

MCM 360W.02: News Reporting

Credit: 3 Hours - Spring 2008

Meeting room: Rather Bldg. 205; 9:30-10:50 a.m. Tuesday-Thursday.

Instructor: Mike Blackman, Warner Chair visiting professor; **Office:** Rather 122.

Phone: 936-294-1335; 817-228-1614 (cell); 817-926-4238 (weekends)

Office hours: Monday: 3-7 p.m; Tuesday: 3-6 p.m. Wednesday: All day (by appointment). Thursday: 11-12:20; Friday: by appointment.

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Required materials

Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual

Strunk & White, *The Elements of Style*, and a good dictionary

Course Objectives

- To learn how to identify good stories and report them in detail, with accuracy, precision and in a highly organized and readable way;
- To understand a reporter's responsibility to handle subjects and sources with respect and care, while always maintaining ethical standards beyond reproach;
- To learn to write solid, well-crafted news stories – on deadline.

Methods

This course will be heavy on practical experience – that is, we will focus on how to find the story, dig for it and get it reported for publication or broadcast. This means mastering the basics – from interviewing and document research, to dealing with difficult sources to the writing/rewriting and editing of a story. In other words, we will approach this course much like we would if you were working in a professional newsroom.

You will be expected to keep up with news of the day; I will be giving occasional current-event quizzes. So read every chance you can the local newspapers, including the *Houstonian*, *Huntsville Item* and the *Houston Chronicle*. Get in the habit of reading the *New York Times* as much as possible; the Sunday paper would be a good start. The *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today* are also important to keep up with. (*While reading these stories, study the writers' styles and techniques for producing an engaging, informative and often entertaining articles.*) Read news on the Internet, watch TV news, local, network and cable. News programs on the radio also can be beneficial. We will also use daily news stories in occasional exercises and for analysis.

Required Work

This class includes lectures, quizzes, exams and vigorous discussion periods in which I expect all to participate. You will be writing weekly either stories or writing exercises; you will also have the opportunity to interview visiting professionals. Emphasis is on developing a level of writing suitable for publication. Course may be repeated as topics vary. (**Prerequisites:** MCM 132, 6 hours of ENG. Credit 3.)

Exams

Daily work: You will have at least six story assignments (and no more than eight) during the semester, including, but not limited to, news, feature, profile, column and deadline writing. One of these stories will serve as the **mid-term**. There will also be two tests covering the first four chapters of Strunk and Whites's *The Elements of Style*, and two from the AP Stylebook. The **final exam** will be a writing assignment.

Grading

Exercises, news quizzes & daily stories: 40 percent. Mid-term exam: 30 percent; Final exam: 30 percent. Extra credit: Extra credit is not likely. Should it be offered, it will be offered to all students.

Missed Assignments or Exams

The instructor must be notified beforehand if a student has to miss an exam or cannot turn in an assignment on the due date because of an excusable circumstance (as described under Attendance Policy). Makeup work must be completed by the following class meeting

Worth remembering

Don't miss class or your grades will suffer, for we're going to cover a lot of landscape fast. Don't be late. Be respectful of your classmates; in other words, don't distract them in class, because they may want to learn something. Pay attention, work hard, mind your manners and don't look for an easy or convenient way to build your stories. You deal with facts – that's your job – and you must dig diligently for them and handle them with all the care you can muster. Take a pledge to yourself: Your work will be error-free. You will check and double-check, and sometimes, just to be dead-solid-perfect sure, you'll check again.

Further, you'll never shade a story angle for sake of dramatics or tinker with a quote for convenience and readability. You fudge, that means you lie, and nobody likes a liar, certainly the boss. If you don't care about others' reputations – if you twist your subjects' words to make them look smarter, dumber, sillier, meaner, drunker, etc -- you surely should think of your own good name. So hard to build, so easy to lose -- your good name. Accuracy and precision – these are your lifelines in the reporting and writing trade.

Finally, don't become so enamored with your prose you can't bear to edit it. Big mistake. If you don't edit your own work ruthlessly, if you don't take the time to rewrite to get the phrasing, that word picture, just right, some indelicate editor will, taking unbridled delight retooling your precious prose. Trust me, you don't want that. Keep these thoughts in mind and you'll do well. Don't be afraid to ask questions or take a chance. Good luck.

Attendance Policy

Anyone with three (3) or more unexcused absences will have his/her grade reduced a letter. Anyone with as many as six (6) unexcused absences will be graded no higher than a D. More than six (6) unexcused absences will earn the student an F for the course.

Students may be excused for illness, family emergency or university or class-related business.

Academic Dishonesty

All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain complete honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The University and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of academic dishonesty including, but not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work which is to be submitted, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of resource materials.

The following definition of plagiarism – about as clear as you will find for our journalistic purposes, from the home of one of the nation’s leading journalism schools -- is borrowed from the University of Indiana Student Handbook:

Plagiarism is defined as presenting someone else’s work, including the work of other students, as one’s own. Any ideas or materials taken from another source for either written or oral use must be fully acknowledged, unless the information is common knowledge. What is considered “common knowledge” may differ from course to course.

a. A student must not adopt or reproduce ideas, opinions, theories, formulas, graphics, or pictures of another person without acknowledgment.

b. A student must give credit to the originality of others and acknowledge an indebtedness whenever:

- 1. Directly quoting another person’s actual words, whether oral or written;*
- 2. Using another person’s ideas, opinions, or theories;*
- 3. Paraphrasing the words, ideas, opinions, or theories of others, whether oral or written;*
- 4. Borrowing facts, statistics, or illustrative material; or*
- 5. Offering materials assembled or collected by others in the form of projects or collections without acknowledgment.*

A student in MCM 364 who plagiarizes will receive a failing grade on the assignment for the first offense. A second offense will result in more severe final semester grade penalty, up to and including an F for the course.

Americans with Disabilities Act

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired.

SHSU adheres to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If a student has a disability that may affect adversely his/her work in this class, then the student is encouraged to register with the SHSU Counseling Center and to talk with the instructor about how best to deal with the situation. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential. NOTE: no accommodation can be made until the student registers with the Counseling Center.

Religious Holidays

Section 51.911(b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. "Religious holy day" means a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20, Tax Code.

Visitors in the Classroom

Unannounced visitors to class must present a current, official SHSU identification card to be permitted into the classroom. They must not present a disruption to the class by their attendance. If the visitor is not a registered student, it is at the instructor's discretion whether or not then visitor will be allowed to remain in the classroom.

Instructor Evaluations

Near the end of the semester, students will be asked to complete a course/instructor evaluation form. .

Classroom Rules of Conduct

The Code of Student Conduct and Discipline is found at the following link:

<https://www.shsu.edu/students/guide/dean/codeofconduct.html>.