Journalism 413

Feature Writing
Fall 2012
Monday and Wednesday 8-10:10 a.m.
3412 Sage Hall

Professor: Dr. Vincent Filak
Office: 3487 Sage Hall
Office Hours: MTW 10:10 – 11:20 or by appointment
Email: filakv@uwosh.edu or vffilak@gmail.com
Phone: 424-0352

"To avoid criticism: Say nothing, do nothing, be nothing."
-Fred "The Fog" Sherro

Introduction

Fluff.

When you say to someone in the field that you're working on a feature, this is often the word that immediately pops into that person's head. Features are often derided as fluff, soft news, easy stories or even, as one of my worst bosses noted, "that weirdo of the week stuff."

Features, of course, can be soft news. They can be a quick look at the handprint paper turkeys a first-grade class is making or a story about the opening of a business, a civic group getting a check or something else that fits that "light bright" mode. However, features are more than that. They are deeper looks at simple mysteries of life, like why is it we've got hundreds of types of mustard but only a couple types of ketchup? They are broader looks at people, places and things of interest. They are historical reviews of key events at the 20, 30 or 50-year milepost.

Features require a great deal of time and energy. They require you to use all of your senses to provide depth, richness and context for your readers. They require you to paint word pictures that place the reader in the shoes of whichever character you deem necessary or in whichever situation you see fit. In short, they take more reporting than your standard news stories and better writing that your common fiction story.

The point of this course is to introduce you to various types of deeper features while helping you to intensify your perception of the world around you. In doing so, we will all be more able to use our senses to report in a way that better serves the audience.

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

• Draw from your basic writing skills and improve them
• Write a variety of feature stories
• Better use your senses as reporting tools, going beyond what you can see
• Generate story ideas and develop them into feature stories
• Use several interviews and outside research to develop longer-form pieces
• Reach beyond your areas of comfort to find stories of interest
• Draw from a variety of pools of research to create a well-rounded piece
• Prepare for and conduct deeper interviews geared toward telling deeper stories
• Write queries
• Understand the ethical boundaries of narrative writing

Course Texts

"The Bigger Picture: Elements of Feature Writing," by Ivor Shapiro
The Associated Press Stylebook. Get the most recent edition. Bring this to every class. Conversely, you can subscribe to AP online for about the same cost and it's searchable.
A good dictionary. If you don't have one, buy one. It's a decent investment.

You should also get used to reading feature stories in various media. Vanity Fair, the New Yorker, most good Sunday metros and other places are great sources. The only way to get good at writing about stuff is to read a lot.

Policy on Academic Misconduct

Cheating and plagiarism are prohibited. Whatever you do for this class must be done on your own, unless expressly noted during class. You'll note that journalistic credibility has taken a beating over the past few years and that trust isn't a boomerang: once you throw it away, it doesn't come back. The best place to start holding yourself to a decent ethical code is right here and right now. Academic dishonesty, including but not limited to plagiarizing and cheating, is a death knell for your program and your career as a journalist. The best way to make sure you aren't messing up is to ask me in advance of doing whatever it is you think might be problematic. If you don't and you get caught, the university will deal with you and that can range from probation to expulsion. The university website contains a list of procedures regarding dishonesty. I will follow those procedures.

In addition to what the University considers to be cheating, here is what I consider to be "unethical"
-Creating your own news event
-Falsifying your research (Additionally, a "wiki" anything is not a source)
-Lying to sources (or lying in general)
-Interviewing friends/family as "ordinary people"
-Turning in other's work as your own
-Using stuff out of the paper verbatim/without checking on it for yourself
-Claiming full credit for a co-authored piece
-Giving me a "second run" story

Policy on Attendance

Yes, I know this is an 8 a.m. class. Yes, I know the A-T's production night is Wednesday and half of you work there. Yes, I know many of you work night jobs. Still, you chose this class. I need you here.

Each person gets two absences. I don't care if you use them for illness, bad weather, because you're going to a concert in Milwaukee (actual excuse) or because you just didn't feel like it. If you notify me that you'll be missing class prior to class, I'll mark it as one of your two absences and you'll be excused that day. Any additional work associated with that day will need to be picked up from a classmate or me. If you do not notify me prior to class, you'll still lose one of your absences but you'll get a zero for all work we complete that day. Any absences beyond the two absences will lead to drastic reductions on your participation grade.

Policy on Sources

You need to reach beyond people that are easiest for you to contact. Thus, any story you're assigned to cover CAN NOT include anyone in the journalism department or any of your family members. Best friends and significant others are off limits. Acquaintances are fine. The only exception to this rule is if the family/friend/journalism faculty member is the only source who can answer the questions you need answered (e.g. Your best friend is the head of the student government and you're working on a student government story) or the primary news source (e.g. The department chair is named dean (or kills six people with an axe) and you get an interview.)

Statement for Students With Special Needs

The university's policies regarding disability will be followed here. Contact the dean of students at 424-3100 or head to the web at: http://www.uwosh.edu/dean/disabilities.htm for information. The university and I will make every reasonable effort to accommodate students with disabilities.

Grading

The grades in this class aren't nearly as important as what you learn and how you progress as a writer and reporter. If you make this all about the grades, you will deprive yourself of a great opportunity to learn these skills and you will be kicking yourself later in life. As for getting out of here alive, the department and the university set the standards. **Students must earn at least a "C" to continue in the major or the minor.**

Don't panic about bombing out. I have found that students who operate that way often find themselves the victims of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Grades will be assigned on the following scale:

100-91	Outstanding work. Work that is ready for publication
90-81	Above average. With minor revisions and editing, it could run.
80-70	Average. Work requires some editing/additional info/revision.
69-60	Below Average/Poor. Requires some major changes.
59-41	Failing. Paper has inherent problems in reporting/writing.
40-0	Beyond problematic. Work that is unacceptable because of factual, spelling or other major errors or reporter missed deadline.

Official course grades:

A	**100-91**	**C**	**78-71**
A-	**90-89**	**C-**	**70**
B+	**88**	**D+**	**69**
B	**87-81**	**D**	**68-61**
B-	**80**	**D-**	**60**
C+	**79**	**F**	**59-0**

Major ways you can cost yourself points:

You will be graded on three basic areas: reporting, writing and style. While much of this will be subjective, here is a discussion of those areas and how to grade for them.

Reporting:
This grading area is meant to determine how well a student researched a topic and how much of the important information they garnered from that search. When I'm grading you for reporting, I'll be asking the following questions:

Is all of the necessary information here?
Can I understand the whole story based on what has been presented?
Has the material been presented equally and fairly?
Are all of the student's facts correct?
Have the appropriate people been interviewed?
Does it emphasize any of the elements of news value?
Does this provide the proper level and type of reporting for the piece?
Has the student properly incorporated background information necessary to understand the story?
Does the reporting adequately add to the texture of the piece?

If you're missing half the story, you're likely to be missing half (or more) of your points in this area. Weakness in background or a little imbalance between the sides is likely to cost you a good chunk of points. Occasionally, you'll see a story that loses a few points due to minor pieces that are missing. I'll do my best to keep pointing these out to you.

BIG TIP:
Factual errors will cost you ½ of your reporting grade per error. If that factual error is a misspelled proper noun (name of a person, place, company etc.) you'll get a ZERO for that section of the assignment. Accuracy is the paragon of our virtues. You screw that up, you might as well pack it up and find a new major.

Writing:
The information in the story may be terrible, but it may be immaculately constructed. Conversely, all the facts may be in place but it is written so poorly that you couldn't find all the pieces with a map and a compass. This is where the writing grade comes in. In grading the writing you should ask the following questions:

Does the introductory paragraphs grab me and draw me into the piece?
Is there a nut graph and does it help provide a strong synopsis of what the piece will entail?
Are the sentences well written or are they awkward?
Is the story easy to understand?
Is there flow to the whole story?
Does it have a beginning, a middle and an end?
Does the writing transition between sentences, paragraphs and ideas?
Does the story have subheads where necessary and do they avoid interrupting the flow?
Does the story make proper use of description and feel?
Are sentences paced or are there really long and then really short sentences without rhyme or reason?
Is the story clear or do vague notions abound?
Is the story lean or is there a lot of flab?
Do I feel like I've fully engaged with the material?

A great story has a point, tells you what it is and moves you through the facts in an orderly and proficient manner. I usually know a well-written story when I have gotten to the end and haven't stopped to make a mark on it. That is when it flows. The more I have to stop and scratch my head, the lower the grade is likely to be in this area.

Style:
Style is one of those areas that can make the difference between an A and a B or a B and a C. It is imperative that reporters get used to the AP style guide and the guide of their own papers. Editors don't have the time to fix all the style errors. Most errors in this section are caused by sloppiness. By knocking you a bit for style, it helps you get used to using the book, checking spellings and making sure you are using the proper words. Although some students have really racked up the points in this area, I have a policy of using 0 as the lowest number they can get in this area. No negatives. Point deductions are below:

AP Style: Since you'll be writing longer pieces, you have more chances to make errors than in previous classes. Thus, we'll cut the penalty in half. You lose 10 points off the style score for each AP error. That means, if you write "Riverview Ct." two times, you're already down to 80 points for your style grade.

In-Class Style: Same deal here. Several aspects of structure, grammar and spelling will be emphasized to improve your writing. For each violation of those rules (as they are introduced), you lose 5 points. That means, you write "said Smith" or keep slipping a "D" between "I" and the "G" of "religion," you'll be costing your 5 points an error.

Other point deductions will be noted within the text of your story.

Course Assignments

Small Stuff: 15 percent
We'll be doing short things like light-brights, how-tos and scene setters. We'll also do some in-class stuff that will require some writing and such. The idea with these items is give you some practice at some of the things you'll be asked to do later in the semester. It'll also give you a couple chances to pick up some short writing pieces.

Big Four: 50 percent
You will receive four story assignments, each with a different focus. You must complete three of them as noted, but you get a choice between the last two. Each week you will be expected to have copies for discussion with your group members and me. The groups and group numbers will be set later in the semester. You are responsible for not only the final draft, but also making sure that you bring rough drafts and that you actively critique each other's work. This should be a learning process. Even people at professional newspapers find that input from coworkers helps them out a lot. Deadlines may seem tight, but quite often you have only hours to pull together stories of this nature. Also,

keep this in the back of your mind: You can lose points for typos, misspellings, vagueness etc. These are things that can nickel and dime you to death in the point category. However, it's worth repeating that the worst thing you can do is make a factual error. The idea being, you have enough time to get it right so make sure you know what you are talking about. These will be discussed in more detail later in the semester.

Sources must be listed for all things you used for each of your articles. Citations of live people must have names, titles and phone numbers. Example: Bill Smith, head of student government, 555-1212 (or email: smithb@uwosh.edu). You should interview people I can contact so that I can verify the interview, quotes and facts in your story. Anonymous sources are discouraged but allowed on rare occasion if you have my prior approval. Documentary sources should be listed as in a normal bibliography. Example: "Officials Reviewing Limits on Arts Funding." The New York Times June 14, 1990, p. C16. **Failure to list sources will cost you 20 points off the story's final grade. Falsifying sources constitutes academic dishonesty and will be dealt with as such.**

Participation: 10 percent
We're going to be doing a number of in-class activities and discussing a variety of pieces. This will be more of a cohort approach to the class than your standard lecture. You'll need to be willing to try new things and you'll need to be willing to speak your mind. This is an easy portion of your grade to earn.

Final: 25 percent
The final project will be a multi-media project that integrates both your digital skills and your storytelling ability. It will be on a topic of your choosing and will demonstrate a wide array of skills including: audio, visuals, Web, links, depth writing and more. We'll spend more time on this throughout the course.

All assignments will be dealt with digitally. Deadlines for assignments will be set in class and the expectation is that I'll receive your work via email no later than that deadline. If you are having trouble email, contact me and we'll work something out. Don't wait until after the deadline has passed to get in touch with me.

Extra Credit:
Traditionally, I don't give extra credit for a course, but you can improve on your grades through the publication of your work in any reputable news or feature publication. This includes both your campus newspaper and the city newspaper. This does not include your own personal blog or something set up by a friend as part of a shell game. Whether this counts or not is at my discretion.

For each of the Big Four, if you get it published, I will add two points to your final grade for that story. This can equal eight points total or a 4 percentage point boost to your course grade if they are all published. It is up to you to work with the editors at these institutions to make this happen. To qualify for the credit, I need you to alert me to the story via email with a link to the specific piece.

Class Schedule:

(Assume it's solid for now. We can change as needs arise.)

Week of Sept. 3
Monday: NO CLASS
Wednesday: Intro to class. How do you get started?

Week of Sept. 10
Monday: Getting an idea: Birthing a feature
Wednesday: LAB- Improving your vocabulary
READING: Shapiro, Ch. 1; Gladwell, "Ketchup Conundrum;" Jones, "Cashing in on Crayfish."

Week of Sept. 17
Monday: Style and Structure of a feature
Wednesday: Story Types: Scene Setter and telling pictures
READING: Shapiro, Chs. 4 & 7; Mullens, "The Sixty-Storey Crisis;" Smith, "As time runs out"
ASSIGNMENT: Scene Setter. Draft due Wednesday in class. Final version due Friday by noon via email.

Week of Sept. 24
Monday: Research; Interviews
Wednesday: Discuss Scene Setter; Story Types: The news feature
Friday: Scene Setter Due via email by noon.
READING: Shapiro, Chs. 3 & 5; Vaillant, "The Golden Bough;" Healy, "The boy the killers didn't take."; Gladwell, "Dangerous Minds."
ASSIGNMENT: News Feature. Draft due in class Monday, Oct. 8. Final due Friday, Oct. 12 by noon via email.

Week of Oct. 1
Monday: Story type: The Profile
Wednesday: LAB- Feel it
READING: Sales, "Tabloid Spiral;" Collins, "Pixel Perfect;" Bass, "Riding with the King;"
ASSIGNMENT: Profile. Draft due in class Monday, Oct. 22. Final due Friday, Oct. 26 by noon via email.

Week of Oct. 8
Monday: Review news feature drafts; When you've got writer's block
Wednesday: LAB- Smell it
Friday: News feature due by noon via email.
READING: Shapiro, Ch. 8

Week of Oct. 15
Monday: Story Types: Multimedia features; Rest of lab for starting feature.
Wednesday: LAB: Multimedia workshop.
READING: Hayes, "Die Hard"
ASSIGNMENT: Simple multimedia feature. Final due to D2L digital drop box by Friday, Nov. 2 by noon.

Week of Oct. 22
Monday: Review draft of profiles; Discuss final project
Wednesday: LAB- Work on profiles: One on ones.
Friday: Profile due by noon.

Week of Oct. 29
Monday: Freelancing and the art of query letters
Wednesday: NO LECTURE: Open lab for your Multimedia feature
Friday: Multimedia final due by noon.
READING: None
ASSIGNMENT: NONE

Week of Nov. 5
Monday: Story Types: How Tos
Wednesday: Story Types: Historical piece
READING: Howe, "Legacy of a Lynching" (parts 1-5); Wolff, "Tonelli's Run."
ASSIGNMENT: How To assignment. Draft due Monday Nov. 12. Final due Friday Nov. 16 by noon via email.

Week of Nov. 12
Monday: Immersion reporting; Review How to drafts.
Wednesday: Story Types: Personal participation; How to one on ones.
Friday: How to final due by noon.
READING: Shapiro, Ch. 6; Kapitan, "Prayers for Rachael;" Healy, "Last Days of Freedom;" Plummer, "Farming;" Xiong, "ROTC"
ASSIGNMENT: YOUR CHOICE: Do either a Personal participation or Historical piece. Draft due in class Monday, Dec. 3. Final Due Friday, Dec. 7 by noon via email.

Week of Nov. 19
Monday: Journalistic Toast: Why you burn out and how to avoid it.
Wednesday: OFF THANKSGIVING

Week of Nov. 26
Monday: When write goes wrong: Ethics and more
Wednesday: Lecture: You pick.
READING: Shapiro, Ch. 10; Cooke, "Jimmy's World"; Glass, "Hack Heaven"

Week of Dec. 3
Monday: Review drafts of personal participation/historical piece; Last-minute questions
Wednesday: Evals; One on ones.
Friday: Personal Participation/historical piece due by noon.
READING: NONE

Week of Dec. 10
WORK ON YOUR FINAL PROJECT
EXTENDED OFFICE HOURS/LAB TIME
READING: NONE