JOMC 256 Syllabus

Spring 2014

“Feature Reporting & Writing”

8:00-9:15 a.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays

Carroll Hall Room 268 (Connected to Park Library)

Lecturer: Dan Bernard

Office: Carroll Room 221

Office Hours: After class Tues./Thurs. 9:30-11 a.m.; Mon./Weds 1:30-3 p.m. Check to see if the time is free.

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## What is a Feature Story?

Excellent feature stories are difficult and challenging stories to report and write. The feature writer must be an excellent reporter first and foremost because great feature stories are infused with facts, figures, information, anecdotes and details to tell a complete story. The reader must not only be intrigued by the facts reported in the feature story but must also be compelled by its writing.

Feature stories, or long-form stories, use excellent reporting as the foundation of the story. The reporting can be in the form of collecting facts, data, documents, but also in the gathering of quotes, descriptions, scenes and anecdotes. Excellent feature writers use all the techniques that great writers use: setting scenes, foreshadowing, tone, mood, narrative openings, dialogue, descriptive detail and other writing devices.

Feature stories are rooted in fact and carry the reader along on a tide of interest with words and writing technique. Despite the shorter requirements of the Internet content, people still want to read longer format stories that tell a more complete story, a more profound story and one that provides insight into a subject, an event, a social change, or a person. Your challenge in this course is to do your very best reporting and match it with your very best writing.

## The Course

This course deals with great reporting and excellent writing for all media. A great story is a great story in any medium. The course will stress professionalism and initiative, the importance of good and accurate writing, and the value of revision.

Your objective in this course is to do your best reporting and writing and to be comfortable with different kinds of feature stories. The emphasis will be on stories you write and re-write and pitch to a news publication or feature publication.

In order to this, you will be reading a lot. But the readings will be current, interesting and you can get involved in your reading by making suggestions of interesting or provocative feature stories for the class to share in and learn about.

### What You Will Learn from this Class

You will learn how to better compose and finish a long-form story or feature.

You will learn how to open a long-form story that attracts a reader or editor.

You will learn how to better craft a nut graph that informs the reader and editor what the story is all about.

You will learn how to better characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.

You will learn how to “show” more and “tell” less in your writing.

You will learn different styles of features and crafting them for certain publications.

You will learn how to better structure a long-form story, organize it and have it engage a reader’s interest over a longer period of time.

You will learn how to become a better writer and reporter.

### Topics

Among some of the topics that we will cover are:

What is a feature or long-format story?

Making the pitch: The query letter

Developing ideas for a big story

Reporting a feature story

Using a schedule to make the most of your time

Interviewing

The art of feature writing

Narrative journalism

Nut graphs

Human interest

The profile

Word choice and usage

Research, reporting, observation techniques

Visual writing and description

Leads

Endings

The angle, unity and transitions

Taking the reader to a place

Freelancing

Revision and rewriting

## Course requirements

**Reading:**

* Textbook chapters on technique
* Feature articles selected by the instructor and students

**Discussion:**

* Share one of your past feature stories
* Post comments about the selected articles in the Sakai website Forums
* Participate in discussions in class about the selected articles
* Lead one discussion about your selected article.

**Writing:**

* Five feature stories plus a longer final feature story
* Five query letters plus the final query letter
* Occasional in-class activities

**Tests:**

* None

### Required Texts

* David E. Sumner and Holly G. Miller, *Feature & Magazine Writing* (third edition)
* Occasional additional readings provided by the instructor
* Articles distributed in class and posted in the Sakai forum
* AP Stylebook
* JOMC Stylebook

### Recommended Optional Texts

* William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*.
* Rene J. Cappon, *The Word.*

### Articles Posted on Course Sakai Site

The course Sakai website will be used to post feature stories of interest that we will discuss in the Sakai forum and in class. Students should check the Sakai page the day before class and check the Forums. Students should read the posted article, post a comment in the Forums, and be prepared to discuss the article or their point in class the next day. The stories will range from first person stories, to personality profiles, to travel stories, to human interest stories, to investigative, to anything relevant and interesting being written today in a timely way. The goal is to bring the most contemporary feature articles into the classroom discussion while allowing student some time for contemplation before class.

Students will also be posting a feature story to the Sakai site by Thursday of their assigned week that caught their interest or used an interesting technique (One student per week). Students will lead a discussion in class the following Tuesday based on this feature story. All students will read the feature story posted by their fellow student and make a general comment in the Sakai forum before Tuesday. This will allow the instructor to know that everyone read the story and is prepared to discuss it in class.

This will constitute part of your class participation.

### Writing Assignments

Past Feature or Long-Form Work

You must bring in a former feature story that you wrote to discuss with the class on the good, the bad and the ugly of the feature. We will work in unison to hone it and make it better. This will happen during one of the first classes to prepare you and go over what it is you will cover. Please post the feature onto the class’ Sakai site for everyone to read. Comments will be heard in class. (Completion grade only, not scored.)

Five Features

You are required to write five regular features for the course plus a longer final feature. A story will be due once every two weeks. A schedule is included for deadlines. You will have an opportunity to re-write a regular feature to try for a higher grade.

The five regular features are to be 1,000-1,500 words long and must have at least FIVE HUMAN SOURCES listed at the end of the story with contact information.

Five Query Letters

You are required to pitch your story to me and to a publication. A query letter is a one-page letter sent to me and an editor at a publication. Query letters are due two weeks before a story is due. After you turn in a feature story, you will turn in a query as to what your next story will be.

Final Feature and Query Letter

You will write a sixth feature-story for submission to the William Randolph Hearst Foundation Journalism Awards Program in the categories of in-depth writing, feature writing and, or, personality profiles. The feature-writing category calls for “a background, color, or mood article as opposed to a conventional news story of personality profile.” The personality profile category is a “personality sketch of someone.”

The final feature is a more comprehensive feature story. The format is the same as a regular feature except the word length is 2,000-2,500 words. At least SIX HUMAN SOURCES are REQUIRED for the final feature. Final features cannot be rewritten for a higher grade. You will also write a query letter for the final feature.

### Query Letter Format

Please address the letter to an editor at the publication of your choice. We will discuss how to write a query letter in class. End the letter with an appropriate closing and your contact information again.

You may wish to consider carrying a camera for art to go with your accepted story. This will help to augment your role as a feature writer contractor for the publication.

### Feature Story Assignment Format

At the top of each story, please type your name, due date and the category of your feature in the upper left-hand corner of the page. Put the approximate number of words in the upper right-hand corner. If you are unfamiliar with Microsoft Word’s Word Count function, ask the instructor or a colleague.

The first page should appear as follows:

**Name**

**Date**

**Assignment number/category Word count**

**JOMC 256.2 Bernard**

**TITLE**

**BYLINE**

In the header of pages subsequent to the first page, please insert your name, due date, and page number. If you are unfamiliar with Headers/Different First Page in Microsoft Word, please ask the instructor or a colleague.

On the last page, list your sources and contact information.

Articles must be submitted by email to danlynx@email.unc.edu by noon on the day they are due. Meet your deadlines. Late and unexcused assignments are subject to 10 percent point deduction per day. Editing and revision will be done electronically with the Track Changes function and Comments.

Each story should have an interesting title. A good title or headline helps sharpen the focus of the feature and forces the writer to decide what the story is really about. Your byline goes below the title. Stories should be double-spaced.

Only two personality profiles will be allowed.

Only one first-person feature story will be allowed.

Only one travel feature story will be allowed.

Only one historical feature will be allowed.

## Grading

All grading on stories is to a certain extent subjective, but so is life generally out in the real world. An editor will be judging your style, mechanics, reporting, how you write, how you capture a reader’s interest and maintain it, tone and whether the story is interesting. Turn in a story to a publication that’s boring to the editor and it won’t be published. Make silly style or grammar mistakes and no one will contract you for a story. Be professional.

The grading for the assignments is broken down into several areas: mechanical, reporting and style.

Each of the five assigned stories is worth 20 percent of your grade for a total of 70 percent. The final feature is worth 20 percent. The final feature may not be rewritten for a higher grade. No exceptions. The query letters make up the final 10 percent of your grade.

Mechanical: In keeping with the school’s grading policy on mechanics, all the previous points system developed under 153 News Writing, are in play. Errors in spelling (including typos), grammar, or punctuation are minus 5 points. Errors in AP and JOMC style, 2 points. Minus 10 for a minor factual error, e.g. address or time element, that doesn't significant affect the story. Minus 50 points for a misspelled name of a person or entity, a misquotation or other major factual error.

Associated Press style is the style for the course along with the JOMC’s own stylebook.

Do not underestimate the seriousness of style, editing and grammar. I will be grading on these elements as well as the reporting and structure of the story and tone. THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR SLOPPY COPY.

### Rewrites

Rewrites are encouraged based on the comments you received when your paper is first graded. Rewrites will boost your final grade on a paper by 5 points total, no more. **Rewrites must be turned in by the next class after you receive your grade and comments on your paper**. You cannot turn in a rewrite weeks later or at the end of the semester. They will not be considered. Rewrites are only possible for scores under 90. No rewrites will be considered for a grade boost if you scored a 90 or better.

### Publishing your stories

After a story of yours is graded and you rewrite it, you should try your best to get it published. We want to disseminate your work as widely as possible. This helps you in all sorts of ways, including getting a job after graduation. So if you get your story published at an established, professional news outlet (newspaper, magazine, website, etc.) where you do not already work or contribute, you will receive an automatic A on the story. The Daily Tar Heel counts if you don’t already work there or haven’t contributed to them in the past. ReeseNews counts. So do the UNC university publications and alumni publications. An established professional online magazine counts, but personal blogs and amateur websites don’t. If there is any doubt whether the publication is eligible, please consult with the class instructor. **The story must have been graded and rewritten before being submitted to the news outlet.**

### Research and reporting

Feature stories require more research and reporting than news stories do because news *tells* the reader what happened and a feature story *shows* the reader. This means that the writer has to immerse himself or herself in the material and witness as many of the story’s events and places as possible.

The Internet is a powerful research tool. It puts information at a writer’s fingertips, but the Internet is only one tool. You may not submit stories based only on material gathered from the Internet or, for that matter, from any single source. You research. You report. You observe.

You must have talked with FIVE HUMAN SOURCES and list them at the end of each story. (Six for the final.) Turning in a story with less than required number of sources will see your grade fall by one letter grade. That is a minimum: If you deem that more interviews are necessary to do justice to your subject, by all means, pursue them.

Documents read should be listed at the end, as well, including the URLs of web pages.