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JRNL 362.01: Feature Writing

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feature writing

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Yet, many of us proles also care about the language, in our humble way, and care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper.
–Stephen King, "On Writing"

The editor is always right.
–Stephen King, "On Writing"

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

Writing is hard. If you already know this, this class will help you come to a more intimate knowledge of that truth. If you do not think writing is hard, this class will prove you are wrong. But writing features can also be incredibly rewarding, especially when you refuse to half-ass the reporting and when you turn that rare phrase that makes your nailbeds tingle. In this class, you will write. A lot. You'll go beyond hard news without sacrificing timeliness and relevance. You'll tell stories with a sense of voice, pacing, tone, mood, narrative, dialogue and detail that is just enough and not too much. You'll care about language and how it sounds or you will not enjoy this class.

Through this course, you will become better writers by reporting numerous features, with feedback to focus on detail, structure, storytelling and style. You will workshop ideas, pitch successfully and study the work of professional feature writers and your classmates by reading them not as reader, but as a writer, dissecting, questioning and learning.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the semester, successful students will:
- Write feature stories of publishable quality.
- Develop their eye for detail and their command of language and style.
- Improve their capacity to engage readers from lead to kicker.
- Meet all deadlines.

- Understand differences among types of features through varied assignments.
- Learn to provide constructive critiques to classmates in a workshop setting.
- Read and be able to analyze the work of professional feature writers.

PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Students must be in good standing in the J-School's professional program.

ABOUT MOODLE/UM ONLINE

I use it for this class. You will, too! Grades and all reading and writing assignments will be posted there as you receive them. You'll also find rundowns of what I teach along with links to stories we'll read and talk about.

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

There will be six major assignments in this class (the last one counts as three: the pitch, the first half and the full feature). All major assignments must be filed by deadline via email as an attached doc (.doc, .docx preferred). Deadlines and word counts are listed, but subject to change. Final deadlines will be announced in class and posted to Moodle.

The major assignments, in order, are:

- ***The Personal Feature:*** You will interview at least one person close to you and tell a specific story about *something that happened*. You'll do it with some nice quotes and a few sweet details in a story that has a clear beginning, middle and end.
  WORD COUNT: Writer's choice, but around 800.
  WORKING DEADLINE: Wednesday, Feb. 3, midnight

- ***The Reported Obituary:*** You'll revive a lost art, that of the obit writer who interviews the family and friends of someone recently deceased. Your obits will include but go beyond the obvious details of someone's job and whom they left behind to get to the real heart of how someone lived. This assignment will probably scare the crap out of you. And make you better for it.
  WORD COUNT: 800-1,000
  WORKING DEADLINE: Sunday, Feb, 28, midnight

- **The Tragedy Feature:** This is a big and important assignment where the reporting cannot be done at the last minute. You'll find the compelling, human angle within hard news by focusing on a crime, criminals, victims of tragedy or any combination of the three. The idea is: Something bad happened; your story tries to make sense if it. This story will require an approved pitch. The pitch will count as 20 percent of your grade. So make it good.
  WORD COUNT: At least 1,000
  WORKING PITCH DEADLINE: Sunday, March 6, 1 p.m.
  WORKING DEADLINE: Tuesday, March 22, midnight

- **The Longform Pitch:** Getting an idea that works for a multitiered longform feature is tough. Getting an editor to say yes to it is tougher. So you'll have to take this seriously and convey you know what a feature pitch should contain: A clear idea of the story, why it matters, how you plan to report and write it, etc. You must get an approved pitch to pass this assignment. If the first pitch is no good, you'll keep at it until you're approved.
  WORD COUNT: Longer than a paragraph, shorter than the story you're pitching
  WORKING DEADLINE: Monday, March 28, midnight

- **The Longform Narrative** (filed in two parts and counting as two assignments): You'll take what you've learned through other assignments, readings, critiques and edits to write a story worthy of about 4,000 words. You'll file the first half of the story, incorporating feedback, before filing the story in its entirety. Part 1 is NOT considered a "rough" draft. Part II counts as your final.

  - *PART 1 [NOT A ROUGH DRAFT]*
    WORD COUNT: 2,000-3,000
    WORKING DEADLINE: Sunday, April 24, midnight
  - *ENTIRE FEATURE*
    WORD COUNT: 4,000-5,000
    WORKING DEADLINE: Tuesday, May 3, midnight.

READING ASSIGNMENTS

You'll do a good amount of reading in this class from materials provided to you by me. These will take four forms:
- The assigned text: *Obit* by James Sheeler
- Features by pros that serve as inspiration for assignments and discussions.
- Writings about writing by writers.

- Your classmates' work in advance of workshop critiques.
Note: All reading assignments are fodder for quizzes, announced and not.

GRADING

Major Assignments: 85 percent
Attendance, Participation and Final Assessment by Instructor: 15 percent

Rewrites: Not accepted after final deadline. Do your best the first time around. Most of your assignments will benefit from instructor feedback and peer-to-peer workshops prior to final deadline, but I don't have time to line-edit you twice.

Attendance: *COME TO CLASS AND COME ON TIME.* You'll find I'm more into this than other profs. Being here when class starts matters. I'll be keeping a list of all unexcused absences and people rolling in late. At the end of the semester, that list will be considered when deciding what ends up being 15 percent of your final grade.

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
    50 - 59 percent: F

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

Please note: My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those assignments that could, without major revisions, be accepted by working editors at respected publications. Students who expect an easy A in this course should reconsider taking it.

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

- Always check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax. This is a writing course. Students may find it helpful to read their assignments out loud and, thereby, catch awkward phrases. Sloppy copy errors will be reflected in final grades.

- Again: ***Reread your assignments for spelling, punctuation and grammar before you file your copy to me.*** I'm a former copy editor and a current copy nerd. It matters; trust me. If you suck at grammar and spelling, let Word help you and/or find a peer who doesn't suck to edit you first.

- ***All major assignments must include a list of sources and contact information for them.*** Most editors reserve the right to call your sources and check accuracy. That is true in this class, as well.

- Be sure to follow the Associated Press Style Book. There is a partial online guide here: http://www.wwu.edu/journalism/syllabi/207labmanual.htm. A better online source is posted on the class Moodle page. Or just buy the damn thing. You'll be glad you did.

- The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction by supporting collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students. If you have a disability that requires an accommodation, contact your instructor during the first week of the semester so that proper accommodations can be provided. Please contact Disability Services for Students if you have questions, or call Disability Services for Students (DSS) for voice/text 406.243.2243. You may also fax the Lommasson Center 154 for more information 406.243.5330.

- Academic Misconduct and the Student Conduct Code: All students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/Index.cfm/page/1321. And, more on

academic honesty, is available here: http://life.umt.edu/vpsa/student_conduct.php

- *PLAGIARIASM:* Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.

- *DOUBLE-DIPPING*: **You may not submit for this course any assignment or variation on an assignment that was, or will be concurrently, submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course.** To do so without **documented** permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course. You are, however, encouraged to publish any and all work you do for this class.