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### JRNL 170.01: Elements of News Writing

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## JRNL 170/Elements of News Writing

Section 1, MW 8:10 to 9:30, DAH 004  
Professor Dennis Swibold  
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Journalistic writing is unlike any other. It values clarity and frugality. It demands active language and vivid details. It hates wordiness, jargon and bureaucratese. The best of it sounds conversational but is always grounded in good grammar and impeccable style.

Successful students in this course will learn the fundamentals of news writing, from commas to captions, from what makes the news to how its shaped into a readable story, from the correct handling of quotations to the proper use of semicolons, from The Associated Press' rules on ages (always a numeral, unless it starts a sentence) to its insistence that Xerox is never a verb.

Your understanding of the elements of news writing will become the foundation for your reporting adventures to come.

### *Course outcomes*

By the end of this course, successful students will have:

- Sharpened their news judgment.

- Honed their skills in grammar, usage and punctuation.
- Explored AP style and learned how to use the stylebook as a resource.
- Identified and written news stories in online, print and broadcast formats.
- Developed an ear for good quotations and learned to use them effectively.
- Written captions that went beyond the obvious.
- Crafted headlines that reflected the essence and tone of news stories.

### *How we'll do that*

We'll gauge your progress through frequent exercises, writing assignments and quizzes on the news and points of grammar and style. In fact, every class will feature a quiz or exercise on one of these things. That means you need to attend every class.

It also means that you'll need to follow the news. Be prepared to discuss what's happening globally and locally by reading the Missoulian, the Kaimin and a national/international site like the New York Times, the Washington Post, the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera America. Start following journalists you admire on social media.

### *Ground rules*

Did I say that you must need to attend every class? Here's another reason why: You will not be allowed to make up work that you miss due to an unexcused absence, and you can't get an excused absence without prior permission from the instructor. Good excuses include illness and death, and that's about it.

### *Building access*

For after-hours access to the rooms and doors listed below, please complete and submit [this form](#) before Feb. 6. Complete only one request per semester. Be sure to select all courses you are taking which pertain to Don Anderson Hall. Here's the link again: (<http://jour.umt.edu/current-students/afterhoursaccess/default.php>)

### *Texts*

Please buy "Working With Words," a writing handbook for journalists. You'll find a summary of wire service style in the back, but if you're really serious about journalism, go ahead and buy the AP Stylebook. (I use the online edition because it's constantly updated.)

## *Grading*

- Participation (exercises and quizzes): 20 percent
- Writing assignments: 50 percent
- Midterm: 15 percent
- Final: 15 percent

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, although the final grade (per requirement) will be given as a letter grade. The equivalents are as follows:

90 - 100 percent: A  
80 - 89 percent: B  
70 - 79 percent: C  
60 - 69 percent: D  
0 - 59 percent: F

UM's plus/minus system also makes the following distinctions:

A: 95-100  
A-: 90-94  
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: Below 60

Fair warning: Expect to receive a zero on any you fail to hand in by the deadline. Your course grade can't survive many zeroes.

### *Additional requirements*

Academic honesty: Misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the university. Students need to be familiar with the [Student Conduct Code](#).

No double dipping

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 of this course. Doing so without permission will result in an F for the assignment, and could result in an F for the course.

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](#) will assist the instructor and student in the accommodation process.

### *Course schedule (Subject to change)*

Week 1 – What's news? I'll provide an overview of the course, and we'll begin by discussing what makes something newsworthy. We'll also look at journalistic writing to see how it's different from other kinds of writing – and from conversation, for that matter. We consider different types of news stories, examine their elements, and learn what they're called. We'll prepare for weekly quizzes on news, punctuation, grammar and AP style.

Week 2 – We'll critique your first stories, focusing on your news judgment and sense of journalistic style, which values accuracy, clarity and brevity and depends on vivid language, precise grammar, perfect punctuation and good spelling. We'll discuss the distinction between writing news and writing commentary.

Week 3 – We'll take a closer look at the beginning sentences of news stories. Journalists call them leads (or ledes). We'll study various approaches to writing leads for basic sorts of news stories, many of which depend on which aspect of the story is the most newsworthy.

Week 4 – We'll write some more leads, and discuss how to write the rest of a basic story. We'll look at how good news writers end their stories.

Week 5 – Recognizing good quotations and using them well is a hallmark of good reporting. We'll study what makes a good quote, and how to handle their attribution and punctuation. We'll write a basic news story that includes quotes.

Week 6 – Note-taking is an essential skill, so we'll show you some strategies for doing that. We'll test your ability with some skill building exercises. We'll also look at some of the most commonly misused or confused words and phrases. Expect a quiz on that.

Week 7 – We'll learn to write a short feature and developing story for an online audience. We'll also review for the midterm, which will be an objective, comprehensive exam covering the topics explored so far.

Week 8 – I'll give you a midterm this week. After that, we'll prepare to cover an out-of-class event.

Weeks 9 and 10 – Event coverage.

Weeks 11 and 12 – We'll read a few good feature stories, and dissect them. You'll see how great writers use telling detail to make their readers see, hear or even smell their subjects. You'll explore story structure and the literary tricks they use keep a narrative galloping along to the finish. I'll have you write a profile.

Week 13 – Increasingly, all journalists have to craft captions to draw attention to explain their photos and draw attention to the accompanying stories. We'll introduce you the art and conventions of writing accurate headlines that get noticed and clicked on.

Week 14 – We'll introduce you to writing for the ear and the eye, and show you the rudiments of broadcast style. We'll practice by transforming short hard news and feature stories for online and print outlet into scripts for radio and television.

Week 15 – We'll wrap up our introduction to broadcast writing and review what learned throughout the course to prepare you for a final exam. The test will include both writing and editing components to assess what you've learned in the course.