

Reporting—Spring 2008
Journalism 61-327, Section A01/Clow 150
Tuesdays & Thursdays 10:20 p.m. to 12:30 p.m.

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Required Texts & Materials:

- “Considering Genius,” Crouch.
- The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law (2007 or earlier version).
- A pocket-sized or steno notebook for interviewing.
- Pens or pencils.

Optional Equipment

- A cell phone with voicemail or an answering machine with remote access. (Helpful but not critically important for this course.)
- A handheld voice recorder. (There are pros and cons to this. The department has a limited number that it can lend to students on a short-term basis.)

Course Content

Reporting is, without a doubt, the best job in the world.

Reporters get not just a front row seat on history but also the opportunity to get up from that seat and affect history. And then, when they want, they get to sit back down.

Reporters get treated like royalty, sometimes; they also get treated like trash. Reporters get to travel to the top of the town, and they also get to see life’s underside. Reporters get to meet the most fascinating people in the world. They get to ask intimate, inappropriate questions, and no matter how boorish their behavior they almost always get invited back.

Sometimes reporters feel like pinballs—bouncing from one story to the next, repeatedly changing speed and direction, and setting off lights and noises as they move along. The good ones are rarely bored.

This course is designed to introduce you to the basics of reporting, a discipline that is built upon three interconnected activities: gathering information, evaluating information and communicating information.

Course Objectives

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

- Ground yourself in current issues and events.
- Develop and apply news judgment.
- Identify and cultivate sources.
- Use standard research methods and techniques.
- Evaluate and synthesize information that is inconsistent or even contradictory.
- Write articles on a variety of topics.
- Assess the quality of others’ reporting and writing.

All of this boils down to just three essentials that we will try to develop this semester. We will work on improving writing skills, interpersonal skills and critical analysis skills. Indicators of good writing can be found in areas such as vocabulary, AP style and sentence structure. Your interpersonal skills are reflected in such things as your ability to put yourself in uncomfortable situations, your ability to put others at ease and your ability to maintain your poise even when dealing with difficult people and questions. Critical analysis is sometimes described as skepticism, and good reporters are always skeptical both of what others are saying and of what they themselves think they know. Critical analysis is based on an awareness and appreciation of the complexity of human existence and leads good reporters to mirror that complexity in their articles.

Course Activities

The core of this course is a series of reporting assignments designed to provide you with a wide range of experiences, from sporting events to politics to crime to contemporary music and more. You must take a stab at all of the assignments, but you will have some flexibility in choosing how many and which ones to be graded on. The truth is that you will get better at this the more of it that you do, and I highly recommend that you try your best to carry at least 10 of these assignments through to completion.

In addition to reporting these articles, students will engage in other activities that are designed to broaden their skill set and improve their chances for employment in the rapidly changing communications industry. It is becoming increasingly clear that students should expand their use of online tools and technology as some employers are expecting that prospective hires have considerable experience with blogging and familiarity with multimedia production tools. We will spend some time in class working with this software, and students are encouraged to explore further on their own.

A good reporter takes an expansive view of the world and is attuned to developments in politics and in culture. An awareness of political and cultural life helps a reporter prepare for specific assignments and also provides a context that makes it easier for a reporter to connect with readers. We will use readings and related projects to help you engage with politics and contemporary culture.

As you work on your assignments you will be aided by a particular reporting methodology that we will study this semester. This methodology will help guide your reporting so that your reports are thorough, well-rounded and fair. Fortunately it is flexible enough that it can be applied in all of the story situations that you will encounter.

As much as possible, we will focus our attention on reporting about events that occur on or near campus. In some cases, you will use class time to go out and seek out sources. Some additional reporting will have to be completed outside of class time. To the extent possible, scheduled class time will be shortened on those occasions when you are expected to do substantial outside reporting. If your schedule prevents you from covering a particular event outside of class, you can propose an alternative assignment.

We will be covering actual events as they come up during the course of the semester, and

your instructor will attempt to craft assignments based on those events. This should make the course more interesting, but it may also require significant changes to the planned course schedule and syllabus. **Students will receive ample notice of such changes if they become necessary.**

Grades

Your final grade will be based primarily on the average score you have received on a minimum of seven articles, including four mandatory assignments. Articles that you complete beyond the minimum will most likely add to your semester grade.

Articles will be graded according to the following guidelines:

A = The story is thoroughly reported and well written. It is ready for publication with no changes. (100 points)

AB = The story is pretty good. It requires one or two minor edits, to clarify facts or improve writing, before publication. (90 points)

B = The story is OK, but the reporter must do some additional work. A story that gets a B might have such flaws as some small amounts of missing information, structural problems, and a few grammar, punctuation or AP errors. (80 points)

BC = The story is not ready for publication without major fixes. It may be missing critical information. Also, the story may have structural flaws and multiple writing problems, such as word choice, grammar, punctuation or AP errors. (70 points)

C = The student must rework the story completely. The reporting is insufficient, and the writing is weak. (60 points)

CD = The student needs to start the assignment over and rethink what the story is. (50 points)

D = The student has not produced a story that can be edited into usable form. Far too little reporting has been done. (40 points)

F = The story would prove a liability to the reporter or publisher. These stories often contain factual errors, such as the misspelling of a proper name. (zero points)

You will get an F for any story in which you misspell the name of a source or include a factual error.

You will have three supplemental assignments, involving media criticism via a blog, political commentary in the form of a letter to the editor and online production using a fun little program called SoundSlides. Each will be worth 10 percent of your final grade.

From time to time during the course of the semester, your instructor will provide you with an indication of your current grade. If you have any questions of where you stand at any time, please feel free to discuss this with your instructor.

Extra Credit

You can receive extra credit for articles that you publish in the Advance-Titan during this semester. Your grade will go up half a letter grade if you publish at least 10 articles, and it will go up a full letter grade if you publish 20. You must provide copies of these articles to your

instructor in order to receive this credit.

You can also receive a boost of half a letter grade for each article assigned for this class if you show it to your main source and obtain feedback about the accuracy and quality of the article.

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 10 percent of the total points available per day that the assignment is not available for grading, including weekends, holidays and other days that the instructor is not on campus.
- 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. Some assignments will be done during class, which means if you are not present you not be able to earn the points associated with those assignments. 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, aka plagiarism. But most significantly, you are cheating yourself if you do not do your own work.

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 fellow students and your instructor, which you can do 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. Please contact the Dean of Students office at 424-3100 (voice) or 424-1319 (TTY). The Web site is <http://www.uwosh.edu/dean/disabilities.htm>. Information related to requests for special accommodations or arrangements will be confidential and shared with relevant university personnel on a "need to know" basis.

Course Calendar

The following schedule is intended as a guide and may be subject to change. Any revised due dates will be announced in class with ample warning.

DATE	TOPIC	READING	SKILLS/METHODS	DUE
2/5	Weather.		DOT.	
2/7	Weather.	"Martin's Tempo."		Weather (must).
2/12	Obits.	"Late, Late Blues."	Reader reaction.	
2/14	Profiles.	"Live at the Village Vanguard."	First impressions.	.
2/19	Media critiques.	"Blue To Be Constitutional."	Formulating stories.	
2/21		Start "Prologue."	Asking questions; taking notes.	Obit.
2/26	Covering an event.	Complete "Prologue."	Using quotes; reader reaction.	
2/28	Stanley Crouch.			
3/4	Revisions workshop.		Writing to be read.	Profile draft
3/6	Science.		Taking notes.	Profile (must).
3/11	Civic engagement.		Basic math.	
3/13				Science.
3/18	Cops.		Fostering skepticism.	
3/20	Labor.			Crime (must).
4/1	SoundSlides.			
4/3	Education.			Local government.
4/8	Editing audio.			
4/10	Courts.			Education.
4/15				
4/17	Sports.			Courts.
4/22				
4/24	Higher ed.			Labor.
4/29				
5/1				Sports.
5/6	Music/arts.	"Piano Prodigy."		
5/8				Campus.
5/13				
5/15				Music/arts.