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JRNL 362.50: Feature Writing

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J362 Feature Writing: Course Syllabus

Instructor: Courtney Lowery Cowgill
Fall 2018

E-mail: courtney.cowgill@mso.umt.edu

Phone: 406-531-4794 (Personal cell. Urgent or scheduled calls only. E-mail is preferred.)

Office Hours: I am not on campus so will not have physical office hours. But, we can Skype or chat via phone whenever -- just schedule something that works for you.

CLASS DATES AND LOCATION:

This online class runs from Aug. 27 to Dec. 16 and is available through Moodle. Most of the course you'll be able to work around your other schedules and do at your own pace throughout the week but we will have an hour-long meeting via video chat once a month. You don't have to make all of the video chats, but you should plan to attend one to get credit. If you attend more than one, you'll receive extra credit. These are informal chats meant to get to know one another, discuss good writing and connect. Think of them as virtual office hours

SPECIAL WRITING WORKSHOP:

We will have one optional in-person writing workshop on campus. Date, time and location to be announced.

BOOKS:

You do not have to buy a book for this course. But, here are a few recommended books: "Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University." You can [read parts of it online here](#). Others you should read: "The New Kings of Non-Fiction," by Ira Glass, and "Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker," by David Remnick. Also: I highly recommend finding one super book of literary non-fiction to read while taking this course to keep you inspired.

Finally, if you want to write long-form or if you want to freelance, read ALL the magazines. A few ideas: The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Nation, The Sun, High Country News, Harper's.

TECH RESOURCES:

Technical support for UMOonline and Moodle is available through the UMOonline Support Desk, 8am - 5pm, Monday through Friday at (406) 243-4999 or by email at umonline-help@umontana.edu.

IMPORTANT DATES:

Sept. 9: Personal essay writing exercise due.

Sept. 23: Pitch your profile.

Oct. 7: First draft of profile due.

Oct. 21: Pitch your final big long-form narrative ideas.

Oct. 28: “Notice what you notice” writing exercise due.

Nov. 4: Final draft of profile due.

Nov. 18: First draft of long-form narrative due.

Dec. 9: Final draft of long-form narrative due.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OUTCOMES

Students will learn and improve storytelling skills that include interviewing, reporting, curating and writing integral to feature stories, building on the traditional “hard news” styles they’ve encountered in prior classes. Successful students will learn the various genres of feature writing, explore how features have changed in the digital landscape, develop their own voice and style, learn the value of detail and nuance in storytelling. These skills will help prepare them for work as staffers or freelancers in newsrooms, online operations and magazines. There will be a heavy emphasis in this class on narrative storytelling across media.

PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Students must have successfully passed J270. Any experience writing feature stories for online or print publications is desirable, but not mandatory.

COURSE PARTICIPATION/COMPLETION CRITERIA

- Complete all course readings, activities, assignments and assessments.
- Participate regularly via the forums – posts should be thorough, thoughtful and timely. Clean copy counts; messy and careless copy counts against. Read over your work for spelling, grammar, missing words, etc., before posting.

GRADING

Feature assignments: Roughly 60 percent of your grade.

Forum discussions and writing exercises: 40 percent of your 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: Feature writing is a tough skill. Few do it well as beginners. My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those articles 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.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASSIGNMENTS AND COURSE STRUCTURE

Structure: The first half of the class will be somewhat of a seminar course – structured around small writing assignments, forums and laying the groundwork for the second half of the semester, in which you will write (and rewrite) your pants off.

Forums: With an online class and limited face-to-face engagement, your learning from other students and sharing of ideas will happen primarily in the forums. You will comment in each assigned forum, which will tend to be based on readings and assignments and you should take care in building on the comments from your fellow students. To earn a higher grade on forums, students must respond to each other, checking back throughout the week. Treat the forums as an interactive, engaging classroom, making it a priority to learn and grow as a group. Analytic, creative and courteous responses are required.

Feature assignments: You'll produce two features in this class. The first will be a knock-out personality profile. The second will be a long-form literary narrative. The first draft of the

narrative will be due in November but you are expected to start working on it (finding it, pitching it, reporting it, etc.) the first few weeks of class.

Both assignments will be heavily workshopped, so be ready to share your work with your classmates.

Also, be ready to rewrite. In this class, we will learn how to make our work better by working with editors (the most important one being yourself) and build on your pieces. That is why there are only two major assignments. You will work on those assignments throughout the semester. This is not a turn-your-piece-in-and-flee class. Features is a long game so this course is a long game. As William Zinsser put it, “rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.”

You won’t be spending any time listening to lectures in this class, but you WILL have as much one-on-one editing time with me as you want. Think of me as your own personal editor for the semester. The editor/writer relationship is so important in this craft and if you want to come out of this a better writer, be ready to invest ample time to the back-and-forth edits and brainstorming with me. That means taking initiative to ask questions and bounce ideas off of me. The purpose of my feedback is not just “correcting” your paper. It’s the two of us working as a team to make your pieces, and your writing, better.

Late assignments: I will not accept them unless there are truly extenuating circumstances.

Format: All assignments, including the features and smaller writing assignments, should be 12-point type, single spaced within paragraphs, double-space to separate paragraphs, one space between sentences. In other words: like the format of this syllabus.

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

- All writing assignments, unless otherwise noted in the learning units section of the course site, are due by 5:00 p.m. MST on Sunday of the week listed.
- Your first discussion board posts (you’ll need to post twice in each forum) should be posted by mid-week, generally Wednesdays.
- Please use Firefox as your browser (per advice of Moodle tech folks)
- 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. Three misspellings or a misspelled name is an automatic F. Consider yourself warned.
- Always fact-check your work. Only misspelled names will drop a grade faster than facts that are misconstrued or downright wrong. Again, consider yourself warned.
- Assignments must be labeled consistently: For example, the first writing assignment would be named like this: YourName_Freeform.doc. Please use an underscore (_) not a dash (-) to separate your name from the name of the assignment or other symbols.

- Be sure to follow AP style.

★ Fair warning: Expect to receive a zero on any assignment you fail to upload or post by the deadline. Your course grade can't survive many zeroes.

Plan ahead when submitting your assignments or hitting a discussion deadline. Computer malfunction is not a legitimate reason for a late assignment or post. I expect you to get in touch with me (ideally before the deadline) if there are extenuating circumstances in your life. I will address these on a case by case basis.

INSTRUCTOR FEEDBACK AND AVAILABILITY

You can expect all quizzes and writing assignments to be graded within 10 days. Forums will be graded within 5-7 days after the close of the forum. (Forums close on Sundays.) Per the guide on how to participate in forums, I will facilitate the discussions by weighing in on themes and connecting the dots and asking you further explore some ideas but I will not respond to each individual post.

I will be available on email Monday-Friday between the hours of 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. and you can expect a reply email from me less than 24 hours after sending me an email within those working hours unless I'm away – which I will notify you about as necessary.

I'm available for phone or Skype conversations as needed and prefer those to be set up by email so I can carve out the time. In general, try to request a phone call.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities and/or special needs should notify the instructor at his or her earliest convenience and contact Disabilities Services for Students, <http://www.umt.edu/dss/> or x2243.

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](#). More on academic honesty is available at this link.

PLAGIARISM

Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. I will be checking. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.

CLASS WORK – Double Dipping

You may not submit for this course any 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

permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course.

AFTER-HOURS ACCESS

For after-hours access to Don Anderson Hall, [complete and submit this form before 5 p.m. Friday, Sept. 7](#). Complete only one request form per semester – be sure to list all courses.