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## JRNL 170.03: Elements of News Writing

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## JRNL 170/Elements of News Writing

MWF 11:10 a.m. to noon, DAH 004

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Office hours: Monday, Wednesday and Friday noon-2 p.m.;

Tuesday and Thursday, 12:30 p.m.-2 p.m., or by appointment

### Introduction

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 news to how facts are 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's at the start of a sentence) to its insistence that Xerox is never a verb. Ideally, as a result of this course, you will spend the rest of your lives flinching at misspelled menus (never “*ice* tea”) and ungrammatical instructions (“Anyone taking this course will spend the rest of *their* life appreciating good grammar.” Face palm.)

Your understanding of the elements of news writing will become the foundation for your reporting adventures TK (that's journospeak for “to come.”)

### Course objectives

By the end of this course, successful JRN170 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.

### 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, which means you need to attend every class.

Each class also will feature a short current events quiz. That means you'll need to follow the news. Be prepared to discuss what's happening around the world and in you town by reading the Missoulian, the Kaimin and a national/international news 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 mention that you need to attend every class? Remember, this class will be treated like a journalism job. Late to class is late to work. A working reporter who shows up late to a story gets beaten on that story. Unacceptable. Here's another reason why: You won't 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. Missing class will affect (not *effect*, by the way) your grade.

### Texts

- "Working With Words," a writing handbook for journalists. You'll find a summary of wire service style in the back.
- Not required, but a short, easy-to-use reference is the Associated Press Guide to Punctuation (about \$10).
- If you're really serious about journalism, go ahead and buy the AP Stylebook. The [online edition](#) is constantly updated, and you can access it for free from the Mansfield Library's site. But you're better off buying the hard copy (about \$20). You'll use it the rest of your life. Follow the Stylebook on Twitter, @APStylebook.

### Course schedule (Subject to change)

**Week 1** – What's news? An overview of the course, with discussion of 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, grammar and AP style.

**Week 2** – We'll critique your first stories, focusing on news judgment and journalistic style, which values accuracy, clarity and brevity and depends on vivid language and precise grammar and spelling. We'll discuss the important 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 ledes (old school for leads). We'll study various approaches to writing ledes for basic news stories, many of which depend on which aspect of the story is most newsworthy.

**Week 4** – We'll write some more ledes, and discuss how to write the rest of a basic story. We'll look at how good news writers end their stories. Read Chapter 9 in the text on punctuation, and be ready for a quiz.

**Week 5** – Recognizing good quotations and using them well is a hallmark of good reporting. We'll study what makes a good quote and learn how to handle their attribution and punctuation. We'll write a basic 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 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** – Midterm! 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. You'll 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 online and print stories into scripts for radio.

**Week 15** – We'll wrap up our introduction to broadcast writing and review what learned throughout the course to prepare you for a final assignment. You'll have to write short stories for publication and broadcast.

## HOMEWORK AND ASSIGNMENTS

Assignments will include increasingly ambitious articles/scripts as the course progresses. Writing and reading assignments will be discussed in class and posted on the UM Online/Moodle site for this class. You're responsible for checking it. ([Log in with your NetID](#)) I won't track you down to let you know you've missed one. Missing an assignment is like missing deadline; i.e., unacceptable. And, it hurts your grade. I'll send email via UM online/Moodle to your university address. Failure to check your university email is not an acceptable excuse for missing information.

## Grading

- Participation (attendance and quizzes): 20 percent
- Writing assignments: 50 percent
- Midterm: 10 percent
- Final: 20 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

Writing and radio assignments will be evaluated according to how well you incorporate what's learned in class and readings, and what your skills bring to a story. They'll be judged on accuracy, news judgment, clarity, completeness and fairness. Grammar and spelling count as do, within reason, the rules of journalistic style. Check your work before you turn it in. Use grammar and spellcheck in Word.

A misspelled name is the No. 1 sin of journalism. If you hear someone's name as someone John Smith, chances are it's Jon Smythe. Always ask. Misspelled names and other obvious factual mistakes will count heavily against your grade for that assignment.

Grades will reflect professional standards. The closer an assignment to being publishable/airable, the better the grade.

Missed deadlines are not an option in this class or in journalism. Unless you make prior arrangements with me, an assignment submitted after the deadline will earn a 0. Your grade can't survive many of those.

Once again, treat the class like a job. Meet your deadlines. Get the instructor's permission in advance for any necessary absence. Be thoughtful and engaged. Grades are 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. Please note: a 70/C is the minimum passing grade for JRNL classes. You will not receive credit toward the requirements of a Journalism degree if you earn lower than a 70/C in this class.

### Homework and assignments

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you've missed one. Missing an assignment is like missing deadline; i.e., unacceptable. And, it hurts your grade. I'll send email via UM online/Moodle to your university address. Failure to check your university email is not an acceptable excuse for missing information.

### 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.

### Plagiarism

As defined by "The University of Montana Student Conduct Code," plagiarism is: "Representing another person's original works, ideas, data, notes, or other materials as one's own." This is strictly prohibited in this class, and any case of plagiarism in this course will be subject to the penalties outlined in the student code of conduct. In addition, fictions (made-up facts, made-up people) presented as journalism are grounds for immediate failure.

### Building Access

For after-hours access to the rooms and doors listed below, please complete and submit the [after-hours access form](#) by 5 p.m. Friday, Feb. 6. Complete only one request per semester. Be sure to select all courses you are taking that pertain to Don Anderson Hall, and include information in the "Comments Section" (300/400-level courses) to further clarify your request.

### 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. For more information, visit the [DSS website](#).

### Writing assessment:

This course requires an electronic submission (via Moodle) of an assignment stripped of your personal information to be used for educational research and assessment of the university's writing program. Your paper will be stored in a database. A random selection of papers will be assessed by a group of faculty and staff using a rubric developed from the following writing learning outcomes.

Compose written documents that are appropriate for a given audience or purpose

- Formulate and express opinions and ideas in writing
- Use writing to learn and synthesize new concepts
- Revise written work based on constructive feedback
- Find, evaluate, and use information effectively
- Begin to use discipline-specific writing conventions (largely style conventions like APA or MLA)
- Demonstrate appropriate English language usage