

# Journalism 327

Reporting  
Winter 2009

Tuesday and Thursday 8-10:10 a.m.

Professor: Dr. Vincent Filak

Office: 106F Clow

Office Hours: MW 8:30-10:20 a.m. & TR 10:10 – 11:20 or by appointment

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*“Learning is not child’s play. We cannot learn without pain.”*  
-Aristotle

## Introduction

If you aspire to enter the ranks of the journalist, this will be, without a doubt, one of the most demanding and yet enjoyable classes of your college career. If you don’t, you may spend the rest of your life wondering, “Why did I subject myself to this?”

Here’s the disclaimer right up front: This class will challenge you more than any class up to this point in your studies. It is work-intensive, writing-intensive and if you start to miss things, this class can run you over. This is not meant to scare you, nor is it meant to discourage you, but I have had students come back to me after the first story and tell me, “This is, like, hard. It’s not like creative writing at all!”

This section is aimed at teaching you the basics of news writing and reporting along with giving you real-world scenarios and problems that you will have to cope with. I will demand no more and no less than an editor at a real paper. You will be forced to work under real newspaper conditions. These include: deadline pressure, wading through a ton of information, working with not enough information, fact checking, style questions and news value.

## Course Texts

News Writing and Reporting (9<sup>th</sup> Edition). The Missouri Group

The Associated Press Stylebook (any edition within the past 3 years) Bring this to every class.

A good dictionary. If you don’t have one, buy one. It’s a decent investment.

In addition, you are expected to read the Advance-Titan, The Oshkosh Northwestern and at least one other newspaper. You might also want to develop a habit of checking in on major news websites and television operations, including local news agencies and CNN.

Finally, you’ll want to own a decent reporter’s notebook. If you want, you can purchase a voice recorder to do interviews. It’s not required, but it can be helpful.

## **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**

Quizzes and in-class writing assignments will be conducted in class. In addition, you'll be getting information in class that you can't get anywhere else. You're paying for this class, so I'd imagine you would want to get your money's worth. That said, as incentive, here is the attendance policy:

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 from any quiz 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 count for zeroes for all work completed in class that day.

## 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:

100-91= A, 90-88= AB, 87-81= B, 80-79= BC, 78-70= C, 69= CD, 68-60= D, 59-0= F

## 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?
- Are all sides of the issue 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?
- Has the student properly incorporated background information necessary to understand the story?

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 lead tell the story?
- 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?
- 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?

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:** You lose 20 points off the style score for each AP error. That means, if you write "Riverview Ct." two times, you're already down to 60 points for your style grade.

**In-Class Style:** 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 10 points. That means, you write "said Smith" or keep slipping a "D" between "I" and the "G" of "religion," you'll be costing your 10 points a crack.

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

## **Course Assignments**

Grades and assignments are not meant to be punitive. However, since the university does require the grades, here are the assignments for the class and what they're worth:

### **In-class and out-of-class writing/exercises: 10 percent**

You are expected to show up EVERY DAY. I understand deaths in the family, emergency surgery etc. If possible, let me know ahead of time. If not, I expect a good explanation of what went wrong. Your grade on this will include:

- In-class activities
- Briefs and cutlines
- Speech stories
- Looking like you are alive. (No heads on the desks, please)

In addition to the work we do in class, there will be some out-of-class writing you will be expected to do beyond the five main stories you'll do. That will be noted on the schedule throughout the year.

### **Major story assignments: 40 percent**

You will receive five story assignments, each with a different focus. 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](mailto: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 two points off the story's final grade. Falsifying sources constitutes academic dishonesty and will be dealt with as such.**

### **Quizzes: 10 percent**

For quizzes, you will be expected to know AP style, current events and current readings. This may seem like a ton of information but if you are going to pursue any career in journalism, you are going to have to know this stuff cold. Current events questions will come from one of the papers you are required to read. If a story is on-going, the only way to keep up with it is to read the paper every day. Read the AP book. Each week you will get another healthy dosage of the AP guide. It may seem like you are reading a dictionary but if you need to know if you are using proper style in a moment's notice, that guide is your saving grace.

### **Mid-term Exam: 15 percent**

This is not the standard, memorize and regurgitate exam. This is a live event of my choosing that will be covered in class. Your job will be to listen, find news value and write a story on what just occurred as if you were trying to make a deadline at a paper. The specifics of this will be discussed later in the term.

### **Final Exam/Assignment: 15 percent**

This will be an extended news article that will require a lot of research. It will be on a topic of your choice (but I need to OK it) and involve at least five sources. It will cover a topic of current interest or debate. Do NOT wait until the last minute to get cracking on this one. Deadline also applies to this story.

### **Professionalism/Participation: 10 percent**

This is probably the most important part of your grade, even though it is among the smallest. The grade part of this is not like every other class where if you show up you get an easy chunk of A. When you operate as a reporter, you will be representing the newspaper/ organization you are working for. You need to show the people you talk to that you are not a fool or a child. You need to operate with the utmost care and perform difficult tasks in a seemingly effortless fashion. How I will judge this includes the way I see you work in class, the kinds of things you do when we go into the field and my contact with the people you have as sources. Good Reporter's Motto: No Whining.

All assignments will be dealt with digitally. We're going to try to save some trees. It'll also be easier for you all to read my comments if we're doing this 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.

### **A Few Final Reminders**

1. Late assignments will not be tolerated. Sorry, but if you miss a deadline at a paper, firm or station, you can embarrass yourself and your editor. You can cost the place thousands of dollars each minute you are late. You are given ample time to finish the task set in front of you. Make the time for this or you will hate yourself.
2. Learning is the most important part of this class. Yes, grades matter, but the skills you acquire here are the most important thing to take away from here. I know people who were "C" students in this type of class who have landed jobs in major markets. The reason why? They took what they were told and incorporated it into their approach to journalism. If you approach this class as something you have to "get through" you will have deprived yourself of a great opportunity to learn.
3. This class is a time suck. It will take more than putting aside an hour or two the day before something is due. The interviewing you will do will take time to set up. If it is near deadline time, most of the procrastinators will be freaking out and get that wonderful feeling of brain lock we call writer's block. Don't assume you can get everything done in the 11th hour.
4. Have fun. Journalism is not a job like in "Office Space" where you show up and breathe for a while and then leave, having filled out an innumerable amount of TPS reports. You become involved in a lot of different areas, work with a lot of different people and get a rare perspective into the human condition. Some days it's a drudge, but over all, it is one of the few jobs where the bad days are far outnumbered by the good days.