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JRNL 170.02: Elements of News Writing

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JRNL 170/Elements of News Writing

Section 1, MW 11:10 to noon, DAH 004
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Journalistic writing is unlike any other. It values accuracy, clarity and economy. It demands active language and vivid details. It hates wordiness, jargon and pompous sounding talk. At its best, it sounds conversational but is always grounded in good grammar, precision 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's at the start of 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 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 on one of these things, which means you need to attend every class.

It also means that you'll need to follow the news. So be prepared to discuss what's happening around the world and in your town by reading the Missoulian, the Kaimin and a national/international news site like the New York Times, the Washington Post, the BBC and CNN. 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.

Building access

For after-hours access to the rooms and doors listed below, please complete and submit [this form](#) before Feb. 5. Complete only ONE request per semester. Be sure to select all courses you are taking in Don Anderson Hall.

Reading for class

Please buy a copy of "News Reporting and Writing" by the Missouri Group (Tenth Edition). You can use it for the next reporting class, so if you can find a used copy, buy it and hang on to it for a while. You'll use it for the next reporting course, so it's a good value. If you're really serious about journalism, go ahead and buy the AP Stylebook. I'd recommend the online edition because it's constantly updated. Then again, if you're working from a computer on campus, you'll find a free version at the Mansfield Library site. (See moodle for a link.)

You're also expected to keep up with the news, and that means local, national and global news. You'll find lots of story ideas if you do. Many reporters start their

careers by finding new facts or angles on stories that have already broken. Expect quizzes from time to time.

Grading

- Participation (attendance, 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 conform to this 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:

| | |
|-----------|-------------|
| A: 95-100 | C-: 70-72 |
| A-: 90-94 | D+: 67-69 |
| B+: 87-89 | D: 63-66 |
| B: 83-86 | D-: 60-62 |
| B-: 80-82 | F: Below 60 |
| C+: 77-79 | |
| C: 73-76 | |

☐ Fair warning: Expect to receive a zero on assignments you fail to hand in by the deadline. Your grade can't survive many of those.

Additional requirements

Nothing sinks a young journalist in the workplace faster than a lazy approach to work and deadlines. That will sink your grade in this course too.

Academic honesty

Fabricating facts or sources or plagiarizing someone else's work will earn you an F for the assignment and perhaps for the course. Journalists are valued for their original reporting. If you must refer to the work of others, quote it directly and attribute it. (Bear in mind that journalists who do too much of this aren't doing much original reporting.)

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. For more information, visit <http://life.umt.edu/dss>.

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 and how to write it today's simplest and most powerful form: a Tweet. If you can write a good Tweet, you can write good headlines and leads, which form the beginnings of other kinds of news writing. We will consider those different types of news stories, examine their elements, and learn what they're called. We'll prepare for weekly quizzes on current events, grammar and AP style, and we'll have you write a first story from information provided in class.

Supplemental reading in text: What is news, how different media present the news, p. 5-7; Using Twitter, see Moodle page; AP Style summary, p. 500-506.

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 and precise grammar and spelling. We'll discuss the important distinction between writing news and writing commentary. We'll have to talk about the pitfalls of libel and slander too.

Supplemental reading in the text: Twenty Common Errors of Grammar and Punctuation, p. 491-499; Libel and Copyright, p. 495-462.

Week 3

We'll take a deeper look at the beginnings of news stories. Journalists call them stories about urgent news or not-so-urgent news, etc. We'll look at lots of good examples of those different types of stories and the demands they place on reporters.

Supplemental readings in the text, Chapter 9 (Inverted Pyramid), p. 169-192.; Chapter 10 (Storytelling, p. 195-217; Chapter (Alternatives, Chapter 11, p. 221-238.

Week 4

We'll write more leads and discuss how to write the rest of a basic story. We'll look at how good news writers end their stories, and we'll begin to look at the importance of good sources and learn how to get good quotations or sound bites that add life and spice to the best stories.

Supplemental readings in the text: Writing for the Web, p. 247-266.

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 story that includes quotes.

Supplemental readings in the text: Chapter 5, p. 83-104.

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 more of the most commonly misused or confused words and phrases. Expect a quiz on that.

Supplemental reading in the text: Twenty Common Errors of Grammar and Punctuation, p. 491-499

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.

Supplemental readings in the text: Writing for the Web, p. 247-266.

Week 8

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

Supplemental readings: Review Twenty Common Errors of Grammar and Punctuation, p. 491-499 and AP Style summary, p. 500-506.

Weeks 9 and 10

Event coverage.

Supplemental readings in the text: Chapter 15, p. 318-331.

Week 11 (No classes, Spring Break)

Week 12 and 13

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 short profile.

Supplemental readings on writing profiles: Tips from the [New York Times](#), [Putting Personality on Paper](#), [Poynter.org](#), [Portraits in Grief](#), Examples from Nieman's [Storyboard](#)

Week 14

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. See Moodle for handouts and examples.

Supplemental readings online: [Poynter tips](#), [KU's tips](#). See handouts and a Powerpoint on Moodle.

Week 15

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.

Supplemental reading: See handouts with tips and sample scripts on Moodle.

Week 16

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.