

Reporting Texas, Spring 2018

J395, J361F
Classes
Lab

Reporting Texas: Working in a Newsroom of Our Own
T/Th 12:30-1:50 BMC 3.208
F 9:30– 11:30 a.m. BMC 3.208

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Instructors

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Course description

Reporting Texas serves reportingtexas.com, the School of Journalism's news website. The site is dedicated to providing high-quality coverage of stories of interest to Central Texas and the state. The course will focus on conceiving and pitching stories, deep and thorough reporting and clear and compelling writing. We have a high interest in stories with strong multimedia potential, including data visualization.

Course objectives

Reporting Texas is designed to help students develop into professional-level journalists. The heart of the course is learning to conceive, pitch, report and write original, high-quality stories that we can publish. The class is modeled on a real newsroom, with

professional-level editing.

Course mechanics

Graduate students are required to produce five stories, undergraduates four. We encourage students to develop multimedia components, which will be worth extra credit, up to full-story credit, depending on the time investment and the quality of the work.

A good RT story length is 800 to 1,200 words.

Reporters will operate independently, although instructors may approve a team approach if a story calls for it. In the past several semesters, the class has worked as a team on breaking-news issues such as the Trump travel ban and Hurricane Harvey evacuees in Austin. We'll also look for those opportunities this semester.

Please see the "How We Work" handout in Canvas for details on our procedures. Failing to follow those procedures will affect your grade.

Classes

Our regular class meets for 80 minutes twice a week. The structure:

Tuesdays: We'll discuss the news of the week, and how to spin strong Reporting Texas story ideas from those events. The goal of this exercise is to hone your ability to develop original story ideas from what is happening locally, nationally or in the world.

To get the ball rolling, editors will select a few stories for the initial News of the Week (NOTW) class and lead an exercise on finding other angles, looking especially for angles that go beyond the obvious, and how we might approach the reporting on those ideas.

In later classes, we will assign four students each week to be the NOTW "editors" and come to class with stories from the top national, state and local events of the week and ideas of spin-off stories we could do.

This will factor into your class participation grade.

We expect students to follow at least The New York Times and The Washington Post for national news, the Austin American-Statesman and the Texas Tribune for state and local and an international news source of your choice.

Thursdays: The focus will be on creating persuasive pitches on which you have done preliminary reporting to establish that the story is relevant and timely, unique (not done by another publication) and important for our audience. You should be able to explain what is at stake and why the story is right for Reporting Texas.

Every student will be required to pitch a story every Thursday. The objective is to get your idea greenlighted right away. Please come prepared with a strong pitch so you can get started quickly on your reporting.

If you are not certain about your pitch idea, please talk to an instructor before the class. We can help you shape your idea or help you switch to a more promising topic.

Your ability to identify, research and pitch good ideas is the foundation of producing quality stories and a key part of your class participation grade. “The Art of the Pitch” handout in Canvas spells out the elements of a successful pitch.

Editors will greenlight – or reject – story ideas based on the strength of the pitches. If your pitch is vague, unfocused, under-researched or lacks relevance, you’ll have to produce another one by the next class, and you’ll lose valuable time.

Once editors greenlight a story, they will set a deadline for the first draft. That draft should be a complete story, not a rough first pass. Editors will set subsequent deadlines based on the story’s complexity and what’s needed to get it into publishable condition.

Labs

We will use the Friday labs for both one-on-one editing and hearing from professionals on issues that students encounter – finding sources, digging for data, using social media as a reporting tool -- as well as journalism issues in a rapidly changing technology landscape and new challenges to press freedom in the age of Trump.

That starts Friday, Jan. 19, with Mike Ward, Austin bureau chief for the Houston Chronicle, on how to use Texas’ open records law. Mike is a pro at dealing with obstructionist public officials who won’t follow the law.

We’ll schedule other speakers as the semester progresses

The labs are valuable opportunities to work side-by-side with editors on your stories. They are not optional. Attendance is important. If you can use the time to report on an

approved story, that's fine, but let editors know the day before. Please do not schedule other activities during lab time. If you have a conflict on a particular day, please talk to an editor beforehand.

Photography: We'll focus the resources of the Photo for Reporting Texas class on stories with high visual potential. Students should expect to take their own photos and/or video for other stories.

The photo class also will come in during the labs for assignments. Be prepared to give a short summary of your story. Photographers will either volunteer for particular stories or be assigned.

Attendance will be taken in class and will factor into your class participation grade.

At least once a week, we'll go over the story list to check on progress and discuss any obstacles you face.

Speakers and special events

On Jan 23, a Tuesday, Tony Plohetski of the Austin-American Statesman and KVUE will talk about the art of coming up with strong story ideas and how to persuasively pitch them to editors.

For the Jan. 26 lab, Debbie Hiott, editor of the Austin American-Statesman, will talk about the types of Reporting Texas stories that the Statesman would be interested in running. The paper's Sunday Insight section has used several of our stories each semester.

Two prominent figures from journalism will be on campus this semester. We will cancel class on those days so students can attend and then discuss their messages in the next class.

On Monday, March 19, Arthur G. Sulzberger Jr., former publisher of the New York Times, will speak in the Belo second-floor auditorium, Time TBA, but likely 1:30-3 p.m.

On Monday, April 23, veteran NBC sportscaster Bob Costas will give the Frank Deford Lecture. Costas was an early voice on the dangers of football concussions and has called traumatic brain injury "an existential" issue for the future of the sport. He will speak in the Belo second-floor auditorium. Time TBA, but likely 1:30-3 p.m.

The International Symposium on Online Journalism (ISOJ) in Austin is April 13-14. We will make arrangements so students can attend if they wish.

Assignments

Part 1: Individual assignments will focus on conceiving strong ideas; successfully proposing your idea; developing it through researching and reporting; organizing your information; drafting your story and revising it in the editing process.

Part 2: Communication with editors and timely response to their edits are essential. If you encounter obstacles, need help finding sources or are not sure how to organize your story, speak up right away. We are here to help. If a story falls through for reasons beyond your control, do not switch topics without getting your editors' go-ahead.

You are required to reply to editors' queries about your story within 24 hours, sooner if possible. Acknowledge the question and say when you expect to be able to answer it.

Part 3: You will be graded on the quality of your pitches and stories, and your ability to follow procedures and meet deadlines, including for rewrites and fixes.

Part 4: You will be graded on participation and effort, in class, in lab and in the field.

Grades

1. Deadlines: Meeting them is a basic requirement. Recurring failure to do so will affect your grade. Editors may agree to extend deadlines if circumstances warrant.

2. Photos and graphics: You are responsible for working with our photo editor, Shelby Knowles, to coordinate on an assignment for the photo class, or to discuss providing photos yourself. Failure to do so in a timely matter will affect your grade.

3. Assessment: Assignments will be graded on the skill with which you use words and, where appropriate, images and sound; good organization; solid reporting; diversity of viewpoints; and how much you improve your skills over the semester.

4. The Breakdown: Two editors will edit your stories.

A backfield editor will help you iron out basic reporting, writing and organizational issues and will require you promptly file fixes and rewrites (60 percent of your story grade). A line editor will review the piece and may require further revisions before the

story is cleared for publication (40 percent).

5. The Matrix: Final course grades will be calculated on the plus/minus grading system. Reporting assignments constitute 70 percent and classroom participation 30 percent.

6. Meeting with course instructors

You will meet with a course instructor at least once during the semester to discuss your progress, reporting methods and career goals. Please also make use of office hours.

Required Reading

There are no textbooks for this course. Read and review assigned materials on Canvas.

Attendance & Rules of the Road

Showing up, and on time, is the first requirement of the journalism professional. If you can't attend class or be on time, let editors know in advance.

Professional courtesy: You may use electronic devices during class only to access class-related information, not for personal matters. Please don't eat in class. Beverages are OK.

APPENDIX I Required University Notices and Policies

University of Texas 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.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism and cheating on tests or assignments are violations of the university's honor code and can lead to severe consequences.

Plagiarism involves representing as your own creation all or part of work done by someone else, including other students, or taken from another media source. It includes representing all or part of work you have done before as new for this class. You can't turn in a story or media project from a previous class without the instructor's permission.

Plagiarism includes making up quotes, sources and facts; using people in your stories whom you have not interviewed; and failing to provide appropriate attribution or citation of a source or background material.

Plagiarism will be dealt with in accordance with University policies referred to in the web link immediately below. If you are in doubt about how to define or prevent plagiarism, ask your instructor and refer to the learning module, also below:

http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint_conseq.php

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/services/instruction/learningmodules/plagiarism/>

Documented Disability Statement

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).

Resources for Learning & Life at UT Austin

The University of Texas has numerous resources for students to provide assistance and support for your learning.

The UT Learning Center: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/>

Undergraduate Writing Center: <http://uwc.utexas.edu/>

Counseling & Mental Health Center: <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/>

Career Exploration Center: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/careercenter/>

Student Emergency Services: <http://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/emergency/>

Use of Canvas in Class

This course will use Canvas—a Web-based course management system with password-protected access at canvas.utexas.edu—to distribute materials and for other class management tasks. You can find support in using Canvas online or at the ITS Help Desk at 475-9400.

Use of E-Mail for Official Correspondence to Students

Email is recognized as an official mode of university correspondence; therefore, you are responsible for reading your email for university and course-related information and announcements. You are responsible to keep the university informed about changes to your e-mail address. You should check your e-mail regularly and frequently to stay current with university-related communications, some of which may be time-critical. You can find UT Austin's policies and instructions for updating your e-mail address at <http://www.utexas.edu/its/policies/emailnotify.php>.

Religious Holy Days

By UT Austin policy, you must notify the instructor of your pending absence at least fourteen days prior to the date of observance of a religious holy day. If you must miss a class, an examination, a work assignment or a project in order to observe a religious holy day, the instructor will give you an opportunity to complete the missed work within a reasonable time after the absence.

Behavior Concerns Advice Line (BCAL)

If you are worried about someone who is acting differently, you may use the Behavior Concerns Advice Line to discuss by phone your concerns about another individual's behavior. This service is provided through a partnership among the Office of the Dean of Students, the Counseling and Mental Health Center (CMHC), the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), and The University of Texas Police Department (UTPD). Call 512-232-5050 or visit <http://www.utexas.edu/safety/bcal>.

Emergency Evacuation Policy

Occupants of buildings on the UT Austin campus are required to evacuate and assemble outside when a fire alarm is activated or an announcement is made. Please be aware of the following policies regarding evacuation:

- Familiarize yourself with all exit doors of the classroom and the building. Remember that the nearest exit door may not be the one you used when you entered the building.
- If you require assistance to evacuate, inform the instructors in writing during the first week of class.

- In the event of an evacuation, follow the instructions of class instructors. Do not re-enter a building unless you're given instructions by the Austin Fire Department, the UT Austin Police Department, or the Fire Prevention Services office.

Drop Policy

The State of Texas has enacted a law that limits the number of course drops for academic reasons to six (6). As stated in Senate Bill 1231:

“Beginning with the fall 2007 academic term, an institution of higher education may not permit an undergraduate student a total of more than six dropped courses, including any course a transfer student has dropped at another institution of higher education, unless the student shows good cause for dropping more than that number.”