JOMC 256.2 Syllabus

“Feature Reporting & Writing”

Fall 2014

8-9:15 a.m. Tuesday/Thursday

Carroll 268

Instructor: John Robinson

Office Hours: By Appointment on Tuesdays & Thursdays

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(If you're having trouble, reach out. I'm here. Seriously.)

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

Feature 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.

In this course, we’ll look at the work of some of journalism’s greatest writers. Every week, we will read outstanding pieces of feature writing and analyze what makes them remarkable. We will read under-performing stories, too, to learn what traps to step around. .

Writing well is a craft, and can be learned through diligence and hard work. Find the perfect word to illuminate a moment, a gesture, a glance and you will do more than bring a scene to life. You will begin to become a great writer. As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word, is the difference between lightening and the lightening bug.”

What You Will Learn from this class:

\* How to determine what's a good feature idea.

\* How to structure a long-form story, organize it and have it engage a reader’s interest over a longer period of time.

\* How to craft a nut graph that informs the reader and editor what the story is all about.

\* How to characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.

\* How to “show” more and “tell” less.

\* How to write different styles of features.

\* How to become a better writer and reporter.

Workflow, Resources and Textbooks:

You will spend the bulk of your time outside of class, reading, researching topics, interviewing subjects, and writing and rewriting. In class, we will explore approaches to stories, develop familiarity with writing techniques and work in a manner similar to newsrooms. Attendance is mandatory. More than three absences will result in a lower grade.

Required texts are **"Writing Tools: 50 Essential Strategies for Every Writer"** by Roy Peter Clark. (Available through Amazon for $6.49 plus shipping); the **AP Stylebook** and **JOMC Stylebook**. You will get handouts and assigned readings for each class.

Assignments:

Four Features:

A story will be due once every two or three weeks. A key to success: Start thinking about and planning for ALL assignments at the beginning of the semester. A key to failure: Last-minute scrambling for a topic and/interviews. This is not a course for linear, one-assignment-at-a-time thinkers. Writers who challenge themselves with meaty stories or stories that are hard to get will be rewarded. Mundane, simplistic stories will be graded accordingly. You will have an opportunity to re-write a story to try for a higher grade. (More on this later.)

Feature story due dates are: Sept. 4, Sept. 23, Oct. 14 and Nov. 6.

A one-sentence description of your story's point is due one week before the story is due. Failure to submit this on time will be reflected in your grade.

The two stories -- a review and a "Southern Neighbor" feature -- will run from 600 to 1,000 words and will require a variable number of sources. The three subsequent feature stories will be 1,000-1,200 words long and must have at least four human sources listed at the end of the story with contact information. We will discuss in class what types of feature stories will be acceptable.

Each story must have a one-sentence theme that says what the focus of the story is. It serves as a guide to help the writer be ruthless in deciding what to include and exclude from the story. It 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.

Test

Writing skills are important. That's why we use the Clark text. You'll be tested on them Oct. 21.

Blog

Becoming comfortable writing in and for the public is vital. A blog - which can be no more than an online journal - is an effective way to "put yourself out there" and hone your everyday writing skills. You are expected to create a blog and post to it at least twice a week. Posts can be first-drafts of scene descriptions, conversations with others, discussions about writing problems, travelogues, writing tips, reviews of what you've read or seen or your internal thoughts. The thrust must be that they are about feature writing. Use them as an opportunity to experiment with your work and to use all five senses in your writing.

Final:

The final 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 must be written in third person. Reporting for this story is crucial. 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. Due date: Dec. 3.

The format is the same as a regular feature except the word length is 2,000-2,200 words. At least five human sources are required.

A word on writing your stories: You writing can improve with each draft -- expect to write more than one. Read the story aloud, to yourself or someone else, to see if it makes sense to the ear. Print it out and review it with a pen in hand to catch typos.

A word on deadlines: Stories are due at the beginning of class. Stories submitted after 8:05 a.m. on the day they are due will be accepted but will be considered late. Late stories are docked one letter grade for each day they are tardy.

Class Participation:

Class participation is crucial, not only to your grade, but to your success as a reporter and writer. Students will have varied writing experiences. Every newsroom in the world blends writers with wide ranges of experience. You can learn from your classmates, no matter their experience levels. The more lively the in-class discussion, the more interesting the class will be. Students who take the initiative will thrive. Ask questions if something doesn't make sense. This is not a class in which sitting silently and taking notes will work all that well. The most successful reporters and writers are often not those who know the most, but the ones who are not afraid to ask questions.

The class has a Facebook page: JOMC 256 Robinson. We will use it to post feature stories of interest for in-class discussion. Students are required to "like" the page and to check it frequently. I will post links to feature stories that we will be discussing in class. Students will be expected to have read the stories and make comments on them prior to the class discussion.

In addition, students will also post feature stories that caught their interest or had an interesting technique employed. Each student will be expected to lead a discussion based on the feature story he or she selected. All students will read the feature story posted by each student and make a general comment on Facebook. This will tell me that everyone read the story and is prepared to discuss it in class. Student-led discussions will occur on Thursdays. I will assign each student a date. Your selected story must be posted on Facebook by Sunday night prior to the Thursday class.

https://www.facebook.com/JOMC256Robinson

Some classes will operate as workshops. That is you will be members of a three- or four-person group. You will send your stories to the workshop group before an assigned deadline. Each member will review the work and, in class, give you constructive feedback. You will do the same for their works. Be respectful and honest, and take the process seriously. But don't be nice out of fear you might hurt their feelings; being nice will only hurt their stories.

Grading:

All grading on stories is to a certain extent subjective, but so are opinions of editors and readers. 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.

Grade breakdown:

Classwork, including blogs -- 20%

Test -- 10%

Story 1 (Review) -- 10%

Story 2 (Southern Neighbor) -- 10%

Story 3 (Your choice/profile) -- 15%

Story 4 (Your choice/profile) -- 15%

Final -- 20%

In keeping with the school’s grading policy, the points system of 153 News Writing, is in play. Errors in spelling are minus 10 points. Errors of grammar 5 points. Factual errors are an F.

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

Generally speaking, for stories: **A** = publishable story with no factual or style errors and written well. **B** = near-publishable story with minor errors of style or logic; no fact errors; needs revision. **C** = unpublishable story with serious errors of style, logic, reporting or readability. **D** = sub-par, unpublishable work with major errors of style, logic, approach; reporting gaps; low level of engagement with the story **F** = unacceptable work, including factual errors, many style errors, major logical errors, minimal reporting; generally embarrassing to the writer. Don’t go here.

Rewrites:

Rewrites are encouraged based on the comments you received when your paper is first graded. 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. Rewrites are only possible for scores under 88.

Publication:

If your story is published by an approved publication or website, you will receive an A on the story. Exception: If you are on the staff of the DTH, publication in the DTH doesn't count. I encourage you to seize this opportunity and treat your stories as worthy of publication rather than simply yet another assignment.

A final note: Please, please, please ask for help. That's what I'm here for.

A public service announcement:

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication’s accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here:

<http://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps>

No single course could possibly give you a solid grasp of all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas.  Our advanced courses will provide you with more detailed guidance based on your specific area of specialization. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies, with special emphasis on the last six bullet dots under "Professional values and competencies" in the link noted above.

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) requires that, irrespective of their particular specialization, all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies and be able to:

* Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, 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