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JRNL 494.01: Pollner Seminar - Training the Professional Observer

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Fall 2013 Pollner Seminar:

TRAINING THE PROFESSIONAL OBSERVER

JOURNALISM 494 MW 12:10-1:30 Don Anderson Hall 301

Instructor: Tamara Jones

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Office: 406-243-2256/ Mobile: 703-798-0335

Office hours: Monday and Tuesday, 2-4 p.m. and by appointment

- 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.

I do not know which to prefer,

The beauty of inflections,

Or the beauty of innuendoes.

The blackbird whistling,

Or just after.

Wallace Stevens, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.

SYLLABUS SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Course Description and Objectives

Whether you are writing a book, a 5,000-word magazine piece or a 500-word daily off the news, the key to telling a story powerfully is intimacy. It is all about creating that "just after" moment when someone finishes reading your words ... then feels them linger.

This seminar will teach you how to look, listen and think before you sit down to write. You will learn how to gather the kinds of detail that illuminate a story rather than merely decorate it, to seek comprehension rather “color.”

Through a series of building-block exercises, workshops and selected readings, you will focus on the components that infuse the best non-fiction pieces with emotional intelligence: character development; mood; dialogue; metaphor. You’ll test-drive different reporting techniques, and together we’ll deconstruct what worked in any given assignment, and what didn’t. (Note: If you bleed easily or whine excessively, this is probably not the course for you. Run now, run fast.)

We will also slice, dice and periodically revisit key topics such as idea development, the art of interviewing, and developing voice.

By the end of the semester, you should be able to “sit still inside” any story, find its core, and apply the techniques of immersion journalism even on deadline. You will develop a customized method to best organize your material based on your own strengths, weaknesses and personal style. The most-successful students will be pushing themselves outside their comfort zones to experiment with ideas and approaches they haven’t tried before.

The word “awkward” will be deleted from everyone’s vocabulary and internal monologue.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

All assignments must be filed by deadline via email as an attached Word doc. Final deadlines will be announced in class. Everyone’s work will be made available to the class for possible discussion.

- **The Silent Observer:** With his/her permission, you will observe your chosen subject for at least 30 minutes and, without interviewing anyone or including any background reporting, write a piece that evokes mood. **WORD COUNT: 400-500. DEADLINE: Weds., Sept. 4, 10 a.m.**
- **Captured Dialogue:** You will return to the same subject you observed in the previous assignment (setting may change) and, without interviewing, spend at least 30 minutes listening to that person interact with those around him/her. Write a piece consisting entirely of captured dialogue, choosing a riff or exchange that illuminates

something about your subject's personality or situation. Explain why you chose this particular snippet. WORD COUNT: 75-100 for dialogue; 50-100 for explanation. DEADLINE: Mon., Sept. 9, 10 a.m.

- **Point of View:** Return to the same subject and choose either that person or someone around them to serve as your pov – the prism this story passes through to reach the reader. Interview that person using conversational technique we will have discussed in class, and write a piece without using any direct quotes. WORD COUNT: 400 words. DEADLINE: Mon., Sept. 16, 10 a.m.
- **IMMERSION SERIES:** You will immerse into the life of someone whose story/situation is worthy of a three-part series. The successful pitch will promise elements of conflict, tension and/or discovery, with a strong character to provide point-of-view. Installments will be due weekly, beginning Mon., Sept. 23. WORD COUNT: At least 1500 words for the entire series, but how you divide it up is up to you, but keep in mind that story flow and how well it all hangs together will be part of the final grade.
- **ON BEYOND BIZARRE:** This assignment can be turned in anytime during the semester, up to Mon., Nov. 25 at 10 a.m. You will find a peculiar person (NO, NOT THE TRANSGENDER WOMAN AGAIN) or event and write a richly detailed piece. Not a riff. A story. WORD COUNT: You be the judge.
- **FINAL STORY:** This will be a narrative piece incorporating the techniques and tools we've covered this semester, with one single objective: Move me. Make me feel like I am inhabiting whatever world you have captured on the page, and make me reluctant to leave. You will be expected to provide a written pitch for your piece no later than Wed., Oct. 30, by 10 a.m., and either use my office hours or make an appointment with me that week to discuss it. On Mon., Nov. 18, by 10 a.m., you will submit a rough outline of the piece, a 300-word summary of your interviews so far, and a list of what you still need and hope to get. This will count as 20 percent of your grade on this project, so don't blow it off. The FINAL STORY will be due on Mon., Dec. 2 by 10 a.m. WORD COUNT: Your choice. (Yes, you read that right: This course is about taking risks, and this is mine. Length is negotiable, but depth is not.)

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Walt Harrington and Mike Sager, [The Next Wave](#) (paperback or ebook, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform)

Mark Kramer and Wendy Call, Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writer's Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University (paperback or ebook, Plume)

ADDITIONAL READINGS:

We will also read selected work from professional journalists throughout the semester.

RULES, RULES, RULES:

- 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 www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/Index.cfm/page/1321. And, more on academic honesty, is available here: http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php

PLAGIARISM: There is no excuse. Ever. Never copy and paste words that are not your own onto your document, no matter how innocent the intent. Your work should be yours and yours alone. The penalty for plagiarism in this class is an "F" for the semester. You could also face expulsion from school. If you have any doubt about what constitutes plagiarism, ask, don't guess.

FABRICATION: Every working journalist has felt deadline panic, and most writers know the self-loathing that kicks in when your notebook doesn't yield that great quote you could have sworn was there, or the killer scene you need for a kicker. Inventing what you don't have shows cowardice, not craft. Consider it a career killer. (Also grounds for an instant "F" and possible expulsion from school)

DOUBLE-DIPPING: You may not submit any assignment for this class that you wrote for any prior class or publication, including the *Kaimin* and internships. This is university policy. Once you've met the class deadline and your work has been graded, you are free to submit your stories for publication anywhere you wish. I will happily coach you on how to find the best market, pitch your piece and polish it to perfection.

SPEAKING OF DOUBLE-DIPPING: Yes, I know this class falls right at lunchtime, but cowboy up already. If you want to nosh on something that is a) silent; b) odorless, and c) easily contained, then bon appetit. String cheese fits the bill nicely. So does a peanut butter sandwich (unless you wipe it on someone who is allergic to nuts and cause a fatal incident, so please exercise the proper caution.)

DEADLINES: Every day missed is a letter grade dropped. Justifiable excuses are rare, and generally tragic. If you squandered precious time watching a Duck Dynasty marathon, I may not feel sorry for you in the way you had hoped, but I will help you as long as you come to me BEFORE THE ELEVENTH HOUR. I want you to succeed, and I am excited to see your best work. Call me, email me or come see me as soon as you start to feel even a little stuck or overwhelmed.

PROOF OF LIFE: Every assignment must include the names and contact information for all sources. Instructor reserves the right to make random checks accordingly.

ELECTRONIC DEVICES: Phones, tablets, iPods and such will all be silenced and kept in a cozy pile at the beginning of class. (If you want to use this time to find a plug and recharge, that's fine, as long as it's powered off)

GRADING

Participation: As writers, we thrive on feedback and hone our craft by learning how to break the code of our journalistic idols. The Pollner seminar gives us all the chance to revel in journalism, to sink into everything that thrills and perplexes us about it. Don't just read or skim the assignments; *think* about them. Then come to class and speak your mind. Participation in class will make up **30 percent** of your grade. Attendance is part of that.

Reporting and Writing: Your written work will count for **70 percent** of your final grade. Each piece will be judged not only by the end result, but by the effort put into it. Report vigorously. Write thoughtfully. Edit carefully. And use me unabashedly: I am here to serve you this semester, and I consider myself a personal writing coach to each and every one of you. My office is your Creative Urgent Care Clinic. Walk-ins welcome, unless the door is closed. Stop by to chat even if you're not bleeding. Networking is a crucial part of building a career in journalism these days, and I've got 30 years' worth of resources to share with you. Be greedy, not needy.

Filing: File electronically but keep a hard copy in a folder that comes to class each week; when your piece is chosen for class critique, you'll be expected to mark it up. (Note: I'm new at this, so please bear with me if I tinker with the filing system. If you loved the way it was done in another class, by all means tell me. I'm eager to find an easy way for us to refer to past stories, too. My ideal would be a master folder online that we could store all pieces in and all have access to)

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, except as a final grade. Here's how it shakes out:

A+ 97-100 percent

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