Fall 9-1-2019

JRNL 370.01: Public Affairs Reporting

Jason D. Begay
University of Montana - Missoula, jason.begay@umontana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi/10481

This Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the Course Syllabi at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syllabi by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Course Description

Beginning today, I am your city editor, and you are my beat reporters. You will be assigned beats, under which you are required to cultivate sources and produce news stories on a regular basis. Also, as a class we will spend up to a couple of weeks at a time covering police, courts, city hall, public schools and education. During the 15 weeks we are together, you will learn the basics of covering local government and writing about the key issues that affect a community. In the process, you'll gain experience making sources, rooting out public information, and digging for documents and data that help break big stories. You will learn to write factual information and differentiate it from hype, spin, speculation or opinion. You will learn the elements of a good story, how to pitch editors and the nuts-and-bolts skills of turning a good story idea into a great read.

Beat reporters are the core of a news organization. There's little that's more fun, or more challenging. Your beat is your turf, a wide-open playing field full of stories that you own. Beat reporting is also competitive, consuming and very hard work. So is this course. You will often be responsible for reporting and writing at least one story a week. I'll edit each of your stories, many of which will need to be rewritten. The pace is fast, but it’s the pace you’ll need to run if you want to do the job.

Course Outcomes

By the end of the semester, you will gain:

- Perspective in covering all aspects of our community in terms of age, race, culture, gender and sexual identity. Diversity will be an important component in the work you do both in this class and in the profession.
- Experience covering police agencies, local government, criminal- and civil-court proceedings, schools and other government institutions.
- The ability to generate interesting, useful story ideas.
- Improved reporting and writing skills applicable to all types of writing.
- Experience writing breaking news on deadline.
• An understanding of government organization and functions.
• An appreciation of the societal value of public affairs reporting.
• An understanding of access to and use of public records.
• Familiarity with news beats and methods for successful beat coverage.
• An understanding of ethical and professional challenges of reporting public affairs.
• Necessary skills needed for reporting internships with news organizations.
• Ability to accurately use numbers and math in a journalism context
• Experience acquiring and using data and documents for reporting
• Experience using writing to learn and synthesize new concepts
• Experience formulating and expressing written ideas that are developed, logical, and organized
• Experience composing news stories that are appropriate for a given audience, purpose and context
• Experience revising stories based on constructive comments from an editor
• Experience finding, evaluating, and using information effectively and ethically
• Demonstrate appropriate English language usage

**Important dates**

Mark your calendars now:

- Diverse U, the campus-wide initiative on diversity is scheduled for Nov. 5-7.
- Also note that the Missoula City Council meets on Monday evenings.
- While there is nothing on the ballot of major note, please keep Nov. 5 open as well in case we decide to cover any ballot initiatives that come up in the general election.
  - You are encouraged to register to vote, and do so via absentee ballot, to ensure you have the time to complete the work assigned for that day. You can find more info at: [https://sosmt.gov/elections/absentee/](https://sosmt.gov/elections/absentee/)

**Course Policies**

**This course requires significant time spent reporting off-campus.** You must commit some Monday evenings to firsthand coverage of Missoula City Council meetings. Court proceedings and other coverage also require an extraordinary commitment of time and local travel.

**Classroom discussion is an essential part of this course.** Attendance and active class participation are essential to your grade. That means completing assigned reading and other homework before class. You are also expected to read and think like a journalist. If you are adequately conversant on the news, we’ll enjoy excellent
discussion. If not, there will be news quizzes. As for the participation grade, you’ll lose five percentage points for every unexcused absence.

**All writing for this class must be original.** As stated in the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, you may not submit for this course any assignment that you have submitted or will submit for another class or publication, unless you receive prior approval from me. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You may not recycle pieces previously written for publication. You must be able to identify the sources of all information you use. Upon request, you must provide story notes and contact information for all sources. Stories from this class that are published will receive extra credit.

**Rules of integrity.** Cheating will not be tolerated. All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code.

**Plagiarism.** Submitted work must be entirely original; you may not copy or borrow phrasing or sentence structure, unless you attribute clearly. You may not take story ideas directly from the Missoulian, or any other newspaper, unless you plan to bring something fresh to an old story. If you are uncertain about what is or is not appropriate, ask me. Submitting the work of someone else as your own is a serious violation of journalistic ethics and the University of Montana Student Conduct Code. An act of plagiarism will result in an F for the course and possible disciplinary sanction by the university.

**Collaborative efforts.** Discussing stories among colleagues often helps you generate better story ideas, work through reporting challenges and improve your reporting and writing. Feel free to discuss your ideas and writing and seek feedback from other people. But the reporting and writing for this class must be your own.

**Double-dipping** No element (recordings, story ideas, scripts, etc.) for another class can fulfill assignments for this class without DOCUMENTED ACCEPTANCE from instructors of all involved courses. Failure to do so will result in failure on that assignment.

**A note on unnamed sources and granting sources anonymity.** Unnamed sources are not allowed unless cleared with your professor. In addition, writers will not change the names of sources for publication. Every story must include a list of sources with telephone numbers and email addresses. Nothing will be written “for class only.” You will report as if your stories will be published and should strive to make that happen. Treat sources accordingly.

**Moodle.** Grades, the syllabus, class notes, some readings and assignments can be found at the UM Online/Moodle listing for this course. All email communication will happen through Moodle to your university-assigned addresses. It’s your responsibility to check the Moodle site and your student email regularly. Not checking this address will not be an acceptable excuse for missing information about this course.
Texts
The AP Stylebook. No older than 2016. Online versions not acceptable.

The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Missoulian, the Kaimin and Poynter's Mediawire.


Subscribe using the Post's education discount: Washington Post academic rate (https://subscribe.washingtonpost.com/acqlite/edu-offer/)

Course Outline
Classes will consist of lectures, discussions, critiques of your work, and mandatory one-on-one meetings with your professor. We’ll also keep our options open so we can react to breaking stories and issues.

Since this is a journalism class, you are expected to keep up with the news for discussion. This is truly an interesting time for journalists and how the public views us and the media. The United States has a president who is extremely controversial, which has astoundingly affected news coverage locally.

Upper Division Writing Requirement
This course requires electronic submission (via Moodle) of an assignment stripped of your personal information to be used for educational research and assessment of the university’s writing program. Your paper will be stored in a database. A random selection of papers will be assessed by a group of faculty and staff using a rubric developed from the following Writing Learning Outcomes:

- Compose written documents that are appropriate for a given audience or purpose
- Formulate and express opinions and ideas in writing
- Use writing to learn and synthesize new concepts
- Revise written work based on constructive feedback
- Find, evaluate, and use information effectively
- Begin to use discipline-specific writing conventions (largely style conventions like APA or MLA)
- Demonstrate appropriate English language usage

This assessment in no way affects either your course grade or your progression at the university. Here’s the rubric that will be used to score the papers.
Attendance
You are expected to attend each class meeting. The success of this course depends on the quality of our discussions, including feedback on homework critiques. Each unexcused absence will lower your grade by 5 points (see below for grading basis). An excused absence means you have contacted me before class and have an approved, valid reason, such as illness or family emergency. I will take roll in this class.

Grading
Your course grade will be based on an average of all individual assignments and quizzes, plus your participation. Here’s the formula: Assignments and quizzes (80 percent) + participation (20 percent) = final grade.
Remember: You will often be required to rewrite stories you do for this course after receiving an edit. Every draft of a story will carry the same weight. Each draft will be considered an independent assignment.
Accuracy: In journalism, accuracy is obviously important. Specifically, it’s important that we strive to get the names of our sources correct. Therefore, it is a grading policy in this class that any assignment that contains a misspelled name, whether a result of a type-o or under-reporting, will automatically get a grade of “Zero,” with no opportunity to rewrite.

Deadlines
Journalism is deadline-driven. A late assignment is a failed assignment. In rare instances involving documentable extenuating circumstances, such as hospitalization, I may grant an extension or, in the case of breaking news, make an alternative assignment. Please remember that a crummy story filed on deadline trumps an excellent one filed late.

Ethics/Academic Integrity
The University of Montana School of Journalism is committed to the highest standards of academic and professional ethics and expects its students to adhere to those standards.

All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to a penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the university. You need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code, online at: http://life.umt.edu/SA/documents/fromWeb/StudentConductCode1.pdf
**Class Conduct**

Student participation is essential for this class to be truly effective. This class is highly interactive so we can learn from each other. I expect student participation and urge students to speak up constantly without fear of being right or wrong. I will assign participation grades based on the courage it takes to participate in discussion.

Students are also expected to set cell phones to the silent – NOT vibrate – setting while in class. You may keep your phones readily available to read incoming messages in case of emergencies, but please do not use class time to compose text messages of any type during class. Computers and tablets are welcome only for the purpose of note taking. If I see anyone using a device for any other purpose, that student will lose the privilege of using the device for the remainder of the semester.

**Disability Services for Students**

If you are a student with a disability and wish to discuss reasonable accommodations for this course, contact the instructors privately to discuss the specific modifications you wish to request. Please be advised we may request that you provide a letter from Disability Services for Students verifying your right to reasonable modifications. If you have not yet contacted Disability Services, in Lommasson Center 154, please do so to verify your disability and to coordinate your reasonable modifications. For more information, visit the Disability Services Web site at [www.umt.edu/dss/](http://www.umt.edu/dss/).
COURSE SCHEDULE (Subject ... likely to change)

Week 1 – Getting started
Introduction to Public Affairs Reporting—a boot camp approach. Practice writing a police story on deadline. Basics of AP style, using quotes, attribution, finding and using sources, etc. The art of the telephone interview.

In-class assignment – Write a crime story on deadline from a press release and PIO interview.

Week 2 – Diversity. We have to improve how well we cover people of color. This will be a focus throughout the semester in all of our assignments.
Begin cops coverage. Crime, fires, crashes, and other pandemonium on the public safety beat
Reporting boot camp continued. Critique of week one story. Review news story structures.

In-class assignment – Second deadline crime story.

Week 3 – Cops continued
What’s a story and how do I find them? Learn to find and pitch stories from a beat. Explore the lifecycle of a news story. Beyond breaking news – intro to other types of news stories. Pitch critiques.
Assignment – Three story pitches. Research and prepare pitches for a crime trend story.

Week 4 – More crime, intro to courts
Critique trend pitches. Introduction to reporting on criminal and civil legal proceedings.
Assignment—Write a crime trend story from one of your pitches.

Week 5 – Courts
How to find, read and understand court records. Learn to follow a case from an arrest to the prison system.
Assignment—Write a story incorporating details from a court record.

Week 6: Courts continued
Critique court record stories. Covering hearings and trials. Field trip to Missoula County Courthouse. Learn to search for court records.
Assignment—Write a daily deadline story on a hearing or an ongoing trial.

Week 7: Justice wrap-up, Intro to the city beat
Working the mafia beat. Skype visit from Michael Zuckerman, former USA Today reporter and editor and expert on organized crime, terrorism, cyber-security, the Justice Department and national security issues.
Intro to city hall reporting. Prep for Monday’s Missoula City Council meeting.
**Assignment** – Write a preview of Monday’s City Council meeting. Due in class Monday

**Week 8: City beat continued**
Continue prep for Monday’s City Council meeting  
**Assignment**—Write a story on the council meeting

**Week 9: Reporting the issue story. Understanding diversity. Reporting in diverse communities.**
How to find and write an issue story. Reporting and writing in diverse communities.  
**Assignment**—Write an issue story that reflects cultural diversity and examines issues of race, class or sexual orientation.

**Week 10: Advancing the story**
Learn to develop and write an issue folo.  
**Assignment**—Develop pitched for an issue folo and write the approved pitch.

**Week 11: Digging deeper on the city beat**
How to read a city budget. Finding stories in the agate type.  
**Assignment**—Three story pitches from the budget.

**Week 12: Reporting on public officials. The art of the profile**
Learn to cover politicians and elections beyond the horse race. Learn to write a strong profile of a public figure.  
**Assignment**—Write a profile of a public official.

**Week 13: The elements of investigative reporting**
Finding investigative stories in your beat. The Gene Roberts “two notebook” method of making a name for yourself as a journalist. Critique candidate profiles. Leaks and documents, how to get them, how to use them. Reporting the data-driven story.  
Intro to Microsoft Excel.  
**Assignment**—Find, pitch and write a story incorporating data or documents.

**Week 14: Education**
Learn to report on public schools, community colleges, and for-profit schools.  
**Assignment**—Localize a national story on K-12 or higher education.

**Week 15: Law, ethics, and public affairs journalism**