MEJO 356.1 Syllabus

“Feature Reporting & Writing”

Fall 2020

3-4:15 p.m. MW

Carroll 283

Instructor: John Robinson

Mode: Face-to-face/hybrid

Office Hours: By appointment, in-person, phone or Zoom

Office: Carroll 219

[robinsjl@email.unc.edu](mailto:cuadros@email.unc.edu)

25johnrobinson@gmail.com

336-312-1018

Twitter: @johnrobinson

Instagram: unc.robinson

Blog: johnlrobinson.com

**Foreword:** This syllabus is a plan based on hope and ambition. My hope is that the semester will begin and end with an open campus; my ambition is that this course can proceed with the rigor and enthusiasm I’m used to. Despite all the obstacles in our way, my goal remains unchanged: that you succeed and become better, smarter, more interesting writers. As the semester rolls on and as circumstances change, we’ll figure out together how to achieve that goal. If you encounter issues or fears or concerns that are in the way of your growth – be it COVID or homelife or internet or stress – please let me know and I will try to support, accommodate and help.

**Course overview**: Excellent feature stories are difficult and challenging to report and write. The reader must not only be intrigued by the facts but must also be compelled by the writing.

Feature stories use reporting as their foundation. 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 fiction writers use: setting scenes, foreshadowing, tone, mood, narrative openings, dialogue and descriptive detail.

You learn good writing by reading good writers, writing yourself and rewriting. Each week in this course, we will read outstanding pieces of feature writing and analyze what makes them remarkable. We will read under-performing stories, too, to learn what traps to avoid. And you'll write, rewrite and rewrite.

Writing well is a craft and can be learned through diligence and hard work. Find the perfect word to illuminate a moment, a gesture, a glance and you will do more than bring a scene to life. You will begin to become a great writer.

What You Could Learn from this class:

\* How to determine what's a good feature idea.

\* How to structure a long-form story, organize it and have it engage a reader.

\* How to characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.

\* How to “show” more and “tell” less.

\* How to become a better writer and reporter.

Workflow

As in all courses, you will have work in class and work out of class. Because of the room size, half of you will attend class from 3-3:35 MW, and the other half from 3:40-4:15 MW. But keep the entire 3-4:15 period open because on occasion we will meet as a full class on Zoom. During that time we will discuss the day’s story, text assignments and the recorded lecture. Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade. You must adhere to the university's guidelines regarding face covering, social distancing and other measures to combat the spread of the virus.

Outside of class, you will spend the bulk of your time reading, watching lectures on Zoom, researching topics, interviewing subjects, and writing and rewriting. Lectures will be recorded and students will be expected to watch them BEFORE class. (This will be part of your homework and points will be deducted if you have not watched the lecture.) For students who choose to attend class remotely, we will have Zoom discussions at a regularly scheduled time outside of the scheduled class time.

Resources and Textbooks:

Required texts are: **"Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer"** by Roy Peter Clark. (Available through Amazon for less than $10 plus shipping); (Clark has an earlier edition -- **50 Essential Strategies**. Either edition is fine.)

The **AP Stylebook** and **JOMC Stylebook**., http://jschoolstylebook.web.unc.edu. You will get handouts and assigned readings for each class.

Subscribe to Chip Scanlan’s weekly newsletter. We will discuss it each week. <https://www.chipswritinglessons.com/newsletter/>

Assignments:

The best stories are filled with detail, anecdote and description. Seeing people, places and events with your own eyes, hearing sounds and voices, feeling the air, smelling the atmosphere all contribute to excellent stories. The easiest way to get those details is to be where they are happening. If you are uncomfortable going out and interviewing in person, you will need to being able to get this in-depth information another way.

Five Features:

A story will be due once every three or four weeks**. A key to success: Start thinking about and planning for ALL assignments at the beginning of the semester. A key to failure: Last-minute scrambling for a topic and/interviews. This is not a course for linear, one-assignment-at-a-time thinkers.**

Writers who challenge themselves with meaty stories or stories that are hard to get will be rewarded. Mundane, simplistic stories will be graded accordingly.

The first story is limited to 400 words and is due **Aug.19.** It’s a short profile of someone you know or want to know, and only one source is required. Its primary purpose is for me to become familiar with your writing, and you to become familiar with my expectations. It will count as 5 percent of your grade.

A second story will be a first-person piece written in class. It will be scheduled later in the semester. It will count as 5 percent of your grade.

The three other feature story due dates are**: Sept 9, Oct. 7 and Nov. 2**. These stories – and the Aug. 19 story - will be copyedited by Professor Andy Bechtel’s editing class and published online. (An admonition: Do not write anything that you do not want published.)

A properly formatted email pitching your story is **due two weeks** before the story is due. Failure to submit this on time will be reflected in your grade because it means that you haven't planned well, don't take the deadline seriously and/or have no idea what you're going to write about. Each is a recipe for failure.

Each of the three feature stories will be 1,000-1,200 words long and must have **at least four human sources** listed at the end of the story with contact information. Each student must write one profile. Students may NOT write a first-person story for one of these three stories.

You may **not** submit stories for which you wrote for another class or a publication, including the Daily Tar Heel.

Final story:

The final story will be a narrative non-fiction feature in which you will shadow a source or sources for some time and write the story from a narrative perspective. This feature, like the other stories you write for this class, must be written in third person. Reporting for this story is crucial. Writers must set up their follow/shadowing reporting early to have enough time to gain experience with the source to be able to tell the story from inside. Due date**: Nov. 19**.

The format is the same as a regular feature except the word length is 1,800-2,000. **At least five human sources are required**.

A word on writing your stories: You writing can improve with each draft -- expect to write more than one. Read the story aloud, to yourself or someone else, to see if it makes sense to the ear. Print it out and review it with a pen in hand to catch typos.

A word on deadlines: Stories submitted after 3:15 p.m. on the day they are due will be accepted but will be considered late. Late stories are docked one letter grade for each day they are tardy.

A word on expectations: Each student should strive to have their story selected to be a recommended entree for the Hearst Awards. The categories are Feature Writing, Sports Writing and Personality Profiles. This is a description of each category and expectations: http://www.hearstawards.org/guidelines/entry-guidelines/writing/

Quiz

Writing skills are important. That's why we use the Clark text. Two-thirds of the way through the semester you will be quizzed on the writing tools in the text.

Classwork

**Stories:** In most classes we will discuss one or two stories, chosen by me and you. The class has a Facebook page: www.facebook.com/JOMC256Robinson. We will use it to post feature stories of interest for in-class discussion. Students are required to "like" the page and to check it frequently. I will post links to feature stories that we will be discussing in class. Each student will lead a discussion based on the feature story he or she selected. When it is your turn to lead the discussion, you will lead both the first half AND the second half of the class. Students will be expected to have read the stories and make comments on them on the Facebook page prior to the discussion. **This counts as part of your class participation grade**.

Your selected story must be posted on Facebook four days prior to your presentation.

**Readings**: I will assign readings about writing for most classes. The purpose is to teach you skills about the craft and to encourage you to think about your style.

**Writing:** You will write from a prompt I give you on many Wednesdays. The purpose is to allow you time to practice specific challenges in your writing craft. I will read, comment and return these promptly. These writing exercises will not be graded. They are designed for you to experiment with your writing.

Grading:

All grading on stories is to a great extent subjective, as are opinions of editors and readers. An editor will be judging your style, mechanics, reporting, precision, enterprise, how you write, how you capture a reader’s interest and maintain it, tone and whether the story is interesting. I will evaluate your stories the same way. 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 assign you a story. Be professional.

Grade breakdown:

Classwork 15%

Aug. 19 story 5%

First-person story 5%

Story 2 10%

Story 3 15%

Story 4 20%

Final 30%

Stories 2, 3 and 4 will be graded twice. Each grade will have the same weight.

>I will read, comment on and grade your first story on its due date. On the next class date, we will meet one-on-one to discuss how you can improve your work. My comments will address reporting, writing and form. You may then rework your story to improve it and **resubmit it within three days.**

>I will read, comment on and grade your story on its rewrite. This grade will be based on the story's final form AND how much you've improved it. Rewritten stories canNOT get a higher grade than a 91.

Grading throughout the semester is conducted on a numerical scale. Each student begins each assignment with a raw score of 100. Points are added or subtracted from that according to the standards listed below. You may determine your approximate grade standing in the course by converting your numerical grades to letter grades on your assignments according to this scale:

90 and above = A

80 - 89 = B

70 - 79 = C

60 - 69 = D

below 60 = F

Grades will be assigned plusses and minuses using this scale: A numerical grade of 80-82.9 is a B-; 83-87.9 is a B; and 88-89.9 is a B+. The same applies to all letter grades except there is no A+ or D-.

The points system of 153 Reporting and Writing is in play. Errors in spelling are minus 10 points. Errors of grammar 5 points. Factual errors are an F.

AP style is the style for the course along with the School’s own stylebook.

Under the definitions established by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, students who receive the following letter grades are considered to have reached the level of attainment defining that letter. Thus, letter grades received for reporting and writing courses may be interpreted this way:

Generally speaking, for stories: **A** = publishable story with no factual or style errors and written well. **B** = near-publishable story with minor errors of style or logic; no fact errors; needs revision. **C** = unpublishable story with serious errors of style, logic, reporting or readability. **D** = sub-par, unpublishable work with major errors of style, logic, approach; reporting gaps; low level of engagement with the story **F** = unacceptable work, including factual errors, many style errors, major logical errors, minimal reporting; generally embarrassing to the writer. Don’t go here.

**Final exam:**

Students are also required to attend the class scheduled for the final exam, which is 4 p.m. Nov. 19. Failure to do so will result in an "incomplete" for the course.

**Seeking Help:**

If you need individual assistance, it’s your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

**Diversity:**

The University’s policy on Prohibiting Harassment and Discrimination is outlined on the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office’s webpage (https://eoc.unc.edu/our-policies/ppdhrm/). UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

**Special Accommodations:**

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let the instructor know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Department of Disability Services website at [*ars.unc.edu/*](https://outlook.unc.edu/owa/redir.aspx?C=_PwXhu5wkEKfdEIVTpil9KJAr6RORM8IBwmgW7JyZPUuO4or7Dri_9D4gXEkBO0Z0IIreRKEjIQ.&URL=http%3a%2f%2fdisabilityservices.unc.edu%2f)

**ACCREDITATION:**

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media’s accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here: http://hussman.unc.edu/accreditation. No single course could possibly give you all of these values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. The values and competencies associated with this course include being able to:

· Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientations and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;

· Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;

· Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;

· Think critically, creatively and independently;

· Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications, professions in which they work;

· Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;

· Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;

· Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions.

Tentative week-by-week schedule

Aug. 10 Introduction

Aug. 12 Finding stories

Aug. 17 Finding stories; writing short --

Aug. 19 First assignment due (400 words or less) --

Aug. 24 Interviewing --

Aug. 26 Interviewing --

Aug. 31 Profiles --

Sept. 2 Profiles --

Sept. 7 Labor Day/No class

Sept. 9 Second assignment due

Sept. 14 Observations --

Sept 16 First person --

Sept. 21 First person --

Sept. 23 Narrative --

Sept. 28 Metaphors --

Sept. 30 Writing intros/role play

Oct. 5

Oct. 7 Third assignment due

Oct. 12

Oct. 19 Writing with voice --

Oct. 21 Description --

Oct. 26 Description --

Oct. 28 Poetry

Nov. 2 Fourth story due

Nov. 4 Cutting stories –

Nov. 9 Writing long --

Nov. 11 Making boring interesting --

Nov. 16 – Final story due

Nov. 19 – Final exam 4 p.m.