

MEJO 253.2  
“Introduction to Public Affairs Reporting”  
Spring 2020 Syllabus

Prof. Paul Cuadros

Tuesday/Thursday: 8:00 am-9:15 am  
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Public Affairs reporting is at the heart of all great reporting and is the first step in becoming a reporter and writer of merit. It is central to maintaining a free and democratic society as it seeks to hold local government and other powerful people and entities accountable. A public affairs reporter is seeking to ensure that the democratic institutions and its members are performing their responsibilities well and with fairness.

#### WHAT IS PUBLIC AFFAIRS REPORTING?

Public affairs reporting can include almost anything that deals with appropriation, distribution, handling or expenditure of public funds. It includes reports on public and quasi-public agencies, organizations and institutions. It also includes reports on the community organizations affected by public institutions. And it includes reports on the private sector that deal with the public in any form. Finally, it reports on the community and its members as they interact with public institutions and are affected by them.

#### WHAT DOES PUBLIC AFFAIRS REPORTING COVER?

Under the umbrella of public affairs reporting are city, county and state governments; local authority districts (e.g. OWASA, Triangle Transit Authority, Airport Authority, etc.); politics; elections; the courts; schools; health care institutions; urban and rural affairs; the environment; and social areas such as minority and women’s affairs, consumer affairs, public affairs, etc. Reporting also includes any private entities that are regulated by local government or impact the general public.

PRE\_REQUISITE: MEJO 153 completed

#### COURSE DESCRIPTION:

Exercise in news gathering and interviewing and in writing news stories for written word online media and print news organizations. The course is an exercise in reporting, making sources, dealing with public information officers, learning how local government works, interacting and reporting on the community in a consistent way, and filing stories using interviews, finding documents, and analyzing reports every week on a particular area of government and the community. In addition to reporting, news writing is expected to be clear and concise and within the rules and guidelines of the style for the class. Precision news writing is a must.

### Required Textbooks:

The Associated Press Stylebook  
MEJO School Stylebook, Latest Edition

### Required Readings:

The Raleigh News & Observer  
The New York Times  
Other local media reports

Students need to read the above news organization websites for daily news stories for content and discussion in class.

Internet Materials: Some material may be sent to students via email.

Notes: Students are expected to take notes during all lectures and special guest speakers. NO MATERIAL from power points or lectures or discussion will be posted anywhere.

Reporters take notes constantly and this is a skill all reporters should develop.

### **Required Attendance:**

Local Government Public Information Officer Meeting  
All students are required to attend this meeting of local PIOs to learn how to work with and get sources from local government agencies. **Mandatory attendance required.** Get to know some of the sources you will be working with this semester. TBA

### EQUIPMENT:

All 253 students must have a laptop and bring it to class.

### COURSE STRUCTURE:

The course is broken up into two components. The first is a lecture-style class with discussion of current events, how local government agencies function, breaking news topics, and news techniques. In-lab lectures will focus primarily on reporting and interviewing techniques and skills and on institutional structures of government, private organizations, businesses, community organizations and reporting topics. They will also include discussions based on required readings; periodic handouts; student papers; and occasional guest speakers.

The second component is a newsroom laboratory class. The lab will focus on completing reporting assignments on deadline, editing and discussion of beat reporting, student work and any issues that come up on beats. In addition, the lab will serve as the news editorial component of the class where the instructor will work with the student one on one. The instructor serves as the in-class editor of student stories working with the student in a close relationship to develop the best story possible.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

Students are required to complete:

1. A beat report that outlines and evaluates the beat covered by the student.
2. Query letters describing stories pitched to an editor for upcoming story.
3. 10 hard-news stories.
4. In-depth enterprise story.
5. A final exam covering lectures and guest speakers.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Upon successful completion of the class, students will have developed the following skills:

1. Students will learn how to manage a news beat and write about a particular topic with authority.
2. Students will learn how to meet a weekly deadline and work on multiple stories at a time to meet the deadline.
3. Students will learn how to interview sources, ask tough questions and develop a cadre of sources on their beat.
4. Students will learn how to read, find and request documents to strengthen their stories.
5. Students will learn how to develop their own story ideas on the beat week to week.
6. Students will learn how to follow a particular story on their beat over several weeks.
7. Students will learn how to write query letters, pitch their own stories for publication and convince editors to invest in their work and expertise.
8. Students will learn how various government bodies function with the public.
9. Students will learn how to apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.

### COURSE REQUIREMENTS CLOSE UP:

Students are required to cover a beat that will generate their written assignments. They will write a Beat Report based on their beat assignment, plus 10 news stories and a final enterprise reporting assignment. In addition, students will produce a query letter for five stories the week prior to submission of the story. Finally, students will also take a final exam on material covered in class.

All stories will make use of a combination of sources, including public documents, interviews, library and Internet research, back-grounding and objective reportorial observation.

### STORY REQUIREMENTS:

All stories must use at least THREE HUMAN SOURCES, which must be listed at the end of each story including FULL NAME, TITLE and CONTACT INFORMATION. Failure to list sources will drop your grade by ONE LETTER or 10 POINTS. You may use additional sources, such as documents and public records.

ALL STORIES ARE DONE OFF CAMPUS. SOURCES SHOULD BE EXPERTS AND PEOPLE OFF CAMPUS. ON CAMPUS SOURCES CAN INCLUDE PROFESSORS, DOCTORS, LAWYERS, EXPERTS IN THEIR FIELDS AND DEPARTMENTS.

NO STORIES WITH STUDENT SOURCES. NO STORIES ON STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS OR ATHLETIC CONTESTS. STUDENT SOURCES CAN ONLY BE ALLOWED WITH PRIOR APPROVAL OF INSTRUCTOR. USING STUDENT SOURCES WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL OR FOCUSING ON STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS IN A STORY WITHOUT PRIOR APPROVAL WILL MEAN POINT DEDUCTIONS.

Speakers and/or participants at events may NOT be used as individual sources unless the source is interviewed separately before or after an event. Students should designate that the quote came from an interview in their attribution of the source.

Students should strive to add different sources in follow-up stories or subsequent stories on their beats. Repeated sources should only be used when relevant or necessary. Be sure to read the school's policy on sources, off-the-record and attribution in your UNC Stylebook.

For direction on how to search for information and sources, students should access the Park Library's resources to do clip searches and other online search engines. See America's Newsroom for clip search engine.

BEAT ASSIGNMENTS:

Ten assignments will be written from a beat category or beat selected by each student and the instructor at the beginning of the semester. No more than two students can be assigned to one beat. The categories or beats from which the students will choose include:

<u>Government Affairs</u>	<u>Public Affairs</u>	<u>Education &amp; Schools</u>
Chapel Hill Town Govt. Carrboro Town Govt. OWASA Public Safety Chapel Hill Police Carrboro Police Chapel Hill Fire Carrboro Fire Other Town Governments County Government Chatham County Government	Business reporting Labor reporting Social Services Parks & Recreation Aviation Chatham Co	Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools Orange County Schools Non-Traditional Schools Home Schooling Charter Schools Private Schools Other Schools Chatham County Schools

<u>Public Health</u>	<u>Arts &amp; Culture</u>	<u>Science &amp; Environment</u>
Orange County Public Health UNC Hospitals Public Health Care Policy Medical Reporting Mental Health Chatham County Public Health	Arts & Business & Govt.	Science Business Environmental impact Energy Business

<u>Legal Affairs</u>	<u>Mass Transit</u>	<u>Public Interest</u>
District and Superior Court Communities Other	Chapel Hill Transit Authority  Other	Diverse  Latino Affairs Immigration Asian Affairs African American Community LGBTQ Community Muslim Community

### SELECTING BEATS:

During the first lab, students will express their beat preferences. The instructor will decide on beat assignments. Routine campus sports event coverage is NOT an acceptable beat for 253.

### BEAT REPORT: (NOT GRADED BUT FOR YOUR BENEFIT)

The Beat Report is a detailed 4-page memo from the student-reporter to the instructor-editor. It outlines a specific beat, its chief officials and newsmakers, elected or appointed bodies. It speculates on the likely news stories that will break during the semester. Students will write the report as if they were writing to a reporter coming onto the beat. It is NOT A LIST of sources found on the Internet. You must speak to sources and write what you learn about the beat. Provide BACKGROUND on the sources. To complete the assignment, students may rely on handouts, calendars, interviews, Internet sources, directories, etc. You must jump into your beat immediately.

### BEAT STORIES (70 PERCENT OF YOUR ENTIRE GRADE)

Story Assignments: Each story will be 500-700 words in length—no more—with no fewer than THREE SEPARATE HUMAN SOURCES. REMEMBER NO STUDENT SOURCES. Stories must be typed, doubled-spaced, copyedited with traditional copy marks and symbols, and submitted on or before the daily deadline dates. All stories will carry a DATELINE.

A story is due on each of the days specified on the Weekly Schedule or as set by the instructor.

Stories are considered late when not submitted during the lab and will be reduced by 10 points. You MUST come to class and submit your story. Emailing stories on the day of the lab and not appearing is insufficient and unacceptable and your story will be considered LATE.

Stories will suffer another 10-point penalty if not turned in at the BEGINNING of the following lecture session.

Stories submitted after that deadline will be docked 50 points. Enterprise stories submitted late will be docked 20 points and 75 points respectively.

Instructors receive stories sequentially. You cannot skip a due date because your story is late. Thus, if you fail to submit the fifth story but submit a story on the due date for number six, then that submission is considered story five and it is penalized accordingly and story six is now late.)

ENTERPRISE STORY (20 PERCENT OF TOTAL GRADE)

Students are required to write a 1,200-1,500-word, comprehensive in-depth story. The assignment requires the use of at least SIX HUMAN SOURCES, each of which will be identified by name, title and contact information at the end of the story. Students should look to their beat for their enterprise story and begin to develop their final project during the semester. Students will be allowed to go off beat with approval by the instructor if they can convince their instructor of the value of the new enterprise story. Stories are NOT TO EXCEED 1,500-word requirement. No stories will be accepted that go beyond the word limit.

FINAL EXAM (10 PERCENT OF TOTAL GRADE INCLUDING CLASS PARTICIPATION AND QUERY LETTERS)

Students must complete five query letters to be submitted to a publication plus one letter for the Enterprise Story. Each letter is graded to 100 points, failure to produce a letter results in a 10-point drop for this requirement and so forth from there. No late letters permitted.

FINAL: TUESDAY, APRIL 28 at 8:00 am—11 am, CA 11.

## GRADING STANDARDS AND SYSTEM

Students are graded on their reporting and writing skills. Writing with careless punctuation and grammar errors could receive a mediocre or failing grade. Students also will be rewarded for difficult-to-get or highly important sources and thorough reporting.

The grades will indicate where you need to pay attention in researching and writing your stories.

Stories are due during the lab period. Students have until the following lecture session to turn in a late, missed assignment. It will, however, be docked as noted above in the deadline section of this syllabus.

If you are to be late with an assignment, you need to notify the instructor in advance and explain why. Events do happen that could interfere with completing a story, such as illness or a death in the family. Be aware, however, that being untruthful to the instructor as to the reason for your missing deadline is an HONOR CODE offense and could lead to your dismissal from the university.

Grading for this class is as follows:

A = 93 or above	B+ = 88-89	C+ = 78-79	D+ = 68-69
A- = 90-92	B = 83-87	C = 73-77	D = 63-67
	B- = 80-82	C- = 70-72	

Honor Code: The University's Honor Code is in effect in MEJO 253 as in all other courses. Student may be allowed to work together on some stories. The instructor will explain and clarify under which particular, limited circumstances such cooperation will be appropriate and acceptable in the course. On all other assignments, you are expected to do your own work and abide by the Honor Code of the University. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at <http://instrument.unc.edu/basicframe.html>.

Plagiarism is an increasing problem on this and other college campuses. You are to cite your sources appropriately and according to the assignment. The Code of Student Conduct states that expulsion or suspension can result from "(a)cademic cheating, including (but not limited to) unauthorized copying, collaboration or use of notes or books on examinations, and plagiarism (defined as the intentional representation of another person's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own). If you have questions, ask your instructor.

Students are reminded that their failure to do all of their own interviews, research, note-taking, documentation, writing and reporting is a violation of the University Honor Code and could result in disciplinary action by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

For more information on plagiarism, go to The Writing Center's Plagiarism site at: <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/avoid.html>.

Keep in mind that the instructors in this class are veteran news reporters who spent their careers finding cheats and liars in the political world. Don't try your luck.



Below is a grading guide to three main areas the instructor will consider in deducting or adding points to your stories. NOTE: Many of these plus and minus points may be applied to the same story for recurring errors or for continual superior performance.

### **REPORTING:**

Students are expected to use a variety of appropriate sources, interview techniques, and to be complete in information. This means asking the right questions to be thorough and not to leave any doubt or questions in the readers' minds. More importantly, students' stories must be clear and not present any lingering questions in the mind of the reader or editor.

+ or -5 to 10 for any questions brought up by the reporting in the story. These occur when the reporting has not been thorough enough and leave questions or confusion in the minds of the readers.

+ or - 5 to 10 for source selection—quality and number of sources used; appropriateness of individual sources for the topic, including the level of expertise or authority involved. Using student sources as experts will always result in deductions.

+ or - 5 to 20 for thoroughness of story; development of significant angles; inclusion of needed detail; points will be deducted for loose ends, holes, or unanswered questions

+ or - 5 to 15 for story backgrounding—research necessary to make the story complete or to provide needed explanations; preparation for interviews or meetings; understanding by the reporter of the general topic.

+ or - 20 for legal errors, such as libel, violation of legal right of privacy, or copyright violation

-10 points for failure to list sources at the end of your story

-5 to -10 points for using redundant sources in follow up stories

+ or -20 for story topic as appropriate to the beat and development of the story topic

### **WRITING:**

In evaluating writing, the instructor considers the quality of the lead, use of language, conciseness, completeness, readability, organization of material and transition, among other factors.

-5 to -10 for an ineffective lead that needs work or for lack of supporting material for a lead

-15 to -20 for missing the lead entirely or burying it

-2 for ineffective or missing transition or induction of material.

-2 to -10 for ineffective organization or treatment of material, including but not limited to, wordiness; use of jargon or clichés; inclusion of unnecessary, non-newsworthy or obvious information; repetition, redundancy, inappropriate choice or use of quoted material; incorrect word choice.

-2 to -5 for overly long quotes. When presented with a long quote paraphrase is best

-2 for overly long quote from a report. These should be paraphrased.

-2 for missing the Dateline.

+5 for an exceptionally effective lead and supporting material

+5 for exceptionally effective organization and treatment of material

+2 to +10 for excellence in quality of information gathered and used

## **GRAMMAR & STYLE**

-1 for a form error, such as failure to mark a paragraph for indenting or failing to show an end mark at the end of a story.

-2 for each error or inconsistency in Associate Press or UNC-CH style

-2 to -5 for excessively long or complicated sentences or paragraphs

-5 for each spelling error, and a typographical is considered a spelling error

-5 for each punctuation error, such as incorrect use of a comma, semicolon or dash

-5 for each grammatical error, such as improper subject-verb agreement, misplaced modifier or noun-pronoun disagreement

-10 for a minor factual error, such as an inaccurate street address or the time element if the effect on the story is relatively insignificant

-50 for a misspelled name of a person, business, agency or institution on first reference, a misquote or other major factual error. Writing School of Journalism and Mass Communications would be -50 because there is no "s" on the end of Communication.

-25 for misspelling a place such as Lake Taho for Lake Tahoe

-10 for misspelling a person's name on second or later references (e.g. Brown on first reference, Brwon on second reference)

#### Honor Code:

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (<http://honor.unc.edu>). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor's responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean Charlie Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

#### 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 in the 2011-2012 Undergraduate Bulletin <http://www.unc.edu/ugradbulletin/>. 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 Accessibility Services website at <https://accessibility.unc.edu/>

## Accreditation:

The School of Journalism and Mass Communication'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://www2.ku.edu/~acejmc/PROGRAM/PRINCIPLES.SHTML#vals&comps>

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. In this class, we will address a number of the values and competencies in the link above and bullet points below with a special emphasis on the last seven bullet points.

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society;
- 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 basic numerical and statistical concepts;
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

MEJO 253 SPRING 2020 SCHEDULE AND DEADLINES:

THR JAN 9—LECTURE: FIRST DAY OF CLASS—GO OVER SYLLABUS—BEAT REPORTS EXPLAINED—BEATS PICKED

TUE JAN 14— LECTURE: INTERVIEWING; BEAT REPORTS DUE

THR JAN 16— LECTURE: BACKGROUND SEARCHES/CLIP SEARCHES

TUE JAN 21— STORY IDEAS AND LEDES

THR JAN 23— STORY 1 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE JAN 28— LECTURE: COVERING LOCAL GOVT

THR JAN 30— STORY 2 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE FEB 4— LECTURE: COVERING BUDGETS

THR FEB 6— STORY 3 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE FEB 11— LECTURE: COVERING EDUCATION

THR FEB 13— STORY 4 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE FEB 18— HOW TO WRITE A QUERY LETTER

THR FEB 20— STORY 5 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE FEB 25— QUERY LETTER 1 DUE—ONE ON ONE EDITORIAL MEETINGS IN MY OFFICE. NO LECTURE.

THR FEB 27— STORY 6 DUE—CLASS LAB

TUE MAR 3— LECTURE: COVERING COURTS; QUERY LETTER 2 DUE

THR MAR 5— STORY 7 DUE

FRI MAR 6—16 SPRING BREAK—NO CLASS

MEJO 253 SPRING 2020 SCHEDULE AND DEADLINES CONT:

TUE MAR 17—LECTURE: COVERING DIVERSE COMMUNITIES;  
QUERY LETTER 3 DUE

THR MAR 19— STORY 8 DUE—POSTPONED—STORY 8 DUE  
FOLLOWING WEEK

TUE MAR 24—LECTURE: ENTERPRISE STORIES; QUERY LETTER 4  
DUE

THR MAR 26—STORY 9 DUE CLASS LAB

TUE MAR 31—OPEN LECTURE—QUERY LETTER 5 DUE

THR APR 2—STORY 10 DUE

TUE APR 7—LECTURE: INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

THR APR 9— CLASS LAB—ENTERPRISE PROPOSAL DUE

TUE APR 14—EDITORIAL MEETINGS ONE ON ONE

THR APR 16—CLASS LAB OPEN

TUE APR 21—LECTURE: CRISIS REPORTING

THR APR 23—FINAL CLASS— ENTERPRISE STORY DUE

TUE APR 28—FINAL EXAM! 8 am CA 11