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JRNL 362.01: Feature Writing

Jule A. Banville

University of Montana - Missoula, jule.banville@umontana.edu

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Yet, many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper.
−Stephen King, “On Writing”

The editor is always right.
−Stephen King, “On Writing”

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES
Writing is hard. If you already know this, this class will help you come to a more intimate knowledge of that truth. If you do not think writing is hard, this class will prove you are wrong. But writing features can also be incredibly rewarding, especially when you refuse to half-ass the reporting and when you turn that rare phrase that makes your nailbeds tingle. In this class, you will report and write. You will understand the importance of re-writing. You’ll go beyond hard news without sacrificing timeliness and relevance. You’ll tell stories with a sense of voice, pacing, tone, mood, narrative, dialog and detail that is just enough and not too much. You’ll care about language and how it sounds or you will not enjoy this class.

Through this course, you will become better writers by reporting numerous features, with feedback from both your instructor and peers that will focus on facts, detail, structure, storytelling and style. You will workshop ideas, pitch successfully and study the work of professional feature writers and your classmates by reading them not as reader, but as a writer: dissecting, questioning and learning.

LEARNING OUTCOMES
By the end of the semester, successful students will:
• Write feature stories of publishable quality.
• Develop their eye for detail and their command of language and style.
• Improve their capacity to engage readers from lead to kicker.
• Meet all deadlines.
• Understand differences among types of features through varied assignments.
• Learn to provide constructive critiques to classmates in a workshop setting.
• Read and be able to analyze the work of professional feature writers.
• Understand the value diverse sources and voices bring to feature writing.
• Understand the importance of using numbers to provide context.

PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE
Students must be in good standing in the J-School’s professional program.

ABOUT MOODLE/UM ONLINE
I use it extensively for this class. You will, too! Grades and all reading and writing assignments will be posted there as you receive them. You’ll also find rundowns of what I teach along with links to stories we’ll read and talk about. Missing class is not an excuse for missing deadlines and assignments. Do not email me asking what we covered in class. Check Moodle. The end.

MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS
There will be three major assignments in this class that will have several associated, minor assignments attached. All three must be filed by deadline via email as an attached doc (.doc, .docx preferred). Some deadlines and word counts are listed, but subject to change. Final deadlines will be announced in class and posted to Moodle.

The major assignments, in order, are:

• The Reported Obituary: You’ll revive a lost art, that of the obit writer who interviews the family and friends of someone recently deceased. Your obits will include, but go beyond, the obvious details of someone’s job and survivors to get to the real heart of how someone lived. This assignment will probably scare the crap out of you. And make you better for it. Note: You cannot write about someone you knew well or were related to.
  Word Count: About 1,000
  Workshop Draft: Monday, Feb. 4, in class
  Final Feature: Tuesday, Feb. 5, midnight

• The Tragedy Feature: This is a big and important assignment where the reporting cannot be done at the last minute. You’ll find the compelling, human angle within hard news by focusing on a crime, criminals, victims of tragedy or any combination of the three. The idea is: Something bad happened; your story tries to make sense if it. This story will require an approved pitch. The pitch will count as 20 percent of your grade. So make it good. Note: You cannot write about a tragedy directly involving you or your family and probably not about a friend. Also note: Some stories that make for good journalism are sad and upsetting. If you feel these kinds of stories are too mentally tough for you to read and write, this class is also offered online in the fall. I try and be sensitive and kind, but I don’t institute “trigger warnings” regarding features about hard aspects of being human.
  Word Count: 2,000-3,000
  Workshop Draft: Wednesday, March 6, in class
  Final Feature: Thursday, March 7, midnight
The Longform Profile: You’ll write about a newsworthy person in a thoroughly reported feature with multiple sources and requiring multiple interviews with the profile subject. We’ll study and then practice longform profiles that are not fluffy valentines of love to the subject, but instead present a compelling story embodied in a multidimensional portrait of complicated human. A status report that proves you’re making headway on the reporting will factor into your grade. Note: You cannot pick as your subject a friend or a family member.

WORD COUNT: 3,000-5,000
Status report: Wednesday, March 21, in class
Workshop Draft: TBD
Final Feature: TBD

MINOR ASSIGNMENTS
Throughout the semester, I'll give minor assignments and reserve the right to quiz you on reading and listening assignments. Minor assignments might include writing exercises, listening to podcast episodes about writing, finding a feature similar to one you’re working on and dissecting it. These types of assignments will be graded on a 100/zero scale. Did you do it? Great! You get 100. Did you blow it off? Sad trombone. You get a Zero. Did you clearly half-ass it? Your grade is somewhere in the middle.

READING ASSIGNMENTS
You’ll do a good amount of reading in this class from materials provided to you by me. These will take the following forms:
- The assigned text: Obit by James Sheeler. Please procure ASAP wherever you like to get books. Amazon has it used for less than $5. Order it today.
- Features by pros that serve as inspiration for assignments and discussions. These will be linked on Moodle and sometimes printed out on dead trees.
- Podcast episodes (WriteLane with Tampa Bay Times’ Lane DeGregory)

GRADING
Major Assignments: 75 percent
Minor Assignments: 10 percent
Attendance, Participation and Final Assessment by Instructor: 15 percent

Rewrites: Not accepted after final deadline. Your assignments will benefit from instructor feedback and peer-to-peer workshops prior to the assignment I grade.

Attendance: COME TO CLASS AND COME ON TIME. You'll find I’m more into this than others. I’ll be keeping a list of unexcused absences and people rolling in late.

Engagement in class: Class is not the time for you to text endlessly and do homework for another prof or click around the web while pretending to take notes.
At the end of the semester, I'll take stock of your attendance and your in-class engagement when deciding what ends up being 15 percent of your final grade.

Grades are based on a scale of 100 percent and will use the University of Montana's plus/minus system. The final grade (per requirement) will be given as a letter grade.

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: My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those assignments that could, without major revisions, be accepted by working editors at respected publications.

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

- Always check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax. This is a writing course. **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.** I'm a copy editor and a hardcore copy nerd. It matters; trust me. If you suck at grammar and spelling, let automatic spell and grammar checks help you and/or find a peer who doesn't suck to edit you first. Consider paying that person in money or baked goods.

- **All major assignments must include a list of sources and contact information for them.** Most editors reserve the right to call your sources and check accuracy. That is true in this class, as well. **Failure to provide a source list will result in at least a 10-point reduction in the final grade.**
I’m not kidding about this.

- I follow the Associated Press Stylebook and expect you to know the basics of AP Style and will also follow its rules. If you don’t have a copy, buy one.

- The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction by supporting collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors and Disability Services for Students. If you have a disability that requires an accommodation, please let me know during the first week of the semester so that proper accommodations can be discussed and provided. Please contact Disability Services for Students if you have questions, or call DSS for voice/text 406.243.2243.

- 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. The code is available for review online at http://www.umt.edu/vpesa/Dean%20of%20Students/default.php.

- PLAGIARISM: Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.

- DOUBLE-DIPPING: You may not submit for this course any assignment or variation on an 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 documented permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You are, however, encouraged to pitch and publish any and all work you do for this class.