

## Spring 2017

### J361F Reporting Texas

Classes: T/Th 12:30-2:00 CMA 4.152

Lab: F 9-12 CMA 4.152

Instructor: Tracy Dahlby  
Office: BMC 3.324  
Telephone: 512-471-6272  
Email: [tracy.dahlby@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:tracy.dahlby@austin.utexas.edu)  
Office hours: Tuesday: 2-3:30 p.m., Wednesday 1:30-3 p.m. or by appointment

Instructor: Rusty Todd  
Office: BMC 3.360  
Telephone: 512-471-1967  
Mobile: 512-660-9014  
Email: [rustygtodd@gmail.com](mailto:rustygtodd@gmail.com)  
Office hours: Wednesdays, 8:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m. or by appointment

Teaching Assistant: Caroline Covington  
Telephone: 512-915-6558  
Email: [chcovington@utexas.edu](mailto:chcovington@utexas.edu)

---

## Course Description

Reporting Texas is a capstone reporting course that serves as a newsroom for ReportingTexas.com, the School of Journalism's news and features website. The site provides high-quality coverage of stories of interest to the Central Texas community, particularly stories that are underreported. Reporting Texas reporters will experience the rewards and challenges of working under the guidance of editors with long experience in the news business.

You will learn to think more deeply, write more clearly, edit more sharply and produce focused, professional-caliber stories. The aim is to publish your stories on ReportingTexas.com and, in limited cases, with partner publications like The Dallas Morning News and Austin American-Statesman.

Reporting Texas will let you practice our craft in real time for a real audience, get published, and, in the bargain, have the best fun in reporting there is — connecting with your local community in ways that count. We will focus on RT's charter: stories that shed new light for folks on the places, people and events of Central Texas.

## Course Objectives

Reporting Texas has one goal: to publish high-quality stories on our website, and for our partners and other professional news outlets. Along the way, we will learn to:

- Define what constitutes *really good stories* for our audience, ones that you want to tell and people want to read, see and hear.
- Think critically about issues and topics, and your approaches to them.
- Pitch stories like the pros.
- Do vigorous, probing reporting, and find reliable and diverse sources.
- Work in a newsroom environment and organize individual efforts accordingly.
- Learn standard newsroom procedures for filing and processing content.
- Identify the best tools for telling the story you want to tell.
- Hone thinking, writing and production skills.
- Study and practice techniques for adding quality to your stories.
- Incorporate social media to help report, as well as enhance public awareness of coverage.
- Learn to see our community as a place of diverse people, interests and cultures.
- Consider the role of ethics in web-based storytelling as it relates to fairness, accuracy and truth-seeking in a digital age.

## Course Mechanics

1. **How it works:** Reporting Texas reporters function as independent actors, each responsible for proposing and executing stories. When the story calls for it, reporters may team up to blend their skills for a more comprehensive presentation. You will work from the toolbox of skills you bring with you. No new software tools will be formally taught, though there will be opportunities to learn technological tricks of the trade from your editors and from one another.

2. **Focus:** Look at this course as a thinking journalist's professional workshop. We will think hard about why we do what we do and how we can do it best. We'll look for stories that *you* want to tell on the assumption that if you're interested in something, you can, by employing good technique, make other people interested, too. You will also be assigned stories that need to be done. You will produce a minimum of four spot, news feature or feature stories (print or multimedia) during the semester.

3. **Story types:** Spot news reports on an event that has just happened and may follow it through several iterations until the story is complete. A spot story can run from 200 to 500 words after editing, with follow-ups growing as the story develops. A news feature develops a fresh angle on a topic that has been prominent in the news lately and often ties something interesting or quirky to recent events. Equivalent short news analysis does the same, but substitutes context for quirks. A feature is anything of human interest that, in our case, runs 500 to 1,000 words or the multimedia equivalent.

4. **Organization:** In hunting for good stories, we will decide as individuals and as a group what we want to work on, how and with whom. The starting assumption is that most people will work on projects as individuals. If you want to work with a team to produce an editorial package, that's fine. We will need to be clear on what constitutes a fair, equitable and substantive division of labor among team members. We will devote a portion of class time to editorial meetings during which we will decide how to proceed and help one another sort out challenges as they arise.

5. **What it's not:** This is *not* a course that will teach you the tools of multimedia per se. We will think about how to exploit our collective toolkit by choosing the right tools to tell your particular story. In so doing, we hope to exploit the variety of storytelling talents of the individuals on our team and learn something from one another as we go. The tools will not dictate the work; the work will dictate the tools.

## Classes

Our regular class meets for 75 minutes twice a week. Think of them as multifaceted editorial meetings during which we will:

1. Start every Tuesday with a discussion of world, national and local news, and how it relates to our work. We call this "News of the Week." Here's how it works: Students arrive in class prepared to present three local/state, national and international stories (nine stories in all) starting in class on Jan. 24. **Be prepared to say, concisely, what your stories are about, why they're important, and how they relate to our audience in Central Texas. "News of the Week" will continue every Tuesday class is held and will constitute an important part of your grade for class participation.** News outlets (minimum) you will be required to follow: The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Guardian, Al Jazeera English, BBC World News, Austin American-Statesman, The Dallas Morning News, The Texas Tribune and The Associated Press.
2. Start every Thursday with a story-pitch meeting and editorial discussion about stories in progress. **Be prepared to pitch two stories starting on Jan. 26. Pitch sessions will continue through the last Thursday class of the semester and, like "News" above, will constitute an important part of your grade for class participation.**
3. Build up our intellectual capital for acquiring a better command of what story possibilities the world holds and how to discover and act on them.
4. Workshop our reporting, writing and production techniques, according to the Course Schedule below. Vet any professional or technical challenges as they arise.

## Labs

Our Friday lab is the heart of this course because it provides a dependable block of time during which you and your editors can work one-on-one on stories. Interaction with your

editors is an important part of the human “software” that makes the editorial enterprise go. **You are required to attend all Friday lab sessions.**

## **Assignments**

1. Individual assignments will focus on the natural stages of bringing a good story to life: coming up with winning ideas; introducing your ideas in proposal (budget-line) form; developing the idea through researching and reporting; organizing your information; drafting your story; editing it; and producing a final story that we (and others) like. Each correspondent will produce four stories.

2: In keeping with standard newsroom practice, your editors will assign at least one of your stories this semester. Other stories originate from stories you pitch that are approved by your editors. **Do not switch topics without letting your editors know and getting their go-ahead. Communicating with your editors, promptly and often, is a key to professional success.**

3: You will be graded on your ability to follow newsroom procedures and file materials on or before the deadline, including rewrites and fixes. Once editors approve a story pitch, they will give you an exact deadline for submitting your story first draft.

Spot, hard news and feature stories all require that you:

- File a budget line describing the content, expected length and delivery time of the story.
- Submit your story on deadline.
- Answer queries from editors regarding the story.
- Use social media to drive audiences to your story.

**Important: When you receive an email query from an editor regarding a story you’ve filed, it’s critical to answer within 24 hours. News goes stale if it sits on the shelf awaiting an answer from the writer or producer.**

4. You will be graded on participation and effort, in class, in lab and in the field. Enthusiasm, hustle and drive will pay dividends.

## **Grades**

1. **Timing:** Deadlines are sacrosanct in journalism and critical in any area of media production. Meet them and qualify your assignments for full credit; miss them, and your highest potential grade will drop sharply– 50 points for each 24-hour period missed. Your files should be as complete as possible–not rough drafts. We give credit for stories that are “publication ready,” as opposed to partially completed stories.

2. **Photos and graphics:** You are responsible for providing “art” for your stories by working with our photo editor, Lukas Keapproth, to either provide photos and/or graphics

yourself or to coordinate what photos Lukas needs to assign to an RT photographer to illustrate your story. Failure to provide ideas to “art” your stories and follow up with the photo editors in a timely matter will significantly impact your grade.

3. **Assessment:** Assignments will be graded on the skill with which you use words and, where appropriate, images and sound; good organization; solidly reported content; and production skills to illustrate and satisfy your topic—and the degree to which you improve your skills over the course of the semester. **See Appendix I below for an assessment checklist.**

4. **Editing drill:** Your stories will go through three edits with three different editors: a backfield edit will help you iron out basic reporting, writing, production and organizational issues and will require you promptly file fixes and rewrites; a line edit will review the piece with the editor making further suggestions and requiring further fixes; and a top edit will address any final issues and clear the piece for publication.

5. **Point breakdowns:** Final course grades will be calculated on the plus/minus grading system. They will be tallied according to the following percentage guidelines:

Overall grading base	1,000 points
▪ Reporting assignments	700
▪ Class/newsroom participation	300
Each of four stories	175 points
▪ Budget line	10
▪ Backfield edit	100
▪ Line edit	40
▪ Top edit	25
Class participation	300 points
▪ News of the Day	100
▪ Pitches	100
▪ Attendance and attention	100
Bonus points for stories published on RT	15

6. **Revision policy:** After you’ve filed your story, your backfield editor will comment in writing within 48 hours. You will then have one week to fill in the reporting gaps and present a revised story. At that point, your backfield editor will give you a signal — either to proceed with the story through the next editing stages or to “spike” the story and start work on the next one. It’s important to remember that your success in getting beyond this cutoff largely depends on the effort you invest in your work — but it’s also pays to remember that not even seasoned pros bring each and every story to completion. Sometimes, things just don’t work out. In our newsroom, the editor will make the

decision. If he or she thinks it's a more efficient use of time to drop a story and move on, you will receive partial credit for your work in the backfield.

7. **Bottom line:** Our aim is to get all students published with four professional-quality stories — but some students will work on more than four stories during the course of the semester earning partial points for those entries only partially completed.

#### 8. **Course grading scale**

A = 940 to 1000 points

A- 900 to 939

B+ 870 to 899

B = 840 to 869

B- 800 to 839

C+ 770 to 799

C = 740 to 769

C- 700 to 739

D+ 670 to 699

D = 640 to 669

D- 600 to 639

#### **Filing Your Work**

For routine messages, use standard email. Send assignments (budget lines story files and fixes) as “files” using a Word attachment. **Always be sure to put the same slug on both your email and the Word attachment.**

Here's how to create a proper slug: If your last name is Smith, and you're filing the budget line for your first assignment, the slug reads:

**file smith assign1 budget line**

**When filing the story draft, the slug reads:**

**file smith assign1 draft1**

If you're sending a routine email message, the slug includes the topic, for example:

**memo smith missed deadline**

Please send all original story files to all of your editors—one copy each to Tracy, Rusty, Caroline and Lukas. Send fixes or a writethru **only** to the editor you're working with at the moment, either in backfield, line or top edit. A writethru is an entirely rewritten version of a story. Memos can of course be sent to one or all, depending on to whom you want to talk and about what.

**Important: Always preserve your editor's tracking changes and comments in your revised copy — that's the only way an editor can quickly get back into your story, since each editor will be handling multiple stories at any given time. Always put a headline on your work, whether it be a budget line or a story draft.**

### **Getting Into the Newsroom Flow: The narrative**

OK, you've filed your story on deadline, and the world is a happy place. But remember, you're not finished with your story; you've really just started. Here's how the process works:

Your story draft (as complete as possible and including multiple relevant sources with an enticing lede and a clearly focused nut graf) goes into a BACKFIELD EDIT in which the assigned editor will assess your story and provide comments, typically within 48 hours. You are expected to respond to your editor about his or her queries within 24 hours and file fixes as promptly as possible. Failure to communicate with your editor in a timely fashion will result in a reduction in your backfield edit grade.

**We don't expect you to have all fixes your editor suggests made within 24 hours — that's unrealistic. But we do expect you to touch base with your editor within 24 hours. You'll be surprised by how much easier the work goes when both you and your editor are pulling together instead of you working your story solo.**

Once your backfield editor clears your story, she or he will send it on to LINE EDIT in which a second editor will assess your story and send you further queries to improve it or make it more accurate. You will be expected to respond to your line editor about her or his questions within 24 hours. Failure to do so will result in the same deductions as for the backfield edit above. Once your line editor clears the story, he or she will place it in TOP EDIT, where a third editor will give it a final look and send any further queries to you — same rules apply.

Once your story clears the TOP EDIT it is ready to be scheduled for publication. The reporter needs to ensure that ART (photos, graphics, etc.) for the story is ready to go—failure to provide art at SCHEDULING, when it is expected, will result in a deduction from your overall story grade.

### **A Word About Pitches**

On the second Thursday of the course (Jan. 26), you will be expected to pitch two sharply focused story ideas, explaining in one or two sentences each: What is the story about? Why is it important for our audience to know about it? Why now?

We will keep a running PITCH LIST and you will be expected to keep at least two live pitches on it at all times. Each week you will drop at least one old pitch and add at least one new pitch. When the editors approve a story pitch you will write a BUDGET LINE

and file it to all editors within 48 hours. As soon as editors approve your proposal, your story is a “go” – and you should start reporting it immediately and in earnest.

### **Editorial Consultations**

You will meet with Tracy and with Rusty at least once each during the semester to discuss individual progress, reporting methods, research ideas and career goals. You are also encouraged to make use of office hours to discuss any of the foregoing.

### **Required Reading**

There are no assigned textbooks for this course. We will work exclusively from materials provided for you on Canvas or online.

### **Attendance & Rules of the Road**

Showing up when you need to be there is the first requirement of the journalism professional. Come to class on time. Do your work. If you can't be on time, tell Tracy or Rusty why—in advance.

**Important: You are expected to attend all classes. If you accumulate three unexcused absences, you should consider dropping the course. Being five minutes late equals half an absence. Fifteen minutes late is a full absence. You are required to attend all Friday lab sessions.**

**Professional courtesy: You may only use electronic devices during class to access class-related information, not for purposes of personal connectivity, and only when authorized by your instructors. If you require personal digital connectivity during class or lab time, this course is not for you.**

**Likewise, please don't consume food in class. Beverages are OK provided they don't prove a distraction.**

### **Course Schedule**

Reporting Texas may operate differently from other courses you've taken at UT. Because it works as a newsroom, where the goal is to produce professional-quality stories, there is no set schedule for discussing a particular academic topic on a particular day. Instead, we will discuss issues of journalism practice as they fit the timing and rhythm of our work.



## APPENDIX I

### Assessment Checklist

In evaluating your work for this course, your editors look for and grade you on the following items:

#### **Budget line (completion check)**

- Does the budget line really tell what the story is about?
- Does it make a statement rather than ask a question?
- Is it based on research/reporting, rather than speculation?
- Have you done your homework?

#### **Lede**

- Does it tease or capture the essence of the story?
- Is it concise and well written?
- Does it grab the audience's attention?
- Does it grab the reader, viewer or listener's attention?
- Does it set the tone and mood for the story that follows?

#### **Nut graf**

- Does the writer establish the focus in a strong nut graf? Is there a clear news angle? Does the nut explain why the story is timely and significant?

#### **Reporting & accuracy**

- Does the story support the lede?
- Is the story complete? Any reporting holes?
- Are context questions answered?
- Is the writing objective? Are opinions attributed?
- Is all information/data attributed?
- Is the story fair? Misleading in any way?
- Are all names spelled correctly?

#### **Sources**

- Do sources present a variety of viewpoints?
- Are the sources credible, relevant and best for the story?
- Are diverse perspectives represented?
- Are there adequate sources? (Generally, three sources needed for any story; more depending on story length)
- Are the sources appropriately identified?
- Is quote style followed? Are the quotes correctly attributed?

#### **Composition**

- Are verbs in the active voice wherever possible?
- Does the story flow logically?
- Does the story maintain focus throughout its structure?

Is the writing clear and concise?  
Are transitions between speakers and topics clear?  
Are the quotes compelling? Paraphrased when necessary?  
Is description vivid, but not overdone?

### **Mechanics**

Grammar/Spelling/AP Style/Punctuation  
Cover sheet includes budget line

### **Multimedia production**

Are the visual and audio materials of good quality?  
Do the elements move the story forward?  
Are the images well edited, the sound bites crisp and clear?

**(Note: Categories will be appropriately adjusted for multimedia work depending on the ratio of writing to visual or audio storytelling.)**

## **APPENDIX II**

### **Undergraduate Course Flags for Reporting Texas**

#### **Writing**

This course carries the Writing Flag. Writing Flag courses are designed to give students experience with writing in an academic discipline. In this class, you can expect to write regularly during the semester, complete substantial writing projects, and receive feedback from your instructor to help you improve your writing. You will also have the opportunity to revise one or more assignments, and to read and discuss your peers' work. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from your written work.

#### **Independent Inquiry**

This course carries the Independent Inquiry flag. Independent Inquiry courses are designed to engage you in the process of inquiry over the course of a semester, providing you with the opportunity for independent investigation of a question, problem, or project related to your major. You should therefore expect a substantial portion of your grade to come from the independent investigation and presentation of your own work.

## **APPENDIX III**

### **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.

## **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).

## **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://deanofstudents.utexas.edu/sjs/acadint_conseq.php)

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

## **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 512-475-9400.

## **Use of Email 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 for keeping the university informed about changes to your email address. You should check your email regularly and frequently to stay current with university-related communications, some of which may be timecritical. You

can find UT Austin's policies and instructions for updating your email 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 me in writing during the first week of class.
- In the event of an evacuation, follow my instructions or those 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.

### **Q-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.”