

**Writing for the Media—Fall 2006**  
**Journalism 61-221, Section B01, Clow 148**  
**Mondays & Wednesdays 3 p.m. to 5:10 p.m.**

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**Required Texts:**

“Reporting for the Media” (8th edition), Fedler, et al.

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law.

**Course Content**

Over the last 25 years, the news media—and the journalists who work for them—have arrived at a position of enormous influence. Their power derives essentially from their ability to describe, and define the significance of, events, individuals and social trends. In this course, you will be exposed to the skills that underlie this entire dynamic.

By learning about these skills, you will gain a greater understanding of how the news media serve as a conduit for commercial and political messages, some of which are embedded in articles and some of which appear as paid advertisements. The insights that you gain will make you a more knowledgeable citizen as well as a more informed and discriminating consumer of media.

As its title implies, this course has a dual focus: on writing and contemporary media. It is designed to help you develop your understanding of journalistic methods and improve your ability to communicate with the written word. To those ends, we will study a wide variety of topics, ranging from vocabulary to ethics. But our overall goal will be to learn how “to see what’s important and make that stand out,” which is how one veteran editor defined the essence of good journalistic writing.

The basic theory of this course is that the best way to improve your skills is by using them, in other words that you will get better at analyzing and presenting the news by performing the key tasks of working members of the media. Two of the most important of these are reading and writing, and in this course you’ll have plenty of opportunity to do both.

Whether you intend to pursue a career in news, advertising, public relations or visual journalism, this course is intended to refine the skills of analysis and communication—especially written communication—that you will need to be successful as a student and as a professional.

**Because this is a prerequisite course for further journalism study, you must earn at least a C grade to continue in the major (or the minor).**

## Course Objectives

By the end of this course, you will have been given the chance to learn how to:

- Use a word processing program to compose on the computer.
- Work under deadline pressure.
- Organize information using typical news formats.
- Identify, and overcome, common forms of inaccuracy.
- Use English grammar and syntax to produce an elegant and engaging style of writing.
- Analyze news events and assign relative values to their significance.
- Think about basic governmental, social and economic processes.
- Evaluate news articles as to the competence they reflect in information gathering and presentation, in other words, their credibility.

## Course Structure

Each class session will be split between lecture/discussion and lab work. You should expect to work on a writing assignment in nearly every class. Some of these will be graded by your instructor while others will be reviewed by members of the class.

Because a large portion of your grade will depend on work that you produce during class, you should make every effort to attend every session.

## Grades

Your final grade will be based on a 1,000 point scale. You can earn points as follows:

- Up to 250 points for writing labs.
- Up to 100 points for participation.
- Up to 150 points for oral presentations, including style quizzes.
- Up to 100 points for the midterm exam.
- Up to 100 points for the final exam.
- Up to 100 points for the assigned book review.
- Up to 100 points for ongoing reading of current publications.
- Up to 100 points for a news analysis project.

Final letters grades will be based on the following scale:

A	930 to 1,000	C	700 to 759
AB	890 to 929	CD	650 to 699
B	810 to 889	D	600 to 649
BC	760 to 809	F	000 to 599

You must complete the assignments in each area. Even if you have enough points to receive a passing grade for the course without turning in a particular assignment, you must still do that assignment. Otherwise you will get an incomplete for the course.

**The cutoff points for grades are not negotiable. In other words, an 889 will translate into a B and will not be rounded up to an AB. It is possible that you will come within a handful of points for a higher grade, but if you wish to receive that higher grade, you must earn it, which you can do by putting maximum effort into each assignment.**

Because of the importance of careful writing, grades will be reduced for any and

all manner of errors, including spelling, grammar, style and factual inaccuracy. Missed deadlines will also lead to reduced scores.

### **I. In Class Writing Labs (250 points).**

You will have five article assignments that will be graded based on what you complete during class time. You have the option to rewrite any of these lab assignments for a higher grade, and you will likely find that these rewrites are one of the most important learning tools in the course.

You may rewrite such assignments a maximum of two times, but the second rewrite must be handed in no later than one week after the original assignment. Your original version must be handed in with each rewrite.

A higher grade is not automatic with rewrites, however. You should be careful not to introduce new errors and to respond to all of the problems that your instructor has noted. **Errors that are not corrected may be assessed a double penalty on the rewrite.**

In some cases, your best approach is simply to fix a specific mistake in your article, but in other cases you may need to completely rewrite your article. Sometimes when you fix one error, you call more attention to another error—perhaps one that your instructor overlooked initially.

### **II. Participation, Including Quizzes and Classroom Activities (100 points).**

You should complete the assigned reading before you come to class. As an added incentive, you may have unscheduled quizzes or reading worksheets (class preps). We will also have graded exercises based on material in the textbook.

You are also expected to contribute to class discussions.

### **III. Oral Presentations/Style Quizzes (150 points).**

While this class emphasizes the development of your skills in written communication, you will also have several opportunities to make oral presentations to the class. These presentations will be short and fairly informal, but they are also designed to contribute in a significant way to the learning that takes place this semester. You will be graded on such things as preparation, thoroughness, thoughtfulness and command of the subject matter. You are *strongly* encouraged to meet with your instructor in advance, which will likely ensure that you get full credit.

### **IV. Exams (200 points).**

There will be a midterm and final. Each will be worth 100 points.

### **V. Book Review (100 points).**

To expand your awareness of journalistic theory and practice, you will be required to prepare a three-page review of a book on some aspect of journalism. Keep in mind that a book review is not a book report. It is not a summary of the content of the book but rather a thoughtful reaction to that content. More specific instructions and a list of possible books to review will be provided.

### **VI. Ongoing Reading/Beat Coverage (100 points).**

For 10 weeks over the course of this semester, you will be required to track the

development of a single news topic, which will be of your own choosing, by reading articles that appear in current publications. In selecting articles for study, you are strongly advised to focus your attention on national newspapers that have attained a reputation for quality, such as The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and USA Today, all of which can be found in the Journalism Department's reading room and in Polk Library. You should also make use of the Internet to access the Web pages of major newspapers.

We will begin each class with a brief discussion of developments on your "beat." In addition you will hand in once a week (no later than the day of the first class meeting of the week) a list of the articles that you have read over the previous seven days. The listing must contain the headline, the name of the publication, the byline and the date that it appeared. This will be done using a class blog. In any case, it must be typed. Look at the example on the last page of this syllabus.

This exercise will help you prepare for your term project and is a relatively easy way to strengthen your grade for the course. You will receive one point for each article that you read up to a maximum of 10 per week. On average you should read seven articles a week to get credit equivalent to a C. Since this is a relatively easy way to boost your grade and improve your skills, you are encouraged to read more.

Each student will have a different beat. You may select from the following list or propose another topic, subject to the instructor's approval.

- |                         |                        |                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Federal government   | 8. Business & economy  | 15. Crime          |
| 2. Internet/new media   | 9. Politics            | 16. Education      |
| 3. TV & the movies      | 10. Legal system       | 17. Environment    |
| 4. Music                | 11. Europe             | 18. Health         |
| 5. Terrorism            | 12. Middle East/Africa | 19. Energy         |
| 6. A professional sport | 13. Asia               | 20. Defense        |
| 7. A collegiate sport   | 14. Latin America      | 21. Arts & culture |

## **VII. News Analysis Project (100 points).**

At the end of the semester, you will use your reading of current publications to prepare a short paper, three to five pages in length, in which you will discuss those qualities that are representative of the highest forms of news writing. You will do so by comparing and contrasting some of the articles that you have read during the course of the semester. Since you will refer specifically to some of these articles, you may want to make copies (paper or electronic) as you go along. More specific instructions for this project will be provided. You will also make an oral presentation describing your analysis of an article at some point during the semester.

## **Course Policies**

To the extent possible, class sessions will be conducted in a manner simulating the style and atmosphere of a working newsroom. Among other things, this means:

- You should get in the habit of addressing your instructor by his first name.
- You don't necessarily have to show up for class on time but should expect to be severely penalized (as much as 100 percent) for any assignments on which you fail to meet deadline. At a minimum, late assignments will be penalized at the rate of one-half letter grade per day.

- You had better have an extremely good reason for missing class. You will not be penalized directly for an absence, but unless you come to class you will not learn the skills you need to carry out the assignments on which you will be graded. As a wise man (I think it was Woody Allen) once said: “Ninety-eight percent of life is showing up.”
- Expect the unexpected.

### **Academic Integrity**

Don’t cheat. The university has rules and procedures that could lead to severe disciplinary action, including expulsion, for passing off someone else’s work as your own, which is sometimes called “plagiarism” and sometimes called “copying.”

### **The Difference Between College and TV**

College courses are not television programs. In other words, you should not switch your attention on and off when you pass through the doors of the classroom. A course can engage your mind for the entire semester, and much of your learning will occur outside of class meeting times. Some of this will occur on your own, but you should also interact with your instructor, either during breaks, after class or during his office hours.

In the classroom, don’t assume the role of a passive consumer of information. Class time will be more enjoyable, and will pass more quickly, if you engage with the material by, for example, taking notes, entering into class discussion or challenging points that you don’t agree with. Remember, the only dumb question is the one you don’t ask.

### **Special University Services**

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh is committed to providing reasonable accommodation to students with special needs. Contact the Dean of Students at 424-3100 (voice) or 424-1319 (TTY). The Web site is <http://www.uwosh.edu/dean/disabilities.htm>.

## Course Calendar

The following schedule is intended as a guide and may be subject to change.

DATE	TOPIC	READING	SKILLS/METHODS	LABS/ASSIGNMENTS DUE
9/6	Course introduction.	None.	Using Word, formatting articles.	Fault lines.
9/11	What's news.	Chapters 1 & 5.	News analysis checklist.	
9/13	Language of news.	Chapter 4.	Word doubles.	
9/18	Style.	Chapter 3.	Introduction to style.	Style quiz No. 1.
9/20	Grammar.	Chapter 2.	Common problems.	Practice Lab No. 1.
9/25	Leads (ledes).	Chapter 6.	The basics.	
9/27	More about leads.	Chapter 7.	Beyond the basics.	Practice Lab No. 2.
10/2	Story structure.	Chapter 8.	When to use which approach..	
10/4	Quotation and attribution.	Chapter 9.	Placement and punctuation.	Writing Lab No. 1.
10/9	The AP.	TBA.	Filing the wire.	
10/11	Interviews.	Chapter 10.	Turning notes into articles.	
10/16	Speeches and meetings.	Chapter 12.	Writing effective leads.	
10/18	COPS.	Chapter 15.	Reading an incident report.	Writing Lab No. 2.
10/23	Online writing.	Chapter 16.	Two-level writing.	
10/25				<b>MIDTERM EXAM</b>
10/30	Accidents.	Chapter 15.	What to report.	
11/1	Politics.	Chapter 13.	Story types.	Writing Lab No. 3.
11/6	Government.	Chapter 14.	Writing features.	
11/8	Broadcast.	Chapter 18.	Writing for time.	
11/13	Public relations.	Chapter 19.	Press releases.	
11/15	Numbers.	Chapter 17.	Excel.	Writing Lab No. 4. Book Review.
11/20	Business writing.	Chapter 22.	Reading financial tables.	
11/27	Sports reporting.	Chapter 21.	Beyond the score.	
11/29	Science.	TBA,	Fairness and balance.	
12/4	Obits.	Chapter 11.	Life in death.	Writing Lab No. 5.
12/6	Getting ready for the final.		Writing the advance.	News analysis paper. Advance article for final.
12/11	Legal and ethical concerns.	Chapter 20.	Understanding legal limits on journalists.	
12/13				<b>FINAL EXAM.</b>

## **SAMPLE FORMAT FOR WEEKLY BEAT REPORTS**

1. GOP Senators Push to Overhaul Energy Policy

Chicago Tribune

Lizette Alvarez

Feb. 27, 2001

2. Bill Fights Alaska Refuge Drilling

The New York Times

The Associated Press

Feb. 28, 2001

3. California Utility Woes Also Hurt Companies Owned by Minorities

The New York Times

No byline

Feb. 28, 2001

4. Battle Over Alaska Begins

Chicago Tribune

Michael Killian

March 1, 2001

5. Cutting Costs? Don't Forget About the Water Heater

Chicago Tribune

James Cummings

March 2, 2001

6. California Municipalities Mull Power Business

The New York Times

Reuters

March 4, 2001

7. Experts: California Should Vary Prices

The New York Times

The Associated Press

March 4, 2001

8. Power Crunch Threatening Salmon

Chicago Tribune

V. Dion Haynes

March 5, 2001