J395 S13  
Syllabus  
Lasorsa

Journalism 395, Feature Writing, meets Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 12 to 1 p.m. in CMA 4.312.

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Office Hours: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, 11 a.m. to 12 p.m., and by appointment

Description
This is a graduate-level writing and reporting course which deals with:

- Differentiating feature stories from news stories.
- Grasping the mechanics of gathering information for feature stories.
- Identifying different types of feature stories.
- Writing different types of feature stories.
- Examining issues of ethics, fairness and accuracy as they relate to feature writing.
- Exploring neglected or under reported feature stories.

Expected Objectives/Learning Outcomes

1. Students will demonstrate a basic competence in identifying publishable feature stories.
2. Students will demonstrate a basic ability to gather information for feature stories.
3. Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in an accurate manner.
4. Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in a fair, ethical manner.
5. Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in a clear manner.
6. Students will demonstrate a basic ability to incorporate multimedia components into their feature reporting.

Outcome 1:
Students will demonstrate a basic competence in identifying publishable feature stories.

- **Method 1:** Students will propose stories and present them to their colleagues and the instructor.
- **Metric 1:** The instructor will evaluate the basic competence in identifying publishable feature stories using an Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).

Outcome 2:
Students will demonstrate a basic ability to gather information for feature stories.

- **Method 1:** Students will be assigned several stories for which they will have to gather information.
- **Metric 1:** The instructor will evaluate the basic ability to gather information using an Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).

Outcome 3:
Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in an accurate manner.

- **Method 1:** Students will be assigned several stories in which the accuracy of their reporting will be evaluated.
- **Metric 1:** The instructor will evaluate the accuracy of the stories, using an Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).

Outcome 4:
Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in a fair, ethical manner.

- **Method 1:** Students will be assigned several stories in which the fairness of their reporting will be evaluated.
• Metric 1: The instructor will evaluate the fairness and ethical grounding of the stories, using an Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1), the University Honor Codes, standards of journalism ethics and university rules related to scholastic dishonesty (see section of syllabus on “Policy on Scholastic Dishonesty”).

**Outcome 5:**
Students will demonstrate a basic ability to report and write feature stories in a clear manner.
• Method 1: Students will be assigned several feature stories which will be evaluated in terms of how well they flow, including an alluring opening, well-organized body and satisfying ending.
• Metric 1: The instructor will evaluate the clarity of the stories using an Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).

**Outcome 6:**
Students will demonstrate a basic ability to incorporate multimedia components into their feature reporting.
• Method 1: In all story proposals, students will be asked to identify multimedia elements which could be included in the reporting of that story.
• Metric 1: The instructor will evaluate whether the student has thought about ways to move the story beyond the written word to include specific artwork, graphics, audio, video or other multimedia information based on Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).
• Method 2: Students will write and report a story in which they incorporate at least one multimedia element.
• Metric 2: The instructor will evaluate whether the student has successfully incorporated at least one multimedia element into a multimedia story based on Assessment Grid (See Appendix 1).

**Class**
Class attendance is important and will be considered in determining your course grade. Attend classes and be on time. Do not schedule other activities, even those relating to this class (e.g., a story interview), during class time. If you must miss a class due to an emergency, check with the instructor or a classmate regarding important information you missed.

**Written Assignment**
Most written assignments are given a length requirement. Make sure that your assignment is within this range: plus or minus 10% of the story length assigned. Thus, an assignment for a 500-word story may be 50 words shorter or longer than the assigned 500-word length, that is, the story must be between 450 and 550 words.

Written assignments must be posted to Blackboard as a Word attachment no later than two hours before the start of class on the due date.

Written assignments also must be submitted in hard copy at the start of class on the due date.

Written assignments (including feature story proposals, feature stories and peer reviews) must be formatted properly. Double-space all copy. Number all pages. Staple pages in top left corner. Don’t use plastic covers or other frills. In the upper right corner put your name, the course number/instructor’s name, submission date and identification of the assignment (e.g., Story Proposal 1, Peer Review for (classmate’s name), Story 3). For story
proposals and stories, also put a one- to two-word “slug” in the upper right corner. The “slug” gives the theme or focus of a story and is used by editors and reporters to refer quickly to a particular story. Below the slug, identify your target publication (if applicable, i.e., a story or story proposal). For example, if your name is Helena Handbasket and you have written your first story about tax-saving tips, this is what the top of your story would look like:

Helena Handbasket
J395/Lasorsa
2/4/13
Story 1

**Story Proposal**
This is a 200-word story idea, focusing on what the story is and why a specified target publication should run it. Identify promising sources, by name, if possible. The more specific you can be about sources, the better. Sources will make or break your story, so pay close attention to them early in the production process. Identify questions you want to ask each source. Identify at least one multimedia element you could incorporate into your story. We will have a “brainstorming session” where you pitch your story idea to the class. We will discuss the merits of your proposal and suggest reporting and writing tactics. For general feature story proposal requirements, see “Written Assignment” (above).

**Feature Story**
Requirements (deadline, length, feature type, etc.) for each feature story differ and are specified in the course schedule (below). For general feature story requirements, see “Written Assignment” (above).

**Peer Review**
This is a frank, honest, polite critique of a classmate’s draft of a story. Your mission is to help your colleague improve their story. Focus on practical things the author can do. Be constructive. If you dislike something, suggest what can be done to fix it.

**Grades**
Grades will be determined by:

1. Class participation and class exercises: Journalism is predicated on interaction with sources, colleagues and editors. Frequent participation, interaction with your colleagues and instructor, is encouraged. You will be asked to describe your work, to defend it and to comment, constructively, on the work of your colleagues.

2. Evaluation of your stories, story proposals and peer reviews:
   - An assignment that needs minor editing and minor additional material (facts, quotes, sources, etc.) gets an A.
   - One that needs major editing or major additional reporting (but not both) is a B.
   - A story that needs both major revision and major additional reporting gets a C.
   - Some effort at writing or reporting gets a D.
   - No serious effort at writing or reporting gets an F.
   - Please note that the university grading policy allows for uses of pluses and minuses.

3. Deadlines. Miss your deadline and your highest potential grade can drop one grade level at each of these benchmarks: 15 minutes late, 12 hours, 24 hours. Many of the assignments can be completed well before the deadlines – in some cases days and weeks beforehand. Work must be submitted in hard copy at the start of class on the due date and also posted to Blackboard as a Word attachment at least two hours before the start of class on the due date.
4. Office Hours: Meet with the instructor at least once during the semester to discuss your work in the class and your career progress generally.

To help you get a good grade on stories, before submitting an assignment, follow the assignment and format requirements (above), the special requirements of a particular assignment (see Course Schedule below), and the “Feature Writer’s Checklist” and the “Assessment Grid” (at the end of the syllabus).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<td>Story Peer Reviews</td>
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<td>Stories</td>
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<td>Class exercises and participation</td>
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Required Texts

Religious Holy Days Observance 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 the observance of a religious holy day should inform the 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

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.
Students may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259.
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 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)

Monday, Jan. 14:
- Class 1. Introductions. Story proposals.
- Seasonal and anniversary features.
- WORK ASSIGNED: Story 1: Seasonal or anniversary feature, 500 words. Story 1 proposal.

Wednesday, Jan. 16:
- Class 2. Brainstorming (Story 1).
- WORK DUE: Two-page Story 1 proposal.
- Pitch your story idea and receive feedback from instructor and classmates.

Friday, Jan. 18:
- Class 3. Brainstorming (Story 1).

Monday, Jan. 21:
- Martin Luther King Holiday: No class.

Wednesday, Jan. 23:
- Class 4. Feature leads.

Friday, Jan. 25:
- Class 5. Story lessons. Peer reviews.
- WORK DUE: Story 1 draft.
- WORK ASSIGNED: Peer review of classmate’s Story 1 draft.

Monday, Jan. 28:
- Class 6. Peer reviews.
- WORK DUE: Peer review of classmate’s Story 1 draft.

Wednesday, Jan. 30:
- Class 7. Feature endings.

Friday, Feb. 1:
- Class 8. Story research.

Monday, Feb. 4:
- WORK DUE: Story 1.

Wednesday, Feb. 6:
- Class 10.
Friday, Feb. 8:
- Class 11. Editor’s feedback. Self-improvement.
- Feedback on Story 1.
- Self-critique: Story 1 improvement idea.

Monday, Feb. 11:
- Class 12. List features.

Wednesday, Feb. 13:
- Class 13. Brainstorming (Story 2).
- WORK DUE: Two-page Story 2 proposal.
- Pitch your story idea and receive feedback from instructor and classmates.

Friday, Feb. 15:
- Class 14. Brainstorming (Story 2).

Monday, Feb. 18:
- Class 15. Fuzzy quantifiers.

Wednesday, Feb. 20:
- WORK DUE: Story 2 Draft.
- WORK ASSIGNED: Peer review of classmate’s Story 2 draft.

Friday, Feb. 22:
- Class 17. Peer reviews.
- WORK DUE: Peer review of classmate’s Story 2 draft.

Monday, Feb. 25:
- Class 18. Profiles.

Wednesday, Feb. 27:
- Class 19. Story research.

Friday, Mar. 1:
- Class 20. Story lessons.
- WORK DUE: Story 2.

Monday, Mar. 4:
- Class 21.

Wednesday, Mar. 6:
- Class 22. Editor’s feedback. Self-improvement.
- Feedback on Story 2.
- Self-critique: Story 2 improvement idea.

Friday, Mar. 8:
- Class 23. Follow-up features.
- WORK ASSIGNED: Story 3: Profile, 500 words. Story 3 proposal.
Monday, Mar. 11 – Friday, Mar. 15:
- Spring Break: No classes.

Monday, Mar. 18:
- Class 24. Brainstorming (Story 3).
- **WORK DUE:** Two-page Story 3 proposal.
- Pitch your story idea and receive feedback from instructor and classmates.

Wednesday, Mar. 20:
- Class 25. Brainstorming (Story 3).

Friday, Mar. 22:
- Class 26. Unusual angles.

Monday, Mar. 25:
- Class 27. Story lessons.
- **WORK DUE:** Story 3 Draft.
- **WORK ASSIGNED:** Peer review of classmate’s Story 3 draft.

Wednesday, Mar. 27:
- Class 28. Peer reviews.
- **WORK DUE:** Peer review of classmate’s Story 3 draft.

Friday, Mar. 29:
- Class 29. Banish weak verbs.

Monday, Apr. 1:
- Class 30. Story research.

Wednesday, Apr. 3:
- Class 31. Story lessons.
- **WORK DUE:** Story 3.

Friday, Apr. 5:
- Class 32. Walking through fire.

Monday, Apr. 8:
- Class 33. Editor’s feedback. Self-improvement.
- Feedback on Story 3.
- Self-critique: Story 3 improvement idea.

Wednesday, Apr. 10:
- Class 34. News features.
- **WORK ASSIGNED:** Story 4: feature of any type, 750 words. Story 4 proposal.

Friday, Apr. 12:
- Class 35. Brainstorming (Story 4).
- **WORK DUE:** Two-page Story 4 proposal.
- Pitch your story idea and receive feedback from instructor and classmates.
Monday, Apr. 15:
- Class 36. Brainstorming (Story 4).

Wednesday, Apr. 17:
- Class 37. First-person accounts.

Friday, Apr. 19:
- Class 38. Story lessons.
- **WORK DUE:** Story 4 Draft.
- **WORK ASSIGNED:** Peer review of classmate’s Story 4 draft.

Monday, Apr. 22:
- Class 39. Peer reviews.
- **WORK DUE:** Peer review of classmate’s Story 4 draft.

Wednesday, Apr. 24:
- Class 40. Reviews and columns.

Friday, Apr. 26:
- Class 41. Story research.

Monday, Apr. 29:
- Class 42. Story lessons.
- Query letters.
- **WORK DUE:** Story 4.

Wednesday, May 1:
- Class 43. The place for humor.
- Course evaluation.

Friday, May 3:
- Class 44. Editor’s feedback. Self-improvement.
- Feedback on Story 4.
- Self-critique: Story 4 improvement idea.
THE FEATURE WRITER'S CHECKLIST

As you prepare a feature story and before you submit it, use this to make sure you have covered the bases well.

Are you taking careful notes and using a digital recorder or camera as often as necessary? [You may be asked to submit your story notes to your editor (instructor) for examination.]

In the first paragraphs: Does the lead grab the reader’s attention and give the reader the gist of the story? Does the lead set the tone and mood for the story? Does it intrigue the reader, create some sort of tension, develop a plot or otherwise lure the reader into the story? In a story with an anecdotal or other indirect lead, do you provide a good nut graph? The nut graph is a summary paragraph explaining why you are writing this story at this time, and why this story is important.

Accuracy and context: Are all names spelled correctly? Are the numbers, dates, ages accurate? Is the story fair? Is it complete (no holes)? Do you have adequate historical context and supporting information? Is it clear and understandable, especially to readers unfamiliar with the subject?

Organization: Is there a maintained focus throughout the story? Does it flow logically, leading the reader from one thought to the next?

Quotes: Is quote style followed? Do the quotes add new information? Do they convey emotion? Are you pulling quotes out of context? Are you using partial quotes effectively? Are you quotes adding to the story or are they just repeating facts?

Sources: Are there reliable sources? Are the sources appropriate for the story? Are the sources properly identified and attributed? Have you obtained the contact information for anyone you interview? Have you included it at the bottom of your story?

Writing: Consider these things: Word choice, clarity and conciseness; sentence construction; transition, flow; active voice; clear storytelling technique. Think about remaining in on tense, either the present tense or past tense. Only switch tenses for a good reason.

Your voice: Should it be in the story? Is it appropriate for this story?

Mechanics: Grammar, spelling, punctuation, AP style.

For story proposals: Are multimedia elements/possibilities noted? [Example: “I have good photos that can accompany this story. I also have clear audio that we can make available on the web site.”]
APPENDIX I

Assessment Grid for J395 Feature Writing

The instructor will use the following framework in evaluating your work:

1. The story met deadline, is formatted properly and of the specified length.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

2. The work is easy to identify as a feature story and has been targeted to readers of a specified publication.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

3. The lead gives readers the gist of the story and lures them into the story.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

4. The work is accurate.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

5. The work is fair, ethical.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

6. Grammar, spelling and punctuation are correct.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

7. The work is clearly composed, structured and written.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

8. The ending of the story gives readers satisfying closure.
   
   0  1  2  3  4

9. The work provides necessary contact information for sources.
   
   0  1  2  3  4