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JRNL 494.01: T. Anthony Pollner Seminar - The Art of the Profile

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Fall 2022 T. Anthony Pollner Seminar: The Art of the Profile

Journalism 494 / MW 11 a.m. – 12:20 p.m. / Don Anderson Hall 210

Professor: Jacob Baynham (you can call me Jacob)

Email: jacob.baynham@umontana.edu

Office: DAH 429

Phone: 406-243-2256; cell (if you must): 406-241-1338

Office hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11:15 a.m. – 2 p.m. and by appointment. Please come see me, early and often. If I'm not in my office, check the *Kaimin* newsroom.

Course Description: This course is designed to teach you the fundamentals and possibilities of profile writing. Any story is only as strong as its characters, and the craft of profile writing is an excellent practice to hone a journalist's skills in character development through deep research, interview technique, and narrative writing. Profiles can be about celebrities, everyday people, or anyone in between. Whoever the subject, a good profile is a thorough exploration of a person, their achievements and flaws, their talents and inconsistencies, their motivations and aspirations. A good profile connects a reader to the humanity of the subject; a great profile illuminates something about the world.

And yet, profiles are in a perilous place. Politicians, celebrities, and powerful people need not engage with the media the way they once did. Instead of relying on journalists to convey their thoughts and ideas, a person can now carefully curate their story on social media, targeting specific audiences. A politician can speak only with cherry-picked reporters. The engine of publicity no longer relies on the fuel of traditional media.

In this way, profile writing is more important than ever. As emerging journalists, you all have an opportunity to remind readers of the value of an exhaustively reported profile and the ways in which these stories shed light on our culture and hold powerful people to account. We will learn and practice these skills together, and I hope that you will draw upon what you learned in this course long into your journalistic careers.

Course Outcomes: By the end of this semester, you should be able to do the following.

- Identify a compelling and timely profile subject
- Approach that subject, establish a rapport, and gain some access to their lives
- Interview primary and secondary sources thoughtfully, rigorously, and compassionately
- Write a successful pitch to a magazine editor
- Conduct thorough background research into the life of your profile subject
- Identify and interview valuable secondary sources to learn about your subject

- Interview people in a way that gains their trust and allows them to share vulnerable truths about themselves
- Create a clear and engaging narrative structure for your profile
- Navigate the unique ethics of profile writing
- Identify key narrative scenes and useful dialogue to shed light on your profile subject
- Know when to insert yourself in a story, when to leave yourself out, and why
- Strike a tone for a profile somewhere on the spectrum between “puff piece” and “takedown”
- Engage in editorial critiques and suggestions for your fellow classmates
- Edit, revise, and fact-check your profile based on editorial guidance and your own reporting instincts to produce writing that is clean, polished, and unassailable

This course addresses the values and competencies Included in The Montana Dozen:

- Demonstrate an understanding of truth, accuracy and fairness
- Understand and apply principles of freedom of speech
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of media
- Demonstrate an understanding of diversity
- Demonstrate visual literacy skills and understanding
- Understand ethics and act ethically
- Think critically and creatively
- Research and evaluate information
- Critically evaluate work and appropriate audiences
- Write correctly and clearly
- Apply basic numerical concepts
- Use appropriate tools and technology

Assignments and Grading: Your grade for this course will be based on multiple grading items. Individual assignments will be discussed in class. The culmination of this course will be a feature-length profile of at least 2,000 words including at least four secondary sources. We will build toward this ultimate goal with several preparatory assignments. If done well, the final product could be a pitched to a publication.

All assignments must be completed in Microsoft Word. Grades will be based on cleanliness of copy, originality, reporting, and structure. Errors of spelling, grammar, misspelled names, and factual errors will result in 5 points off for each mistake. Grading items for this course include:

- Class attendance and participation – 15%
- Weekly reading responses – 15%
- General assignments – 20%
- Feature-length profile (rough draft) – 25%
- Feature-length profile (final draft) – 25%

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. **I will grade on a**

professional scale. This means a grade of 90 percent and above is reserved for features that could, without major revisions, be published by respected news outlets.

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

Graduate Increment: In addition to all other class assignments, graduate students will interview an experienced profile writer on a topic of my choosing. The graduate student will then lead the class in a discussion on that topic and will use that interview to create a tip-sheet highlighting key takeaways on the subject that will be made available to the *Kaimin*.

Reading: The best way to improve your writing is to read. Every week in this course I will assign a feature-length magazine profile. You will be required to write a 250-350-word reading response which will help form the basis of our class discussion. In addition to these profiles, I will also assign selected readings from our textbook: **“Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers’ Guide From the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University.”** Please obtain a copy of this book as soon as possible.

Attendance: We have 28 classes together this semester. I expect you to attend every class. If, for some very good reason, you cannot attend, I expect to be notified in advance. You are required to collect the reading and any other assignments from that class.

Holidays: We will not have class on Monday, Sept. 5 (Labor Day), and on Wednesday, Nov. 23 (Thanksgiving Eve).

Equipment: You will need notebooks and a recording device. If you don’t have one (or your phone does not have a voice recorder), you will need to check one out. Please see Professor Keith Graham for those procedures.

Phones/Technology in Class: We live in distracted times. Please show me and your classmates respect by silencing and putting away your phones. I prefer that your notes be taken by hand. I expect your full attention and engagement in every class. That is a baseline expectation. If you cannot give me that, please do not take this class.

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. Please familiarize yourself with the [Student Conduct Code](#).

- **Plagiarism and fabrication:** As a journalist, your credibility is your only currency. If you copy work, invent facts, doctor quotes, or take part in any form of misinformation you undermine yourself and the entire institution of journalism. Like any editor, I will expect complete transparency in the way you conduct your reporting. Occasionally I may ask difficult and uncomfortable questions about your work. Your answers must be honest and forthright.
- **Do not recycle work** from past or current classes or from the *Kaimin*. This class is about creating new work and learning together. Recycled, plagiarized, or dishonest work will result in an “F” for the assignment, and could result in an “F” for the course.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities: The university is committed to making this course accessible to otherwise qualified students with disabilities. Please see me to request reasonable program modifications. The Office for Disability Equity will assist us in this process. For more information, visit UM’s [Office for Disability Equity](#) online.

UM School of Journalism Mission Statement: The mission of The University of Montana School of Journalism is to provide students with a professional education in journalism; to teach them to think critically, act ethically, and communicate effectively; to help them understand the challenges and changes in the news media; and to inspire them to use their talents to improve journalism and enhance a diverse and democratic society.

About me: I was born in Denver. My father is British, my mother American. We lived in India when I was young, and I graduated from high school in the foothills of the Himalayas. Before college, I spent a year teaching English in Laos. In 2003, I came to the University of Montana to study journalism, and also because I really liked fly fishing. I graduated in 2007 and spent a year freelancing around Asia for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Newsweek*, and other publications. After that, I lived in Cincinnati and worked for Xavier University while continuing to write freelance magazine stories. In 2012, I moved back to Montana and married my wife, Hilly McGahan, a fellow UM alum. I’ve been freelancing ever since. In 2020, I won a National Magazine Award for a profile I wrote about my father-in-law, published in *The Georgia Review*.

I have two sons, aged 8 and 5. I bake muffins and sourdough bread. It’s a good day when I get the Wordle in three. I like to run, fly fish, and play the guitar. I’m an aspirational rock climber currently unpacking a lifelong fear of heights.

Important Note: This syllabus, course assignments, and our class schedule are **subject to change**. This course will be flexible, and I will adjust it according to current events, guest speakers, instructional needs and other factors.