

## Spring 2017

**J395 44**  
**Classes**  
**Lab**

**Reporting Texas: Working in a Newsroom of Our Own**  
**T/Th 12:30-2 p.m. BMC 3.208**  
**F 9 a.m. – noon BMC 3.208**

**Professor**  
**Phone**  
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**Office hours**

**R. B. Brenner**  
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**W 11:30 a.m. -1 p.m.**

## Instructors

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## Teaching Assistants

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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 will look for stories with 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 professional newsroom, with professional-level editing.

This semester, with a new legislative session and a new presidency, presents a unique opportunity for high-impact stories, although other topics will help broaden and enrich our website.

### **Course mechanics**

Graduate students will be required to produce five stories, but may do fewer, deeper stories with the permission of instructors. Reporters will operate independently, although instructors may approve a team approach if a story calls for it.

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:** News of the Week. Come prepared with two stories each on local, state, and national events, or one national and one international. Be able to concisely explain each one and discuss how we could spin Reporting Texas stories from those topics. This will factor into your class participation grade.

We expect students to follow at least The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, BBC World News, Austin American-Statesman, The Dallas Morning News, The Texas Tribune and The Associated Press. This semester, websites such as Politico and The Hill also will be valuable.

**Thursday:** Students will start pitching stories on Jan. 26 and continue through the end of the semester. Each week, you will be expected to pitch two story ideas, explaining in one or two sentences each: What is the story about? Why is it important for our audience? Why now? What is at stake? Has another publication already done it?

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**

Our Friday labs are crucial opportunities for working one-on-one with editors. If you can make better use of the time reporting on stories, let us know in advance.

We may require attendance at some labs.

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.

During the semester, we'll also discuss 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.

## **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, Lukas Keapproth, and data visualization advisor, Cody Winchester, to provide photos and/or graphics yourself or to coordinate on an assignment. 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.

See the Assessment Checklist handout in Canvas for a breakdown of what constitutes a thoroughly reported and written story.

### **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 all of the assigned materials, which we'll post 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.

**Important: You are encouraged to attend all classes. If you accumulate three unexcused absences, you should consider dropping the course.**

**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.

Any instances of 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://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](http://canvas.utexas.edu)—to distribute course materials, to communicate and collaborate online, and to fulfill 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.”