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JRNL 370.01: Public Affairs Reporting

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Journalism 370 Public Affairs Reporting

Meets Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:40 p.m. – 2 p.m., in DAH 210

Instructor

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Office Hours

Monday and Wednesday, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

And by Appointment

Course Description

Beginning today, I am your city editor, and you are my beat reporters. Unlike standard beat reporters, who often spend years sinking their teeth into a single topic area, you will spend a couple of weeks, or less, covering police, courts, city hall, public schools and higher education. During the 15 weeks we are together, you will learn the basics of covering local government and writing about the key issues that affect a community. In the process, you'll gain experience making sources, rooting out public information, and digging for documents and data that help break big stories. You will learn to write factual information and differentiate it from hype, spin, speculation or opinion. You will learn the elements of a good story, how to pitch editors and the nuts-and-bolts skills of turning a good story idea into a killer read.

Beat reporters are the core of a news organizations. There's little that's more fun, or more challenging. Your beat is your turf, a wide-open playing field full of stories that you own. Beat reporting is also competitive, consuming and very hard work. So is this course. You will often be responsible for reporting and writing one story, or more, a week. I'll edit each of your stories, many of which will need to be rewritten. The pace is fast, but it's the pace you'll need to run if you want to do the job.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the semester, you will:

- Experience covering police agencies, local government, criminal- and civil-court proceedings, schools and other government institutions.
- Ability to generate interesting, useful story ideas.
- Improved reporting and writing skills applicable to all types of writing.
- Experience writing breaking news on deadline.

- An understanding of government organization and functions.
- An appreciation of the societal value of public affairs reporting.
- An understanding of access to and use of public records.
- Familiarity with news beats and methods for successful beat coverage.
- An understanding of ethical and professional challenges of reporting public affairs.
- Necessary skills needed for reporting internships with news organizations.
- Experience writing about diversity and reporting in diverse cultures
- Learn to accurately use numbers and math in a journalism context
- Use writing to learn and synthesize new concepts
- Formulate and express written ideas that are developed, logical, and organized
- Compose news stories that are appropriate for a given audience, purpose and context
- Revise stories based on constructive comments from an editor
- Find, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically
- Demonstrate appropriate English language usage

Course Policies

- **This course requires significant time spent reporting off-campus.** You must commit some Monday evenings to firsthand coverage of Missoula City Council meetings. Court proceedings and other coverage also require an extraordinary commitment of time and local travel.
- **Classroom discussion is an essential part of this course.** Attendance and active classic participation are essential to your grade. That means completing assigned reading and other homework before class. You are also expected to read and think like a journalist. If you are adequately conversant on the news, we'll enjoy excellent discussion. If not, there will be news quizzes. As for the participation grade, you'll lose 5 percentage points for every unexcused absence.
- **All writing for this class must be original.** As stated in the University of Montana Student Conduct Code, you may not submit for this course any assignment that you have submitted or will submit for another class or publication, unless you receive prior approval from me. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You may not recycle pieces previously written for publication. You must be able to identify the sources of all information you use. Upon request, you must provide story notes and contact information for all sources. Stories from this class that are published will receive extra credit.
- **Rules of integrity.** Cheating will not be tolerated. 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.
- **Plagiarism.** Submitted work must be entirely original; you may not copy or borrow phrasing or sentence structure, unless you attribute clearly. You may not take story ideas directly from the Missoulian, or any other newspaper, unless you plan to bring

something fresh to an old story. If you are uncertain about what is or is not appropriate, ask me. Submitting the work of someone else as your own is a serious violation of journalistic ethics and the University of Montana Student Conduct Code. An act of plagiarism will result in an F for the course and possible disciplinary sanction by the university.

- **Collaborative efforts.** Discussing stories among colleagues often helps you generate better story ideas, work through reporting challenges and improve your reporting and writing. Feel free to discuss your ideas and writing and seek feedback from other people. But the reporting and writing for this class must be your own.
- **Moodle.** Grades, the syllabus, class notes, some readings and assignments can be found at the UM Online/Moodle listing for this course. All email communication will happen through Moodle to your university-assigned addresses. It's your responsibility to check the Moodle site and your student email regularly. Not checking this address will not be an acceptable excuse for missing information about this course.
- **A note on paying attention in the Internet age.** Except when otherwise noted, this classroom is a device-free zone. Please put all gadgets (computers, phones, etc.) in your bag. Active participation requires your complete attention. Traveling in the online world will harm our discussion and hinder your grade.

Texts

- The AP Stylebook. No older than 2012. Online versions not acceptable.
- The New York Times, the Missoulian, the Kaimin and Poynter's Mediawire. Subscribe to the Times here with an education discount: [New York Times Educational Discount](#)

Grading

Your course grade will be based on an average of all individual assignments and quizzes, plus your participation. Here's the formula: Assignments and quizzes (80 percent) + participation (20 percent) = final grade.

Remember: You will often be required to rewrite stories you do for this course after receiving an edit. Every draft of a story will carry the same weight. Each draft will be considered an independent assignment.

Deadlines

Journalism is deadline-driven. A late assignment is a failed assignment. In rare instances involving documentable extenuating circumstances, such as hospitalization, I may grant an extension or, in the case of breaking news, make an alternative assignment. Please remember that a crummy story filed on deadline trumps an excellent one filed late.

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](http://life.umt.edu/dss) (<http://life.umt.edu/dss>) will assist in the accommodation process.

COURSE SCHEDULE (Subject to change)

Week 1 – Getting started

Introduction to Public Affairs Reporting—a boot camp approach. Practice writing a police story on deadline. Basics of AP style, using quotes, attribution, finding and using sources, etc. The art of the telephone interview.

In-class assignment – Write a crime story on deadline from a press release and PIO interview.

Week 2 – Crime, fires, crashes, and other pandemonium on the public safety beat
Reporting boot camp continued. Critique of week one story. Review news story structures.

In-class assignment – Second deadline crime story.

Week 3 – Cops continued

What's a story and how do I find them? Learn to find and pitch stories from a beat. Explore the lifecycle of a news story. Beyond breaking news – intro to other types of news stories. Pitch critiques.

Assignment – Three story pitches. Research and prepare pitches for a crime trend story.

Week 4 – More crime, intro to courts

Critique trend pitches. Introduction to reporting on criminal and civil legal proceedings.

Assignment—Write a crime trend story from one of your pitches.

Week 5 – Courts

How to find, read and understand court records. Learn to follow a case from an arrest to the prison system.

Assignment—Write a story incorporating details from a court record.

Week 6: Courts continued

Critique court record stories. Covering hearings and trials. Field trip to Missoula County Courthouse. Learn to search for court records.

Assignment—Write a daily deadline story on a hearing or an ongoing trial.

Week 7: Justice wrap-up, Intro to the city beat

Working the mafia beat. Skype visit from Michael Zuckerman, former USA Today reporter and editor and expert on organized crime, terrorism, cyber-security, the Justice Department and national security issues.

Intro to city hall reporting. Prep for Monday's Missoula City Council meeting.

Assignment – Write a preview of Monday's City Council meeting. Due in class Monday

Week 8: City beat continued

Continue prep for Monday's City Council meeting

Assignment—Write a story on the council meeting

Week 9: Reporting the issue story. Understanding diversity. Reporting in diverse communities.

How to find and write an issue story. Reporting and writing in diverse communities.

Assignment—Write an issue story that reflects cultural diversity.

Week 10: Advancing the story

Learn to develop and write an issue folo.

Assignment—Develop pitched for an issue folo and write the approved pitch.

Week 11: Digging deeper on the city beat

How to read a city budget. Finding stories in the agate type. Skype visit with Dave Levinthal, a former Houston Chronicle city hall reporter who now covers political spending in Washington, D.C.

Assignment—Three story pitches from the budget.

Week 12: Reporting on public officials. The art of the profile

Learn to cover politicians and elections beyond the horse race. Learn to write a strong profile of a public figure.

Assignment—Write a profile of a public official.

Week 13: The elements of investigative reporting

Finding investigative stories in your beat. The Gene Roberts “two notebook” method of making a name for yourself as a journalist. Critique candidate profiles. Leaks and documents, how to get them, how to use them. Reporting the data-driven story. Intro to Microsoft Excel.

Assignment—Find, pitch and write a story incorporating data or documents.

Week 14: Higher Education

Learn to report on public schools, community colleges, and for-profit schools.

Assignment—Localize a national story on K-12 or higher education.

Week 15: Law, ethics, and public affairs journalism

Review education story. Ethics of public affairs journalism. Feedback and student evaluations.