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JRNL 362.50: Feature Writing

Courtney L. Cowgill

University of Montana - Missoula, courtney.cowgill@umontana.edu

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Instructor: Courtney Lowery Cowgill
Fall 2019
E-mail: courtney.cowgill@msot.umt.edu
Phone: 406-214-0164 (texts too!)
Office Hours: I am not on campus so have sporadic physical office hours. Instead, we can video chat or talk via phone whenever -- just schedule something that works for you. I will let you know the days I will be on campus for in-person meetings.

CLASS DATES AND LOCATION:
This online class runs from Aug. 26 to Dec. 13 and is available through Moodle. Most of the course you’ll be able to work around your other schedules and do at your own pace throughout the week but we may have occasional optional video chats in which we gather all at once. You don’t have to make all of the video chats, but you should plan to attend one. These are informal chats meant to get to know one another, discuss good writing and connect. Think of them as virtual office hours.

BOOKS:
There is one book you need to buy for this course: “Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction” by Jack Hart. Buy it wherever you want to buy it. You can find it online and often, used. (The e-book also comes with flashcards and study guides, so there’s that too.)

Here are a few other recommended books if you want to dive deeper on your own: “Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University.” You can read parts of it online here. Others you should read: “The New Kings of Non-Fiction,” by Ira Glass, and "Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker," by David Remnick. “The Art and Craft of Feature Writing” by William Blundell is also an excellent guide. Finally, I highly recommend finding one super book of literary non-fiction to read while taking this course to keep you inspired.

Finally, if you want to write long-form or if you want to freelance, read ALL the magazines and papers and online publications that do features well.
Technical support for UMOnline:

umonline-help@umontana.edu
(406) 243-4999 | (866) 225-1641 (toll-free)

IMPORTANT DATES:

Sept. 15: Personal essay writing exercise due.
Oct. 13: “Writer’s Choice” narrative assignment due. (Draft No. 1)
Oct. 27: Draft No. 2 of narrative assignment due.
Nov. 3: “Notice what you notice” writing exercise due.
Nov. 11: Draft No. 1 of profile due.
Dec. 8: Draft No. 2 of profile due.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OUTCOMES
Students will learn and improve storytelling skills that include interviewing, reporting, curating and writing integral to feature stories, building on the traditional “hard news” styles they’ve encountered in prior classes. Successful students will learn the various genres of feature writing, explore how features have changed in the digital landscape, develop their own voice and style, learn the value of detail and nuance in storytelling. There will be a heavy emphasis in this class on narrative storytelling across media.

PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE
Students must have successfully passed J270. Any reporting experience is helpful since we will be focusing heavily on the writing part of feature writing, assuming students already know the basics of reporting.

COURSE PARTICIPATION/COMPLETION CRITERIA

• Complete all course readings, activities, assignments and assessments.
• Participate regularly via the forums – posts should be thorough, thoughtful and timely. Clean copy counts; messy and careless copy counts against. Read over your work for spelling, grammar, missing words, etc., before posting.
GRADING

**Feature assignments**: Roughly 60 percent of your grade.

**Forum discussions and writing exercises**: 40 percent of your grade.

Grades will be based on a scale of 100 percent and will use the University of Montana's plus/minus system. Letter grades will not be used in this course, although the final grade (per requirement) will be given as a letter grade. The equivalents are as follows:

- 90 - 100 percent: A
- 80 - 89 percent: B
- 70 - 79 percent: C
- 60 - 69 percent: D
- 50 - 59 percent: F

UM's plus/minus system also makes the following distinctions:

- A+: 97-100
- A: 93-96
- A-: 90-92
- B+: 87-89
- B: 83-86
- B-: 80-82
- C+: 77-79
- C: 73-76
- C-: 70-72
- D+: 67-69
- D: 63-66
- D-: 60-62
- F: 59 or lower

Please note: Feature writing is a tough skill. Few do it well as beginners. My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those articles that could, without major revisions, be accepted by working editors at respected publications. Students who expect an easy A in this course should reconsider taking it.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASSIGNMENTS AND COURSE STRUCTURE

**Structure**: The first part of the class will be somewhat of a seminar course – structured around small writing assignments, forums and laying the groundwork for the second part of the semester, in which you will write (and rewrite) your pants off.

**Forums**: With an online class and limited face-to-face engagement, your learning from other students and sharing of ideas will happen primarily in the forums. You will comment in each assigned forum, which will tend to be based on readings and assignments and you should take care in building on the comments from your fellow students. To earn a higher grade on forums,
students must respond to each other, checking back throughout the week. Treat the forums as an interactive, engaging classroom, making it a priority to learn and grow as a group. Analytic, creative and courteous responses are required.

**Feature assignments**: You’ll produce two features in this class. The first will be writer’s choice: meaning that you get to choose the topic and type of feature (how-to, tick-tock, explanatory, trend story, etc.). But, here’s the thing: there has to narrative, or story arc, to the piece. The second assignment will be a knock-out profile. Start thinking about what you’ll write about right now.

Both assignments will be heavily workshopped, so be ready to share your work with your classmates.

Also, be ready to rewrite. In this class, we will learn how to make our work better by working with editors (the most important one being yourself) and build on your pieces. That is why there are only two major assignments. You will work on those assignments throughout the semester. This is not a turn-your-piece-in-and-flee class. Features is a long game so the course is a long game. As William Zinsser put it, “rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.”

You won’t be spending any time listening to lectures in this class, but you WILL have as much one-on-one editing time with me as you want. Think of me as your own personal editor for the semester. The editor/writer relationship is so important in this craft and if you want to come out of this a better writer, be ready to invest ample time to the back-and-forth edits and brainstorming with me. That means taking initiative to ask questions and bounce ideas off of me. The purpose of my feedback is not just “correcting” your paper. It’s the two of us working as a team to make your pieces, and your writing, better.

**Late assignments**: I will not accept them unless there are truly extenuating circumstances.

**Format**: All assignments, including the features and smaller writing assignments, should be 12-point type, single spaced within paragraphs, double-space to separate paragraphs, one space between sentences. In other words: like the format of this syllabus.

**ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES**

- All writing assignments, unless otherwise noted in the learning units section of the course site, are due by 5:00 p.m. MST on Sunday of the week listed.
- Your first discussion board posts (you’ll need to post twice in each forum) should be posted by mid-week, generally Wednesdays.
- Please use Firefox as your browser (per advice of Moodle tech folks)
- Always check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax. This is a writing course. Students may find it helpful to read their assignments out loud and, thereby, catch awkward phrases. Sloppy copy errors will be reflected in final grades.
• Again: Reread your assignments for spelling, punctuation and grammar before you file your copy to me. Three misspellings or a misspelled name is an automatic F. Consider yourself warned.

• Always fact-check your work. Only misspelled names will drop a grade faster than facts that are misconstrued or downright wrong. Again, consider yourself warned.

• Assignments should be uploaded as Word .doc documents and be labeled consistently: For example, the first writing assignment would be named like this: YourName_PersonalNarrative.doc.

• Be sure to follow AP style.

★ Fair warning: Expect to receive a zero on any assignment you fail to upload or post by the deadline. Your course grade can’t survive many zeroes.

Plan ahead when submitting your assignments or hitting a discussion deadline. Computer malfunction is not a legitimate reason for a late assignment or post. I expect you to get in touch with me (before the deadline) if there are extenuating circumstances in your life. I will address these on a case by case basis.

INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK AND AVAILABILITY
You can expect all quizzes and writing assignments to be graded within 14 days. Forums will generally be graded within 5-7 days after the close of the forum. (Forums close on Sundays.) Per the guide on how to participate in forums, I will facilitate the discussions by weighing in on themes and connecting the dots and asking you further explore some ideas but I will not respond to each individual post.

I will be available on Monday-Friday between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and you can expect a reply email from me less than 24 hours after sending me an email within those working hours unless I’m away – which I will notify you about as necessary.

I’m available for phone or Skype conversations as needed and prefer those to be set up by email or even text so I can carve out the time. In general, try to request a phone call.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
Students with disabilities and/or special needs should notify the instructor at his or her earliest convenience and contact Disabilities Services for Students, http://www.umt.edu/dss/ or x2243.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT AND THE STUDENT CONDUCT CODE
All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. More on academic honesty is available at this link.
PLAGIARISM
Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. I will be checking. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.

CLASS WORK – Double Dipping
You may not submit for this course any assignment that was, or will be concurrently, submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course.

AFTER-HOURS ACCESS
For after-hours access to Don Anderson Hall, complete and submit this form before 5 p.m. Friday, Sept. 7. Complete only one request form per semester – be sure to list all courses.