

## **Course Content**

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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.

By the end of this term, you should be able to complete the following tasks:

- Given a published article, you can classify it as a feature or straight news.
- Given a lede, you can evaluate its strengths and weaknesses according to accepted professional standards.
- Given a sentence that depends on using the correct alternative from a set of words that have similar sounds or similar meanings, you can select the appropriate word.
- Given a sentence or part of a sentence that has an AP style error in it, you can use the AP Stylebook to find and fix the error.
- Given an article written for print, you can recast it as a broadcast script that meets a specified time requirement.
- Given an article written for print, you can recast it for publication on the Web.
- Given a set of facts and quotations along with a marketing objective, you can write a press release.
- Given a news topic (beat) that you have been reading about over the course of the term, you can identify the major developments during that time and describe them in concise, grammatical English writing.
- Given an assignment that requires the use of a blog or a wiki, you will be able to create content in an appropriate format for such programs.
- Given a published news article, you can evaluate it on the basis of the quality of the lede, the thoroughness of the reporting, the appropriateness of the vocabulary and the logic of the organizational structure.
- Given a set of facts and interview notes, you can write an accurate, engaging news article in the inverted pyramid style that is about 300 to 500 words in length and that conforms to the rules of English grammar and the AP Stylebook.

Miles Maguire is an associate professor of journalism who teaches writing, editing and reporting.

He has worked in almost all sectors of the field of journalism, including newspapers and magazines, public relations, advertising, and the Internet. He is originally from Baltimore and earned a bachelor's degree in English from the University of Maryland College Park (where he became a lifelong Terrapin basketball fan) and a master's degree in business administration from Loyola College in Maryland.

His hobbies include reading, writing and gardening. He and his wife recently acquired a coonhound-beagle puppy who consumes all the rest of his spare time.

This course consists of 20 units, one per day over the first summer session. For each unit you will be expected to engage in one or more of the following kinds of tasks: doing the assigned reading, participating in an online discussion, reviewing supplemental materials (such as PowerPoints or audio files) and completing written exercises. All activities will be completed online, using Desire2Learn (D2L) or in some cases e-mail.

If this is your first online course, don't worry—it's my first online course, too. We'll learn along the way and make adjustments as necessary.

An obvious benefit to an online class is the freedom it provides in that students do not need to commute to campus or even to show up at a particular time. But assignments still need to be completed, and deadlines need to be met. For any given day, you will generally get 24 hours to complete the assigned reading, discussion, quizzes and exercises. On most days you can choose when to complete your assignments, but there will be some cases when you may want to get feedback from your instructor and you will need to make allowances in your schedule for that to happen.

On a typical day, you will receive an e-mail from me, highlighting the main points of the day's content, pointing you to relevant links and reminding you of specific activities that are due that day. I am thinking of sending these out by 10 a.m. each morning, but if enough people would prefer to have them earlier, or later, I will consider alternatives. You will find day-by-day summaries in D2L so that you can look ahead and see what we will be covering.

The course will proceed over four weeks, and each week will have a different focus.

Our first week will be an introduction to the basics, covering some key points in how the language is used in the communications industry and some key concepts about journalism.

- Day 1: Introduction
- Day 2: Grammar & spelling
- Day 3: Newswriting style
- Day 4: The language of news
- Day 5: News selection

The second week will use these elements as building blocks, and we will look at the major components of a news article, including leads, transitions and quotes

- Day 6: Basic ledes (or leads)
- Day 7: More about ledes
- Day 8: Alternative ledes
- Day 9: The body of a news story
- Day 10: Using quotations

In the third week, we will put these pieces together to write complete news articles of various types, including features.

- Day 11: Obituaries
- Day 12: Speeches
- Day 13: Specialized types of stories
- Day 14: Features
- Day 15: Government stories

In the fourth week we will work on using the principles of news writing in different formats and contexts, including press releases, the Internet and broadcast.

- Day 16: Broadcast writing
- Day 17: Writing for the Web
- Day 18: Press releases
- Day 19: Legal & ethical issues
- Day 20: Final exam

There will be two longer-term projects that you will complete over a period of several weeks. These are described in the next section.

During this course you will get to work with two of the more important tools of what's called "Web 2.0," which is essentially the Internet as a device for interactivity as contrasted with "Web 1.0," which refers to the use of the Internet as a one-way mechanism for disseminating information. These two Web 2.0 tools are blogs and wikis.

We will use the blog for a project called "beat reading," in which you will track the development of a single news topic 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.

This exercise will expose you to professional writing in the media and help to alert you to models and examples that you can use in your own writing. It is also a relatively easy way to strengthen your grade for the course.

To get credit you will make a total of 10 blog postings. In each posting, you will briefly summarize an article that you have read on your beat and you will offer a brief critical analysis of the article based on some of the things you are learning about journalistic writing. You will get more detailed instructions at a later date, but at this point just note the emphasis on being brief. Brevity is one of the keys to successful blogging. You are not expected to write a lot for this assignment, but what you write should be worth reading.

We will use a class wiki as a group learning tool to help gain greater familiarity with the AP Stylebook, which is the main handbook on writing that is used throughout the American journalism profession. In this exercise, you will take an assigned part of the stylebook, read it carefully and provide some tips to your fellow students about what to be careful of when applying AP style. Again, you will get detailed instructions at a later date.

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

- Up to 150 points for quizzes and exercises based on the assigned reading.
- Up to 150 points for participation in online discussions, including peer critiques
- Up to 100 points for beat reading/blogging.
- Up to 400 points for individual writing assignments.
- Up to 100 points for your contributions to a class wiki on AP style.
- Up to 100 points for a final exam.

Final letters grades will be based on the following scale:

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

## Required texts

The required texts for this course are:

- "Reporting for the Media" (9th edition), Bender, et al.
- Associated Press 2008 (or 2009) Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law.

This course requires the following technology:

- A Web browser capable of accessing D2L. Firefox is the recommended browser for both Windows and Mac although others may also be used.
- Microsoft Word.
- Multimedia capabilities with speakers.

A high-speed Internet connection is recommended but not required. The faster connection will make the course easier and faster.