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JRNL 370.01: Public Affairs Reporting

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Journalism 370 Public Affairs Reporting

Meets Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:30 a.m. – 1:50 p.m., in DAH 004

Instructor
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Office Hours
Tuesdays and Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 12 p.m.
And by Appointment

Course Description

Beginning today, I am your city editor, and you are my beat reporters. Unlike standard beat reporters, who often spend years sinking their teeth into a single topic area, you will spend a couple of weeks, or less, covering police, courts, city hall, public schools and higher 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 one story, or more, 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.

Learning Outcomes
By the end of the semester, you will gain:

- 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.
- Experience writing about diversity and reporting in diverse cultures
- 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
- Demonstrate ability to write thoughtfully about issues of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in a news setting

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 classic 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 5 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 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.

A note on paying attention in the Internet age. Except when otherwise noted, this classroom is a device-free zone. Please put all gadgets (computers, phones, etc.) in your bag. Active participation requires your complete attention. Traveling in the online world will harm our discussion and hinder your grade.

Texts
The AP Stylebook. No older than 2012. Online versions not acceptable.

The Art and Craft of Feature Writing, William E. Blundell (Suggested)

The New York Times, the Missoulian, the Kaimin and Poynter’s Mediawire. Subscribe to the Times here with an education discount: New York Times Educational Discount
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.

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.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities
This course is accessible to otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the instructor. Disability Services for Students (http://life.umt.edu/dss) will assist in the accommodation process.