accuracy.  
- Examine “neglected” or “under reported” stories
Expected Learning Outcomes:

Outcome 1:
Students will be able to demonstrate an initial understanding of and competence in identifying public affairs stories, issues, beats.

- **Method 1**: Students will identify, present, propose, public affairs stories, issues, beats in editorial budget meetings and/or story memos.

- **Metric 1**: The instructor will evaluate the ability to identify, present, and propose stories by relying on class feedback and by using Appendix #1 (Assessment Grid) to this syllabus.

Outcome 2:
Students will be able to gather and write public affairs news in an accurate, fair, comprehensive and clear manner as required to practice effectively as a professional in print or digital journalism.

- **Method 1**: Students will gather, report and write public affairs stories.

- **Metric 1**: The instructor will evaluate the accuracy, fairness, comprehensiveness and clarity of the work, using, in part, Appendix #1 (Assessment Grid) to this syllabus.
How The Classes Work:

Students will form two-person teams. Each team will work on 4 stories. Your work will be overseen by the instructor and by guest editors.

These things are expected in each class:

- You will share your knowledge and opinion about the local, regional, national and international public affairs stories worth reporting and writing.
- You will meet all deadlines.
- You will provide, at the end of each story, the contact information for the people you interviewed -- including anonymous sources.

Work:

Each two-person team will:

- Identify a public affairs “beat” or area of coverage that you will pursue over the semester. Examples: The environment, education, housing, immigration, health and human services, law enforcement, public arts/music.

- You will also be asked to describe your reporting, defend it and comment on the reporting of your colleagues.

- You will be asked to do three stories related to your chosen beat:

  - First Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 interviews. A news-oriented profile of a city, state or federal agency, institution, or organization based in Austin that touches on your “beat.” Examples: Texas Commission on Environmental Quality, Austin Environmental Board, Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, Texas Department of Public Safety, Austin Police, Texas Music Office, Texas Film Commission, Austin Film Commission, Texas Education Agency, Austin Independent School District, etc.

  - Second Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 interviews. With multimedia.

  - Third Story: minimum 1500 words, minimum 5 interviews. With multimedia.
**Factors That Go Into Grading:**

1. Class participation, including identifying a beat, presenting story ideas, constructive criticism of work done by your colleagues and of required reading.

2. Instructor evaluation of the stories:
   - Needs very minor editing and additional material (facts, quotes, sources, etc.). Virtually reading for publication: A
   - Needs major editing or major additional reporting (but not both), B.
   - Needs major revision and major additional reporting, C.
   - Some effort at writing or reporting, grade of D.
   - No serious effort at writing or reporting, grade of F.
   - University policy allows use of “plus” and “minus” grades.

3. Deadlines: Miss a deadline and your grade will automatically go down one grade level (Example: Automatic reduction to a C for a story that had earned a B).

4. Attendance: If you miss three classes without advance notice to the instructor and the graduate assistant, your course grade can be dropped one level (Example: Automatic reduction from B to C).

**The Grade Grid:**

Grades will be tallied according to the following percentage guidelines:

- First story 25 percent
- Second Story 25 percent
- Third Story 25 percent
- Class participation 25 percent

**Required Text: (available in University Coop, online and sometimes at discounted bookstores in the city).**

**Suggestions & Tips:**

Study and examine:

*Texas Monthly, Austin American-Statesman, Austin Chronicle, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, Austin Bulldog, Texas Tribune.*


Center for Public Integrity: [http://www.publicintegrity.org/projects/](http://www.publicintegrity.org/projects/)


*Do not delay working on your stories*

**Create a clear division of duties on your stories**

***Read all relevant stories already done on your beat or area of coverage***

**Religious Policy:**

The Texas Education Code specifies that an institution of higher education shall excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. A student who misses classes or other required activities, including examinations, for observance of a religious holy day should inform instructor as far in advance of the absence as possible, so that arrangements can be made to complete an assignment within a reasonable time after the absence.  
[http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance](http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/catalogs/gi03-04/ch4/ch4g.html#attendance)

**Students with Disabilities:**

Please notify your instructor of any modification/adaptation you may require to accommodate a disability-related need. You will be requested to provide documentation to the Dean of Student's Office in order that the most appropriate accommodations can be determined. Specialized services are available on campus through Services for Students with Disabilities. The University of Texas at Austin provides upon request appropriate academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. For more information, contact Services for Students with Disabilities at 471-6259 (voice) or 232-2937 (video phone).

[http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/](http://www.utexas.edu/diversity/ddce/ssd/)
**Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty:**

Do not plagiarize, make up quotes or make up facts.

The University defines academic dishonesty as cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized collaboration, falsifying academic records, and any act designed to avoid participating honestly in the learning process.

Scholastic dishonesty also includes, but is not limited to, providing false or misleading information to receive a postponement or an extension on a test, quiz, or other assignment, and submission of essentially the same written assignment for two courses without the prior permission of the instructor.

By accepting this syllabus, you have agreed to these guidelines and must adhere to them.

Scholastic dishonesty damages both the student's learning experience and readiness for the future demands of a work-career. Students who violate University rules on scholastic dishonesty are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in the course and/or dismissal from the University. The Standard for Academic Integrity:


**The University Honor Code:**

*The core values of The University of Texas at Austin are learning, discovery, freedom, leadership, individual opportunity, and responsibility. Each member of the university is expected to uphold these values through integrity, honesty, trust, fairness, and respect toward peers and community.*
Course Schedule (*subject to changes):

Jan. 14:
- Introductions: Instructor, students.
- Review of syllabus.
- Students form two-person teams and begin deciding on a beat. You will have nine days, until Jan. 23, to decide on a beat.

Jan. 16:
- What is “public affairs journalism?”
- (Skype with Ed Timms, editor/reporter with The Dallas Morning News).

Jan. 21: No class-holiday

Jan. 23:
- **DUE:** Each team introduces and describes its beat. Why did you choose it?
- **Story One Assigned:** minimum 1500 word profile of a city, state or federal agency, institution or organization – related to your beat. Due Feb. 18.

Jan. 28:
- *Reporter's Tool Kit.*
- (Skype with Ed Timms, editor/reporter with Dallas Morning News).

Jan. 30:
- Ways to profile an agency, institution, organization -- and the directors, presidents, heads, etc.
- The Compositional Breakdown of a public affairs story.
- **Assigned Reading:** Kramer

Feb. 4:
- **Discussion: Assigned Reading, Kramer**

Feb. 6:
- Reporting Workshop/Editorial Budget Meeting: Present a status report on First Story. Who have you talked to? What sources have you set up? What have you read? Problems we can help solve, address? (Skype: Ed Timms, Dallas Morning News)

Feb. 11:
- Hyper-local public affairs reporting.
- (Tentative): Ken Martin, editor of The Austin Bulldog: Creating, designing and funding your own public affairs site
Feb. 13:
- (Tentative): Melissa Del Bosque from *The Texas Observer*, specialist in international stories, border stories, immigration stories.

Feb. 18:
- **Due: Story One**
  - Selected stories screened, critiqued
- **Story Two Assigned: Due March 25**

Feb. 20:
- More selected stories (Story One) screened, critiqued

Feb. 25:
- *Dealing with state and national agencies, regulatory bodies, commissions.*
- *Filing Freedom of Information and Texas Open Records requests.*

Feb. 27:

Mar. 4:
- Reporting Workshop/Editorial Budget Meeting: Present a status report on Story Two. Who have you talked to? What sources have you set up? What have you read? Problems we can help solve, address?

Mar. 6:
- Do not report to classroom. Use this time to do reporting on Story Two.

Mar. 11 & 13: Spring Break

Mar. 18:
- **Under Reported Local Stories**

Mar. 20:
- **Under Reported National Stories**

Mar. 25:
- **Due: Story Two**
  - Selected stories screened, critiqued
- **Story Three Assigned: Due April 24**

Mar. 27:
- Selected stories (Story Two) screened, critiqued
Apr. 1:
- Experts, think tanks, non-profits. (Center for Public Policy Priorities, etc.).
- GuideStar.org

Apr. 3:
- Under reported international stories. (Skype: Ed Timms, Dallas Morning News. Please come prepared to present some ideas.

Apr. 8:
- Reporting Workshop/Editorial Budget Meeting: Present a status report on Story Three. Who have you talked to? What sources have you set up? What have you read? Problems we can help solve, address?

Apr. 10:
- The unjustly, unfairly accused and incarcerated.
- Finding public affairs stories in everyday stories.
- (Tentative): Dave Mann, editor, Texas Observer

Apr. 15:
- Race, race relations and “minority” affairs. Listening posts. (Tentative: Susan Smith: The Nation, Chicago Tribune, Texas Observer, Boston Globe, etc.)
- Assigned Reading: Kramer

Apr. 17:
- Discussion: Assigned Reading, Kramer

Apr. 22:
- Reporting Workshop/Editorial Budget Meeting: Tell us what major findings you have learned about your beat?

Apr. 24:
- Due: Story Three
- Selected stories screened, critiqued

Apr. 29:
- Selected stories (Story Three) screened, critiqued

May 1:
- Course Instructor Survey
- Goodbyes
APPENDIX I

Assessment Grid for Advanced Writing/Public Affairs Reporting

Evaluating your work, the instructor will use the following framework:

1. The story reveals new facts, new information.

   0   1   2   3   4

2. The work shows enterprise reporting – creativity, persistence and critical thinking in the reporting process.

   0   1   2   3   4

3. The work is accurate and fair.

   0   1   2   3   4

4. The work has multimedia components if required.

   0   1   2   3   4

5. Grammar, spelling and punctuation are correct.

   0   1   2   3   4

6. The work provides necessary sources & contact information.

   0   1   2   3   4

7. The work has concrete and specific details AND a larger “sweep,” context or perspective.

   0   1   2   3   4

8. The theme, premise and news value are clear, easy to follow and readily identified.

   0   1   2   3   4