Media Writing

Spring 2020

MEDA-2311.001

MW 03:30-04:45 p.m. CCH-209

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Office hours: M 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; W 1-3 p.m. and by appointment

In today’s media world, content is king. This class combines mass and strategic communications content creation in journalism and public relations.

Journalistic reporting sounds simple. Observe something. Gather information. Tell/show people what you saw/learned/found out. Fact is, good reporting is hard. Good reporting is the heart of good journalism. Good reporting requires curiosity, critical and creative thinking, practice, dedication to finding and telling/showing the truth to the best of your ability, people skills, communication skills and, perhaps most important, a sense of purpose akin to a calling.

In this course we will study why journalism matters and the mechanics and art of good reporting. This course focuses on word reporting—on writing with words—with attention to visual reporting.

In public relations, the skills developed to create good journalism are used to help create content such as press releases, feature stories, newsletters, etc. Reaching audiences with authentic content is a focus of this class in the latter half.

In Media Writing we will explore five interconnected and equally important themes:

**Reading:** You need to read news to be good at reporting news. You will read news for two reasons: (1) To be informed about the worlds around you, which is the most basic expectation of any journalist, and (2) To analyze how news stories are reported and constructed. You are no longer simply consuming stories. You are finding and reporting them. You need to think like a reporter.

**Reporting and news values:** What is news? What is newsworthy? Although journalists are no longer the gatekeepers, journalism and journalistic values matter more than ever. Good journalism requires listening to the communities we cover, particularly to people who have been traditionally underrepresented in the news media. Ethical decision making and transparency are vital.
**Writing:** We will focus on words, sentences and paragraphs—and, especially important, how they fit together. Whatever kind of journalism or storytelling you do: You will have to write words. The words you choose and how you use them matter. Learning how to choose and use words well will help you succeed at everything you do.

**Grammar and style:** These are the tools of the craft. Used well, they are almost invisible, enhancing clear communication of your story. Used poorly, they detract from what you are trying to say—or even worse, they confuse the reader and prevent communication of your story. You will revise two stories. You want your writing to shine. That requires correct use of these tools.

**Audiences and authenticity:** These are the aims of good public relations writing and content. You will create content with those two values in mind.

**Course Objectives**

This course is about sharpening your skills as a journalist and deepening how you think about the principles that define good journalism. By the end of this class, you will be able to:

- Identify and apply news values. Specifically, you’ll be able to pinpoint the most newsworthy information in an interview, speech and event—and in news coverage you consume.
- Identify and evaluate sources. Specifically, you’ll be able to determine key sources to interview—if not by name, at least by describing the kind of people you’re looking for. You’ll also be able to determine who isn’t worth an interview—and to explain why.
- Evaluate how diversity—in sources, story ideas and journalists—makes a difference in news coverage. This is directly related to rebuilding trust in the news media, which much of the public has lost.
- Collect information through interviews, observation and background research. This is the fun part.
- Write clearly, concisely and correctly. This includes crafting strong sentences, especially news alerts and leads, and structuring stories logically. It also may include social media posts. This can also be fun. Really.
- Identify relevant audiences and how to reach them in an authentic way.

Achieving the above goals will require you to focus on the following:

- Asking good questions—and, equally important, good follow-up questions.
- Generating compelling and newsworthy story ideas and story angles.
- Applying journalism’s ethical principles to your reporting and writing.
- Asking yourself, “Who’s missing?” when you evaluate traditional news coverage.
- Consuming daily news coverage. Again: You must read news to write news.
- Understanding what makes for authentic and successful public relations content.

**Required text:** *2019 Associated Press Stylebook.* Always bring this with you. There is also an online/app version.
Readings

We will be discussing the news in class. This is part of the participation grade. You’ll also read and analyze selections to use as a model for your work. Here’s what you should read so we can have a common frame of reference for discussions and quizzes. And please don’t limit yourself to this list. You should always read/listen/watch all the news you can.

Local news, including the Caller Times and Island Waves, TV and radio, including the local stations, and PBS.


Class readings. I will post additional class readings on Blackboard.

Course assignments and grading:

More details regarding specific assignments will be given in class and on Blackboard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due*</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pulitzer presentation</td>
<td>Jan. 27</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leads</td>
<td>Feb. 13</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Briefs (2)</td>
<td>Feb. 7, Feb. 13</td>
<td>25 (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quotes</td>
<td>Feb. 16</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>AP style and grammar quizzes (4)</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>20 (4)</td>
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<td>News reflection (2)</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>25 (2)</td>
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<td>In-class exercises (ICE)</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>5 (12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 1</td>
<td>Feb. 21</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 2</td>
<td>March 6</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 2 revision</td>
<td>March 10</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>Story No. 3</td>
<td>March 20</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 3 revision</td>
<td>March 26</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 4</td>
<td>April 12</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story No. 4 revision</td>
<td>April 17</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Story pitch</td>
<td>Finals day</td>
<td>100</td>
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*Dates for the quizzes, reflections and presentations will be posted on the course website as the semester unfolds. Because journalism depends upon real-world events, which may change times, story dates may change at the instructor’s discretion.

Note: All four stories must have one visual/multimedia element from the following: 1-2 photos, 30- to 60-second video, audio interview or podcast, SoundSlides or infographic.

All assignments must be turned in on a Word doc, 12 point, double spaced, Times New Roman. Word counts vary by story and will be specified on the assignment on Blackboard.

Course grading

Grading for this course will be based on these percentages:
A: 90-100  
B: 80-89  
C: 70-79  
D: 60-69  
F: Below 60  

All stories are based on deadline-style requirements. Missing a deadline in news work is unacceptable. **A late assignment will lose points automatically**, so get it in early.

**Course attendance and class policies**

This is a hands-on course that requires faithful attendance and your full attention. Because deadline writing and constructive feedback are essential to your growth as a journalist, it is critical that you attend class. Unexcused class absences will result in lower engagement points and missed in-class assignments for unexcused absences cannot be made up.

Here, as in the professional world, good communication is key. If you know you’re going to be absent, please let me know as soon as possible—and before class. If you are having trouble with an element of this class, I can’t help unless I know what’s going on.

Credibility is everything in journalism. This is an introductory class, so you’ll have some time to get used to being 100 percent accurate. Starting at the beginning of Week Six, a major fact error such as the misspelling of the subject’s name, the incorrect outcome of an event or a misidentification of a major figure in the story or exercise will result in an F for the assignment. Minor factual errors and earlier major errors will be penalized less harshly.

**Laptop and phone use:** During class discussions, there should be no laptops or cell phones out. During our writing labs and in-class exercises, then laptops and phones are allowed. Research has shown that taking notes by hand yields better cognition and memorization of ideas, concepts and practices. Therefore, laptops are allowed only when it is time to write or take quizzes.

**Class Schedule**

**Week 1: Jan. 22**

Mass vs. strategic communication

Audiences

**Week 2: Jan. 27, 29**

A (Brief) History of Journalism

Where do stories come from?

Elements of journalism

Introduction to AP style and grammar
Week 3: Feb. 3, 5
Inverted pyramid
Leads and beginning news writing

Week 4: Feb. 10, 12
Interviewing and quotes
Ending the story

Week 5: Feb. 17, 19
Journalism ethics
Show, don’t tell

Week 6: Feb. 24, 26
Epistemology and thinking
Individual feedback

Week 7: March 2, 4
Features

Week 8: March 9, 11
Spring break

Week 9: March 16, 18
Investigative journalism
Data journalism

Week 10: March 23, 25
Intro to PR
PR ethics
Midterms Due March 25

Week 11: March 30, April 1
Press releases
Authenticity and setting the tone
Layout and design
Week 12: April 6, 8
Finding stories
Working with journalists, story pitches and press kits
Crisis communications

Week 13: April 13, 15
Social media
Other content (PSAs, community relations, video, audio)

Week 14: April 20, 22
Internal content (memo, email)
Newsletters and more design

Week 15: April 27, 29
Advertisements
Shared knowledge and looking ahead

May 8, 11-14
Finals
Final Grades due May 19

Disabilities Accommodations
The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please call or visit Disability Services at (361) 825-5816 in Corpus Christi Hall 116.

If you are a returning veteran and are experiencing cognitive and/or physical access issues in the classroom or on campus, please contact the Disability Services office for assistance at (361) 825-5816.

Grade Appeals
As stated in University Procedure 13.02.99.C0.03, Student Grade Appeal Procedures, a student who believes that he or she has not been held to appropriate academic standards as outlined in the class syllabus, equitable evaluation procedures, or appropriate grading, may appeal the final grade given in the course. The burden of proof is upon the student to demonstrate the appropriateness of the appeal. A student with a complaint about a grade is encouraged to first discuss the matter with the instructor. For complete details, including the responsibilities of the parties involved in the process and the number of days allowed for completing the steps in the process, see University Procedure 13.02.99.C0.03, Student Grade Appeal Procedures. For assistance and/or guidance in the grade appeal process, students may contact the Dean’s office in the college in which the course is taught or the Office of the Provost. These documents are accessible through the University Rules Web site at:
Academic Advising

The College of Liberal Arts requires that students meet with an Academic Advisor as soon as they are ready to declare a major. Degree plans are prepared in the CLA Academic Advising Center. The University uses an online Degree Audit system. Any amendment must be approved by the Department Chair and the Office of the Dean. All courses and requirements specified in the final degree plan audit must be completed before a degree will be granted. The CLA Academic Advising Office is located in Driftwood #203. For more information please call 361-825-3466.

Dropping a Class

I hope that you never find it necessary to drop this or any other class. However, events can sometimes occur that make dropping a course necessary or wise. Please consult with your academic advisor, the Financial Aid Office, and me, before you decide to drop this course. Should dropping the course be the best course of action, you must initiate the process to drop the course by going to the Student Services Center and filling out a course drop form. Just stopping attendance and participation WILL NOT automatically result in your being dropped from the class.

Statement of Civility

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi has a diverse student population that represents the population of the state. Our goal is to provide you with a high quality educational experience that is free from repression. You are responsible for following the rules of the University, city, state and federal government. We expect that you will behave in a manner that is dignified, respectful and courteous to all people, regardless of sex, ethnic/racial origin, religious background, sexual orientation or disability. Behaviors that infringe on the rights of another individual will not be tolerated.

Academic Honesty/Plagiarism

Definition: In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else’s language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source. Plagiarism is a violation academic expectations, but it is sometimes difficult to understand what plagiarism actually is. Often, students commit unintentional plagiarism (not citing sources properly, for example), because they are unaware of the standards that apply. Plagiarism includes:

- Using the work of another as your own,
- Downloading or purchasing ready-made essays off the web and using them as your own,
- Using resource materials without correct documentation,
- Using the organization or language of a source without using quote marks and proper citation.
- Turning in a researched project without citing sources in an appropriate documentation style.

When you are confused about citation of quotes or ideas, please visit the Writing Center or me to get help. Information on MLA documentation rules and APA documentation rules is available at Purdue University’s OWL: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/, and from our local Writing Center at CASA.
Statement of Academic Continuity

In the event of an unforeseen adverse event, such as a major hurricane and classes could not be held on the campus of Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi, this course would continue through the use of Blackboard and/or email. In addition, the syllabus and class activities may be modified to allow continuation of the course. Ideally, University facilities (i.e., emails, web sites, and Blackboard) will be operational within two days of the closing of the physical campus. However, students need to make certain that the course instructor has a primary and a secondary means of contacting each student.