Spring 2016
J361F/J395 44:   **Reporting Texas: Working in a Newsroom of Our Own**
Classes   **T/Th   12:30-2:00   BMC 3.208**
Lab   **F   9-12   BMC 3.208**

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Course description

Reporting Texas is a multimedia course that serves reportingtexas.com, the School of Journalism's news website. The site is dedicated to providing high-quality coverage of stories of interest to the Central Texas community, particularly those that are underreported. The course will involve students in advancing an important model for producing and delivering digital news. (See: "Plugging the Local News Gap" – a report sponsored by the School of Journalism.) Reporting Texas reporters will experience the rewards and challenges of working in their own newsroom under the guidance of instructors Tracy Dahlby and Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, TAs Saif Shahin and Shane Graber, and editors-in-residence Fred Zipp and Kathy Warbelow. You will learn to think more deeply, write more clearly, edit more sharply and produce focused, professional-caliber stories. Through arrangements with The Dallas Morning News, the Austin American-Statesman and other media, Reporting Texas students have the opportunity to see their work published elsewhere, providing opportunities for hardworking, hustling and committed reporters to add to their portfolios.

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 of "Hidden Texas"– ones that shed new light for folks on the places and people in Central

Texas. We'll also be working with The Dallas Morning News , the Austin American-Statesman and others to produce news and news features.

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 hear, see and read.
- 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 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

How it will work: Reporting Texas reporters will function as independent actors, each responsible for proposing and executing stories. When the story calls for it, reporters may come together 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.

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. Undergraduates will produce at least four spot, news feature or feature stories (print or multimedia). Graduates students will produce five.

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 <u>feature</u> is anything of human interest that, in our case, runs 500 to 1,000 words or the multimedia equivalent.

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 on a team to produce an editorial package, that's fine, too. 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 in which we decide how to proceed and help one another sort out challenges as they arise.

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. In short, the tools will not dictate the work; the work will dictate the tools.

Classes

Our regular class meets for 80 minutes twice a week. Think of it as a multifaceted editorial meeting in which we will:

- 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 must arrive in class prepared to present three local/state, national and international stories (nine stories in all) starting in class on January 26. **You need to 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 through May 5 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.
- Start every Thursday with a story-pitch meeting and editorial discussion about stories in progress. **Students must arrive in class prepared to pitch three stories starting on January 28. Pitch sessions will continue through the last Thursday class of the semester on May 5 and, like "News" above, will constitute an important part of your grade for class participation.**
- 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.
- Workshop our reporting, writing and production techniques, according to the Course Schedule below.
- Vet any professional or technical challenges that arise in the course of your story development or review material covered in earlier sessions.

▪ Entertain guest speakers as opportunities 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. This spring we're lucky in several respects. For one thing, we will have TAs Saif Shahin and Shane Graber to serve as editors. For another, former Austin American-Statesman editor-in-chief Fred Zipp will be on hand to lend his editorial expertise to our story machine, as will Kathy Warbelow, a longtime Statesman senior editor. Interaction with your editors and other journalists is an important part of the human "software" that makes the editorial enterprise go—so you will want to make maximum use of this rare constellation of talents and opportunities.

Important: You are strongly encouraged to attend <u>all</u> Friday lab sessions, though you are not technically required to do so. You will be expected to make at least 10 sessions, so please get in the habit. Attendance will be taken. Using the lab is critical to your success–and the success of Reporting Texas. It is the best time for us to give your work individual attention. One-on-one meetings with your editors are not a substitute for attending lab sessions. The lab is our newsroom, and the newsroom is where the knots of news coverage are untangled. If you have a time conflict that limits your participation in lab sessions, you should consider dropping the course.

Assignments

Part 1: Individual assignments will focus on the natural stages of bringing to life a good story: coming up with winning ideas; introducing your ideas in proposal 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 undergrad correspondent will produce four stories– spot, news features or features, or the multimedia equivalent. Grad students will produce a total of five.

Part 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.**

Part 3: You will be graded on your ability to follow newsroom procedures and file materials on or before the deadline, including rewrites and fixes. We will distribute the deadline schedule at our second or third meeting.

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

- A story line (aka budget line) describing the content, expected length and delivery time of the story.
- The story.

- Answers to queries from editors regarding the story.

We'll learn in lecture how to file budget lines, story proposals and stories. We'll also learn how to file "fixes" to stories and, if necessary, how to file complete rewrites or re-edits for multimedia stories.

Important: You are required to reply to your editor regarding questions raised about your stories immediately or within 24 hours at the latest. When you receive from an editor an email query regarding a story you've filed, it's critical to answer swiftly—news goes stale if it sits on the shelf awaiting an answer from the writer or producer.

We'll be working on multimedia elements as we report and file each story. These might range from the simple to the in-depth, but we'll be considering them at each stage in the reporting and editing process.

We'll also be filing tweets for our stories, as well as Facebook entries. We'll learn how to do those early in the term as we seek to use social media to drive audience to our stories. We'll be looking at how we can legitimately use social media as a reporting tool.

Part 4: You will be graded on participation and effort, in class, in lab and in the field. Enthusiasm, hustle and drive never go amiss.

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– 25 points for each 24-hour period missed. Be aware that you can always file your assignments *before* deadline for extra credit, but these must be complete articles–not rough drafts. We give extra 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. If art is expected for a story but not available when it's cleared for publication, your grade will drop one full point – from an A to a B, and so forth.

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. **The Breakdown:** Your stories will go through three separate edits by 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 (60 percent of your story grade); a line edit will review the piece with the editor making further suggestions and requiring further fixes (20 percent); and a top edit will address any final issues and clear the piece for publication (20 percent).

5. **The Matrix:** Final course grades will be calculated on the plus/minus grading system for both undergraduate and graduate students. They will be tallied according to the following percentage guidelines:

- **Reporting assignments**   **70 %**
- **Class/newsroom participation**   **30 %**

Filing Your Work

All written communication between you and your editors will be electronic. For routine memos (messages), use standard email. Send assignments (proposals, outlines, drafts) as "files" with the assignment sent as a Word attachment.

Important: When filing an attachment always be sure to put the same slug on <u>both</u> your email <u>and</u> the Word attachment.

Here's how to create a proper slug:

Start by using the correct tag for the item you're sending: For all stories, it's "file." For all other messages, it's "memo." Add a space, then your last name, and then another space, and finally the assignment number (or for memos only, a brief topic identifier). If your last name is Smith, for example, and you're filing your first assignment, the slug reads:

    file smith assign1

If you're sending a routine memo, it reads:

    memo smith missed deadline

Please send all original story files to all of your editors–one copy each to Maggie, Tracy, Shane, Saif, Fred and Kathy. Send fixes or a write-thru **only** to the editor you're working with at the moment, either in backfield, line or top edit. Memos can of course be sent to one or all, depending on to whom you want to talk and about what.

Important: Excepting memos, anything you write for this class (story proposals, blueprints or story drafts) must carry a working headline. Artfully summing up our storytelling efforts in a handful of words helps us focus–and focusing on what we

want to say is half the battle in the effort to tell good stories. We'll also discuss how effective headlines and summaries improve search-engine optimization.

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 graph) goes into a BACKFIELD EDIT in which the assigned editor will assess your story and provide comments usually 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 20 percent reduction in your backfield edit grade; failure to respond within 48 hours will result in a further 20 percent reduction, and so on each 24-hour cycle thereafter.

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 full point deduction from your overall story grade.

A Word About Pitches

On the first Thursday of the course (January 28) you will be expected to pitch three 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 three 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 story PROPOSAL or 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.

Important: Pitches need to be researched – no vague ideas, please.

> **Vague:** I want to write about rodeo clowns because I think they're cool, they wear funny clothes, and everybody wants to know more about them.

> **Acceptable:** The continuing drought is causing a comeback in windmills throughout Texas as ranchers look for ways to maintain their herds and wildlife habitat. Aeromotor, perhaps the most famous windmill maker, is doing booming business in San Angelo. We will look at businesses that erect and repair mills in Travis and neighboring counties. We'll also gather nationwide statistics on this resurgent business. We'll interview windmill repair people, ranchers, Department of Agriculture officials and economists to find out if this business will continue to thrive as climate change progresses. Art to include pix of a windmill repairman at work, livestock or wildlife at a windmill tank. Graphic could chart growth of windmill sales/repairs over past few years.

Tips for Setting Up a Good Pitch

1. Do research first—Google/Lexis/Nexis

   What has already been written about the topic? What more can you add? This will give you grounding in the topic.

2. Have some facts/studies to demonstrate if something will work out.

   Sometimes news stories will mention a study/research/numbers – look up the original source and see what else you might learn. (Also, this way, if you use the info in your story, you can cite the original source, rather than the publication that tipped you off to it.) Likewise, news stories contain human and institutional sources that can be helpful contacts for both pitching and reporting your story.

3. Contact people to find out if you have access to building/people.

   This gets to the feasibility of your story. If you want to interview President Fenves, do you have access to him? How do you know this? Lack of immediate access doesn't necessarily rule out your story. But you may need to put the story idea on a back burner while you try to secure access – and be working on one that you KNOW you will be able to do NOW.

Editorial Consultations

You will meet with Tracy or Maggie 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. <u>Read and review all the assigned materials.</u> They are designed to target key skills and issues of critical thinking and ethics that you will need to successfully complete your work for this course and in a reporting career.

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 either Maggie or Tracy why–in advance.

Important: You are encouraged to attend <u>all</u> 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 a minimum of 10 Friday lab sessions.

Professional courtesy: Focus is the key to good thinking, and good thinking is the key to good work. You may <u>only</u> use electronic devices during class to access class-related information, <u>not</u> for purposes of personal connectivity. In other words, we will not send or monitor non-class-related text or email messages during class sessions. <u>Likewise, please don't consume food in class.</u> 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 the Class Topics listed below when and as they fit the timing and rhythm of our work. In other words, your editors will take up those topics most helpful to your development as a reporter at the point we deem them to be of greatest benefit.

We will spend the first two weeks introducing you to the rhythm of the course as follows:

Each Tuesday, we will cover, in the following order, HOUSEKEEPING, NEWS OF THE WEEK, WORKFLOW, discuss a CLASS TOPIC (or host a guest speaker) and, if time permits, WORK OUR STORIES. Each Thursday we will follow the same schedule but substitute doing PITCHES in lieu of NEWS OF THE WEEK. Each Friday we will devote the entire lab session to your efforts to report and produce your stories with the help and guidance of your editors.

When we discuss a CLASS TOPIC we will critique examples from the professional media as well as elements of the stories you produce for the class in order to elicit peer feedback that will help you develop your techniques.

Class Topics

- Why practice journalism? Why practice it in a newsroom? What's the point of Reporting Texas? Who is our audience?
- How do we get a more complete sense of the community we're reporting on and serving?
- How will your stories be edited and what do your editors expect? What are the mechanics of our formal edit system?
- What role does self-editing play in the process?
- How do you produce a world-beating pitch?
- How do we write perfect ledes? How do we compose perfect nut graphs?
- How do we take publishable photos? What makes a good photo? How do we edit photos?
- What are the secrets of sharply focusing a story?
- What is story "architecture" and why is it important? What are storytelling essentials and why keep them in mind?
- What is "viewpoint switching" and why is it important? How do we amplify "internal debate" in your stories?
- How do we find sources? What are the best sources for sources in Central Texas?
- How do we compose good headlines and captions?
- What is the best way to incorporate social media in our reporting?
- What do stories in print, video and podcasting share in common? How do they differ?
- How do we organize long-form stories?
- What role should data-mining play in our work?
- How do we prepare ourselves for reporting across cultures?
- How can we make sure to be inclusive? And why is it important?
- In thinking about ethics, is being "fair and balanced" enough? What are some key ethical challenges in our digital age?
- What do you want out of your career? What's the best way to achieve your goals?

APPENDIX I

Assessment Checklist

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

Reporting Texas Grading Form

Student's Name: _____Grader's name/initials:_____
__Backfield   __Line   __Top

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?

Lead (10 points)   _____

        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 graph (15 points)   _____

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

Reporting & Accuracy (20 points)   _____

        Does the story support the lead?
        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 (20 points)   _____

        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 (20 points) _____

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 (10 points) _____

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

Multimedia Production (5 points)

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.)

Deduction for lateness _____
(25 points for each 24 hours past deadline)

Total: _____

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 the Consequences of Plagiarizing

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://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 —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 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."