JOMC 256.1 Syllabus

“Feature Reporting & Writing”

Fall 2014

9:30-10:45 am Mondays & Wednesdays

Carroll Hall 11

Professor Paul Cuadros

Office Hours: By Appointment After Class

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Feature Stories:

Excellent feature stories are difficult and challenging stories to report and write. The feature writer must be an excellent reporter first and foremost because great feature stories are infused with facts, figures, information, anecdotes and details to tell a complete story. The reader must not only be intrigued by the facts reported in the feature story but must also be compelled by its writing.

Feature stories, or long-form stories use excellent reporting as the foundation of the story. The reporting can be in the form of collecting facts, data, documents, but also in the gathering of quotes, descriptions, scenes, and anecdotes. Excellent feature writers use all the techniques that great writers use: setting scenes, foreshadowing, tone, mood, narrative openings, dialogue, descriptive detail and other writing devices.

Feature stories are rooted in fact and carry the reader along on a tide of interest with words and writing technique. Despite the shorter requirements of the Internet content, people still want to read longer format stories that tell a more complete story, a more profound story, and one that provides insight into a subject, an event, a social change, or a person. Your challenge in this course is to do your very best reporting and match it with your very best writing.

The Course:

This course deals with great reporting and excellent writing for all media. A great story is a great story in any medium. The course will stress professionalism, the importance of good and accurate writing, the role of revision, and entrepreneurialism.

Your objective in this course is to do your best reporting and writing and to be comfortable with different kinds of feature stories. The emphasis will be on stories you write and re-write and pitch to a news publication or feature publication.

In order to this, you will be reading…a lot. But the readings will be current, interesting and you can get involved in your reading with me by making suggestions of interesting or provocative feature stories for the class to share in and learn about.

What You Will Learn from this Class:

You will learn how to better compose and finish a long-form story or feature.

You will learn how to open a long-form story that attracts a reader or editor.

You will learn how to better craft a nut graph that informs the reader and editor what the story is all about.

You will learn how to better characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.

You will learn how to “show” more and “tell” less in your writing.

You will learn different styles of features and crafting them for certain publications.

You will learn how to better structure a long-form story, organize it, and have it engage a reader’s interest over a longer period of time.

You will learn how to become a better writer and reporter.

Facebook: JOMC 256 Feature Writing/Cuadros

The course has an integrated Facebook page for me to post feature stories of interest for in-class discussion. Students are required to sign up for the Facebook page by “liking” the page and having access to it. Students are required to view the page consistently for links and posting by me on feature stories we will be discussing in class. Students are expected to have read the stories on Facebook and make comments on them prior to discussion. The stories will range from first person stories, to personality profiles, to travel stories, to human interest stories, to investigative, to anything relevant and interesting being written today in a timely way. By using this Facebook page, students will have access to interesting feature stories being written today.

Students this semester will also be posting a feature story that caught their interest or had an interesting technique employed. Students will lead a discussion in class based on this feature story. All students will read the feature story posted by each student and make a general comment on Facebook. This will allow me to know that everyone read the story and is prepared to discuss it in class. This will constitute as part of your class participation.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/JOMC-256-Feature-WritingCuadros/159202890823106>

Discussion:

Among some of the topics that we will cover are:

Story Ideas: Where to find them

Writing Nut Graphs and why

Seven Feature Types

Feature Writing Structure and Leads

How to Write an Excellent Query Letter and Land a Paid Assignment

Writing in the First Person

Sections and Endings

Storytelling and Narrative Non-Fiction

Narrative Non-Fiction Journalism

Interviewing for the Narrative

Reporting for Narrative

Researching for Narrative

Participatory Journalism

Developing Ideas for a Big Story

Interviewing techniques for Long Form Narrative

Choosing the Best Words

Visual Writing

The Angle, Unity and Transitions

Transportation: Taking the Reader to a New Place

Transformation: Characters, Story, and Readers Transformed

Reworking a story.

Freelance reporting & writing

Assignments:

Class Participation:

Every student will select an online feature story and post the story to the class Facebook site for everyone to read on Wed. Student will then present the feature on Monday for class discussion on the feature and its techniques.

Four Features/Two Drafts:

You are required to write four features for the course. A schedule is included for deadlines. Prior to turning in your feature story you will turn in a draft for review on your first two features. The drafts are not graded alone but count towards your cumulative class participation grade. That said, the drafts must be COMPLETE DRAFTS to not receive a penalty on the final story. No outlines, no incomplete drafts. Drafts should at the minimum have an opening, beginning, and nut graph, quotes, and the beginnings of storytelling. The next two features will be turned in without a draft and graded by itself.

Four Query Letters:

You are required to pitch your story to me and to the publication of your choice. A query

letter is a one-page letter sent to me and the publication of your choice. Please see schedule when query letters are due.

Final Feature:

The final feature will be a NARRATIVE NON-FICTION feature in which you will shadow a source or sources for some time and write the story from a narrative perspective. This feature does not have to be in the first person but can be in third person. Writers must set up their follow/shadowing reporting early to have enough time to gain experience with the source to be able to tell the story from inside. Narrative, literary techniques must be employed.

Feature Story Assignment Format:

All stories must focus on a topic, person or theme OUTSIDE the university. This means NO stories on fraternities, sororities, student organizations, student events, student shows or performances, and NO PROFILES involving STUDENTS. No stories on family members unless cleared by the instructor. No stories on students traveling abroad, their volunteer work, etc. Topics that touch on the university must be cleared PRIOR to being turned in. No exceptions.

All stories are to be 1,500-1,800 words long and must have FOUR HUMAN SOURCES listed at the end of the story with contact information.

Please place your name, due date, and the category of your feature in the upper left-hand corner of the page. Put the approximate number of words in the upper right-hand corner.

Each story should have an interesting title. A good title or headline helps sharpen the focus of the feature and forces the writer to decide what the story is really about. The title should be about halfway down the first page. Byline goes below the title.

All stories are double-spaced and stapled. Margins are one inch or more.

When you turn in an assignment, please turn in an original and a second printout.

Only two personality profiles will be allowed. No exceptions.

Only one 1st person feature story will be allowed. No exceptions.

Only one travel feature story will be allowed. No exceptions.

Only one historical feature will be allowed. Exceptions must be pre-approved by me.

Stories that simply tell your adventure or your personal experience are a starting point. They will earn you a C or 70 points total. You must EXPAND them to include more.

Final Feature Format:

The final feature is a more comprehensive feature story and is written in the NARRATIVE NON-FICTION style from within the story or experience of the sources. You must set up a time to shadow a source or experience what it is they do. Reporting for this story is crucial. Access is key, so an early start is best. Again, topics and themes should focus on something OUTSIDE the university. The format is the same as a regular feature except the word length is 2,000-2,200 words. A required SIX HUMAN SOURCES are REQUIRED for the final feature. Final features cannot be rewritten for a higher grade. No exceptions to this.

Query Letter Format:

Please address the letter to an editor at the publication of your choice. We will discuss how to write a Query Letter in class. End the letter with an appropriate closing and your contact information again.

You may wish to consider carrying a camera for art to go with your accepted story. This will help to augment your role as a feature writer contractor for the publication.

Grading:

All grading on stories is to a certain extent subjective, but so is life generally out in the real world. An editor will be judging your style, mechanics, reporting, how you write, how you capture a reader’s interest and maintain it, tone and whether the story is interesting. Turn in a story to a publication that’s boring to the editor and it won’t be published. Make silly style or grammar mistakes and no one will contract you for a story. Be professional.

The grading for the assignments is broken down into several areas: mechanical, reporting and style.

Each of the four assigned stories is worth 20 percent of your grade for a total of 70 percent. The final feature is worth 20 percent. The final feature may not be rewritten for a higher grade. No exceptions. The query letters and participation make up the final 10 percent of your grade.

FOUR STORIES=70 PERCENT OF GRADE

QUERY LETTERS& PARTICIPATION=10 PERCENT

FINAL NARRATIVE FEATURE=20 PERCENT

Mechanical: In keeping with the school’s grading policy on mechanics, all the previous points system developed under 153 News Writing, are in play. Errors in spelling are minus 10 points. Errors of grammar 5 points. Factual errors are an F.

Associated Press style is the style for the course along with the School’s own stylebook.

Do not underestimate the seriousness of style, editing and grammar. I will be grading on these elements as well as the reporting and structure of the story and tone. THERE IS NO EXCEPTION FOR SLOPPY COPY.

Rewrites:

Rewrites are possible only for the last two features as no draft is required. Rewrites will boost your final grade on a paper by 5 points total. No more. Rewrites MUST BE TURNED IN BY THE NEXT CLASS AFTER YOU RECEIVE YOUR GRADE & COMMENTS ON YOUR PAPER. You CANNOT turn in a rewrite weeks later or at the end of the semester. They will not be considered.

REWRITES ARE ONLY POSSIBLE FOR SCORES UNDER 80. NO REWRITES WILL BE CONSIDERED FOR A GRADE BOOST IF YOU SCORED AN 80 OR BETTER.

Reporting:

You must have talked with FOUR HUMAN SOURCES and list them at the end of each story. Turning in a story with less than required number of sources will see your grade fall by one letter grade.

Documents read should be listed at the end as well.

Required Texts:

* Posted articles in class on JOMC 256 Feature Writing Facebook Page.
* AP Stylebook
* JOMC Stylebook

Recommended Texts:

* Feature Writing: The Pursuit of Excellence, by Edward Jay Friedlander and John Lee (seventh edition).

LAST PAGE: LIST SOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

At the end of this course and all courses at the School of Journalism and Mass Communications, all students should have proficiency with the following values and practices when reporting and researching and disseminating information to others:

* Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;
* Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
* Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
* Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society;
* Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
* Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
* Think critically, creatively and independently;
* Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
* Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
* Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
* Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
* Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.