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JOUR 331.01: Public Affairs Reporting

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Public Affairs Reporting/J331

Fall 2009, Section 1

Instructor: Professor Dennis Swibold, DAH 427

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Wednesday, or by appointment

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About this course

Democracy cannot thrive without accurate and timely information. That's the premise for journalism's special protection under the First Amendment. That's the idea behind this course. Over the next 16 weeks you will learn to cover local institutions empowered to compel your behavior, skim your income, mold your mind, and tell you what you can and cannot do with your property. You will learn to cover cops and courts, schools and local governments. You will also do some reporting on other beats crucial to the safety and welfare of people in Missoula.

You will gain a better understanding of journalism's role in democracy and of the ethical and professional challenges beat reporters face daily. You will get a sense of the pace of daily reporting and its demand that you be accurate, clear, thorough, fair, productive, ethical and punctual. You'll also get an introduction to investigative techniques and research. By the course's end, successful students should be able to succeed as interns at a local news organization.

Class meetings:

We'll meet from 2:10 to 3:30 Mondays and Wednesdays in DAH 210. You will spend several Monday nights covering the Missoula City Council. You are expected to attend and participate in every class. If you skip class without clearing it with me *beforehand*, I won't allow you to make up any of the work assigned in or for that class. Treat this course like a job.

SCHEDULING NOTE – Keep the following nights free for deadline reporting: Monday, Sept. 14 (City Council); Monday, Sept. 21 (City Council); Monday, Sept. 28 (City Council); Monday, Oct. 5 (City Council); and Nov. 3 (City election). Holidays: Sept. 7, Nov. 11, Nov. 25-27.

How we'll work:

I'll run the class like a newsroom. I'm your city editor, and you're my reporters. You'll do deadline reporting almost every week of the course, and I'll give you detailed feedback. Besides producing stories that I assign, you will generate weekly articles from beats you choose to cover. I expect you to keep up with the news, keep up with your beat, attend every class, read all assigned materials, and join in discussions and critique sessions. Class discussions will range over a variety of topics, such as:

- **Reporting** – We'll talk about the importance of accuracy, good news judgment and enterprise. We'll talk about techniques for finding and getting the story (interviewing, sourcing, research strategies, etc.)
- **News writing** – We'll emphasize clarity, organization and style, and we'll discuss various storytelling formats and techniques.
- **Fairness** – We'll discuss how to avoid bias in your work by reporting all sides of a story and keeping the context clear. We'll study how to avoid thoughtless stereotypes that can undermine your credibility with an increasingly diverse audience. We'll talk about libel and ethics and the damage that incompetent, lazy and sleazy journalists do to your profession. We'll wrestle with ethical decisions reporters frequently face. One of your beat stories must be on underserved or underreporting people on your beat
- **Power** – We'll find out who has it, how it's used and how it's abused. We'll learn how journalists can help readers participate in democracy. We'll discuss how journalists sometimes abuse their power.

Texts

No one book can do the job. You'll get lots of in-class handouts, and I'll expect you to take notes on class lectures and critiques. I'll also make several general reporting texts available to you if you need them. Here are some titles I have that you might find helpful:

- *The Associated Press Guide to News Writing*, by Rene J. Cappon
- *News Reporting and Writing*, by Melvin Mencher
- *The Investigative Reporter's Handbook*, by Houston, et al.

You must keep up with the news, especially on your beat. Start by reading the *Missoulian* and *Kaimin* every day, especially local news regarding your beats. Add a national newspaper or news magazine for a broader perspective and ideas you can localize. You can't recognize news if you don't know what's been reported.

Read the class blog

You'll find it at www.newzhound.blogspot.com. Check it daily. You'll find assignments, deadlines, class announcements, discussion topics and some of the class's best reporting. You'll be required to register at www.blogger.com to post comments, but it's free, so dive in.

How I'll assess your work

I'll base most of your grade on the articles you will write. I'll hold your articles to professional standards, which means that beyond the writing and reporting, I'll be considering the story's newsworthiness and the amount of enterprise it showed. Here's the madness behind my grading method:

- An "A" story is one that is interesting, enterprising, timely, thorough, well-written, accurate, fair and in need of virtually no editing. In other words, the story is publishable.
- A "B" story is one that could be an "A" with minor editing or a little additional reporting.
- A "C" story is one that needs a story that needs significant editing and additional reporting, or shows weak news judgment. A sloppily written but well-reported story might get you a C. A story based on only one source will rarely earn more than a "C."
- A "D" story is one that it is unacceptable. It may be inaccurate, poorly written, barely researched, badly focused or all of the above. In other words, it is a story that requires more editing than could or should be done on deadline.
- An "F" story is the one you fail to write or fail to hand in by deadline or any story that I determine to have been plagiarized or written from another reporter's notes. A story containing particularly egregious errors (a misspelled name, for instance) or too many mistakes in spelling, grammar and style may receive an "F," too.

Final course grades, using the plus/minus system, will be based on your performance on the following:

- Weekly reporting and beat assignments (60 percent)
- A feature reporting project (20 percent)
- Participation, professionalism and improvement (20 percent). I'll assess this based primarily on the improvement shown in your work (i.e., your reporting, writing, ability to generate your own stories, meet deadlines, etc.) over course of the semester. I'll also consider your attendance, contributions to the class discussions, the class blog. *Students with more than two unexcused absences will fail the class.*

REMEMBER: *You must earn at least a "C" in this course to graduate from the program. If you fail, you will get only one opportunity to repeat the course.*

The Feature Project

You will be expected to produce an in-depth article or series of articles based on a public-affairs issue. The project, due toward the end of the semester, will involve a mandatory revision. I will grade only the revised work. Stay tuned for deadlines.

Rewrite policy

You'll do mandatory revisions on the project and a few other stories of my choosing this semester. Beyond that, you'll always have the opportunity to rewrite a story. I won't replace the original grade but the improvement shown on rewrites goes toward your participation grade.

Get published:

Until you get published, you're just playing at being a journalist, so I'll push you to publish at least one story this semester. The *Kaimin* is your best bet. In any case, you should work as though every story you do may get published somewhere – and your sources should be told that. When a source agrees to tell you something on the condition that your story is just a class assignment and won't be printed, smile and explain why that won't work. *However, never identify yourself as a reporter for the Kaimin or any other publication unless that publication has assigned you to do the story.*

Plagiarism warning

Plagiarism is representing another's work as your own. In my book that includes writing a story based someone else's reporting, including a classmate's notes. Students who plagiarize have failed this course and been suspended. The solution is simple. Do your own work, and attribute your sources.

Academic Honesty

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. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/index.cfm/page/1321>.

Same Work for Multiple Classes in J-School

You may not submit for this course any assignment that has previously 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.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

This course is accessible to and usable by otherwise qualified students with disabilities. To request reasonable program modifications, please consult with the instructor *during the first week of classes*. Disability Services for Students will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process. For more information, visit the Disability Services website at www.umt.edu/dss/.

And finally:

A MENTAL HEALTH NOTE

This is a tough course, not only because of the amount of work but also because that work will be examined critically. I'll try to mark everything on your story that an editor should catch, and we'll go over those problems in class. Don't take the criticism personally, but remember that reporting is serious work done under pressure and under the critical eye of editors, sources and readers. Learning to deal with that constructively is part of becoming a pro. Work hard, keep a sense of humor, and remember that there's life (and perhaps even a job) after Public Affairs Reporting.