

MEJO 541: Business Reporting, Fall 2021

Meeting time: 12:30-1:45 p.m. T/Th

Meeting places: Carroll Hall, Room 128

Mask use: All enrolled students are required to wear a mask covering your mouth and nose at all times in our classroom. This requirement is to protect our educational community — your classmates and me — as we learn together. If you choose not to wear a mask or wear it improperly, I'll ask you to leave immediately, and I'll submit a report to the [Office of Student Conduct](#). At that point you will be disenrolled from this course for the protection of our educational community. Students who have an authorized accommodation from Accessibility Resources and Service have an exception. For more information, see <https://carolinatogether.unc.edu/university-guidelines-for-facemasks/>.

Instructor: Margaret Moffett (I prefer to be called Margaret)

Email: mmoffett@ad.unc.edu

Cell: 336-707-1982

Office hours: Virtual, phone or face-to-face by appointment

About Margaret: I was a full-time newspaper reporter and editor for 28 years, 23 of them at the Greensboro News & Record (jobs included general assignment reporter, an investigative reporter, City Hall reporter, assistant sports editor and assistant city editor). In 2018, I became managing editor of Triad Business Journal, also in Greensboro. In late 2019, I left to become a full-time freelancer/ghostwriter. Here's my [LinkedIn page](#).

Course overview: This course teaches students how to understand what's going on at companies big and small and to report and write stories about these businesses. As business becomes more influential in the lives of everyday citizens, it's important for the media to become more aggressive in acting as a watchdog. I'll teach you to cover Wall Street and the economy, focusing on how stocks, bonds and economic indicators interact and how this information is reported to the public.

Required texts:

- *Writing about Business: The New Columbia Knight-Bagehot Guide to Economics and Business Journalism*, Terri Thompson, editor, Columbia University Press
- *Covering Business: A Guide to Aggressively Reporting on Commerce and Developing a Powerful Business Beat*, Robert Reed and Glenn Lewin, Marion

Street Press

- *Show Me the Money: Writing Business and Economics Stories for Mass Communication*, Chris Roush. Routledge
- *The New York Times Reader: Business and Economics*, Mark Tatge, CQ Press.

Attendance

University policy: No right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these university-approved absences:

1. Authorized university activities
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by [Accessibility Resources and Service](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#)

Class policy:

- You get 1 unexcused absence with no penalty. After that, I'll take off a half-letter grade from your final class grade for each unexcused absence.
- Please communicate with me early about excused absences. You're bound by the [Honor Code](#) when making a request for a university-approved absence. (source: <http://catalog.unc.edu/policies-procedures/attendance-grading-examination/>). You may make up work you missed if an absence is pre-approved. It'll be easier to obtain permission than forgiveness.
- I CANNOT STRESS THIS ENOUGH: 1) Do NOT come to face-to-face class if you feel bad or have been exposed to someone who has tested positive; we can arrange for you to watch class remotely 2) If you do come into contact with someone who has the virus, and you've been to class in the last 2 weeks ... please notify me so I can tell members of our class.

Late assignments (or, Don't make me dock you a letter grade.)

In the newspaper business, we call this "missing a deadline." It's a sure-fire way to make your editor mad. Since we're trying to simulate realistic professional conditions in this class, it's important that you hit your deadlines. Late papers, if I decide to accept them, will receive a reduced grade unless we agree BEFORE the assignment is due that a delay is justified. On some assignments, the grade will be an F for failure to meet the deadline. Even if an assignment is excused as late, I won't accept any assignments that are later than two weeks after its deadline.

Obviously, I'll make exceptions for emergencies related to COVID-19 — yours or a family member's. I reserve the right to verify that you're caring for a family member.

Grading

The class will operate a point system. The more complex the assignment, the more points it's worth. I'll use a combination of objective and subjective metrics to grade you. At the end of the semester, I will divide the number of points you've earned by the total possible points (2,500) and use the following scale to calculate your grade:

A = 93-100	B- = 80-82	D+ = 67-69
A- = 90-92	C+ = 77-79	D = 60-66
B+ = 87-89	C = 73-76	F = 0-59
B = 83-86	C- = 70-82	

Course grades will be based on which of the following categories best describes you and your efforts:

- **A:** Your work is “wow!” Your thinking is clear and original. Your assertions are logically supported with plenty of relevant evidence. Your writing is strong and grammatically correct. **THERE WON'T BE MANY OF THESE.**
- **B:** Topics are carefully and thoughtfully covered. Superficial flaws in logic, evidence, or organization exist, but your case is clear and on-target. Writing is strong with very few errors. Your work is quite good. **THIS IS A GOOD GRADE!**
- **C:** One or two minor elements of the assignment or evidence are weak or missing. Organization is adequate. Writing contains several misspellings or grammatical errors. Your work is average (which, BTW, is not a bad thing!!).
- **D:** Several elements of the assignment or evidence are missing. Organization is haphazard. Writing contains numerous mistakes and detracts from the message. Your work is below average.
- **F:** You miss the point of the assignment, or you don't complete the assignment. Most or all of the required elements are missing. Writing is poor and it's difficult to discern the message. Your work is failing.

Daily assignments: 20% of grade (500 points)

Group project: 35% of grade (875 points)

Final exam: 30% of grade (750 points)

Class participation: 15% of grade (375 points)

Mistakes that bring out Margaret's red pen:

- Misspelled name: **-50**
- Missing first reference: **-15**
- Obvious fact error: **-50**
- Misspelled word: **-10**
- AP style error: **-5**
- Wordiness, redundancy: **-5**
- Grammar error: **-5**
- Punctuation error: **-3 to -5**
- Other errors: **-3 to -25**

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 C. A. Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Syllabus Changes

The professor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus, including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

ARS

The university facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities. Accommodations are determined through the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Website for contact information: <https://ars.unc.edu> or email ars@unc.edu.

(source: <https://ars.unc.edu/faculty-staff/syllabus-statement>)

Counseling and Psychological Services

CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their website: <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more.

TITLE IX

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>. Please contact the University's Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, interim – titleixcoordinator@unc.edu), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu; confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at safe.unc.edu.

POLICY ON NON-DISCRIMINATION

The university is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and to ensuring that educational and employment decisions are based on individuals' abilities and qualifications. Consistent with this principle and applicable laws, the University's [Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination](#) offers access to its educational programs and activities as well as employment terms and conditions without respect to race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, creed, genetic information, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Such a policy ensures that only relevant factors are considered and that equitable and consistent standards of conduct and performance are applied.

If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination, you can seek assistance and file a report through the Report and Response Coordinators (see contact info at safe.unc.edu) or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#), or online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>.

Diversity statement

I strive to make this classroom an inclusive space for all students. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to improve; I appreciate any suggestions. More broadly, our school has adopted diversity and inclusion [mission and vision statements](#) with accompanying goals. These complement the university policy on [prohibiting harassment and discrimination](#). In summary, 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. The Dean of Students (Suite 1106, Student Academic Services Building, CB# 5100, 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5100 or [919] 966-4042) has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Thursday, Aug. 19: Introductions

We'll go over the syllabus, talk about the course and get to know each other.

Tuesday, Aug. 24: Business reporting

While business reporting was once considered the backwater of journalism, since the 1970s there has been an incredible boom in the demand for business news, witnessed in part by the proliferation of weekly business journals and the creation of 24-hour networks such as CNBC and Fox Business Network. Because of the ongoing financial crisis, this type of reporting captured the attention of readers and viewers across the world. Reporters win Pulitzer Prizes covering business, and their stories dominate websites, newspapers and television networks.

We'll also spend the last 15 minutes of class talking about the team project that's due Nov. 30.

What you should read for class: Ch. 1, *Show Me the Money*

Thursday, Aug. 26: Business beats

Business reporters are often called on to cover a variety of topics, whether they're their specialty or not. At the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* a reporter might have to cover the Port of Manatee, boat builders in the region, orange juice maker Tropicana, and tourism, with frequent trips to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court and downtown development authority meetings as well. Working a beat requires skills and strategies that can be used for virtually any type of coverage or story. One of the hardest things for a new business reporter to accomplish is to come up with story ideas. A reporter who has been on the beat for several years knows what's been covered and what has been newsworthy in the past, but the new beat reporter has no context, particularly if he or she is new to the business desk.

What you should read for class: Ch. 3, *Covering Business*; Ch. 11, *Writing about Business*

Tuesday, Aug. 31: Public vs. private companies

The important thing for reporters to remember about private companies is that they're just that — private. Their stock is not traded on any exchange and they are not required by law to disclose information to the public. However, there is still

plenty of information available — reporters just have to know where to dig and what to look for. While many private firms are loath to attract media attention, reporting on them can give a journalist the opportunity to write stories in a noncompetitive situation. An aggressive, but fair, coverage of private companies can arguably lend some of the best stories in business reporting.

What you should read for class: Ch. 22 of *Writing about Business*

Thursday, Sept. 2: The Securities and Exchange Commission

The Securities and Exchange Commission is a federal government agency that regulates publicly traded companies and private companies with debt offerings or a large shareholder base. The SEC's job is to protect investors from unscrupulous companies by requiring businesses to disclose information about their operations. Virtually all these filings are public records that can be accessed from the [SEC's website](#). The SEC and its filings can be the business reporter's best friend because they often disclose information that the companies don't put out in press releases or include on their websites. Knowing what to look for in these filings can increase a reporter's ability to understand how a company operates.

What you should read for class: Ch. 6, *Show Me the Money*

Tuesday, Sept. 7: Company structure

Without understanding how a company is managed, a business reporter can't know its inner workings. The CEO is often the person who spends the most time talking to the media, but may not be the only person worth interviewing. How a company's managers interact with each other and what their goals are can also be important factors when writing about a business. In addition, the management team dictates the strategy for the company and the tone for its operations. Because of this, some companies may make decisions that aren't in their best interests, but are purely made to satisfy the whims of management. Getting inside a management team and understanding how it operates can be one of the most difficult tasks for a business reporter, but also one of the most important. The CEO and his or her executive team are the ones who should answer to investors and employees when a company is struggling or has made a controversial decision. They're also the ones inside a company most likely to talk to the media.

What you should read for class: Ch. 7, *Writing about Business*

Thursday, Sept. 9: No class

Take this opportunity to work on your portfolios.

Tuesday, Sept. 14: Using the Internet to slueh (part 1)

We talk about all the sources of information about public AND private companies available online.

What you should read for class: Ch. 25 of *Writing about Business*

Thursday, Sept. 16: Using the Internet to slueh (part 2)

Bring your laptops. You'll get with your team to search online for juicy info on your company. We'll spend the last 15 minutes of class talking about what you found.

Tuesday, Sept. 21: Form 8-K filings and executive compensation (part 1)

One of the most important SEC filings companies make is the [Form 8-K](#), which must be submitted when a materially important event occurs in the life of the firm. The SEC recently reviewed these requirements and added additional reasons why 8-Ks must be filed. Since Regulation Fair Disclosure was enacted, there has been an increase in 8-K filings. Many companies use 8-Ks as a way to notify investors and other interested parties of information that they have disclosed to others or plan to disclose during a meeting. Form 8-Ks are one of the key places for reporters to look for news about companies on their beat, particularly news that businesses are not eager to disclose but are required to do so by law.

Meanwhile, the proxy statement is the document filed with the SEC that alerts all of the company's investors when and where its annual meeting will be held. The proxy is the invitation to the meeting, and it includes information about the proposals to be voted on. But that's not the only reason a company's proxy statement is often newsworthy: it also discloses the compensation of the top five executives, including salary, bonus, and stock options, as well as items such as the CEO's membership in a country club or relocation costs. In addition, the proxy also details financial relationships that the company might have with outside board members and their companies. Proxy statements help a business reporter ascertain how companies value and compensate their executives. A story from a proxy statement filing is the one that a CEO probably dreads more than any other.

What you should read for class: Ch. 4, *Covering Business*

Thursday, Sept. 23: Form 8-K filings and executive compensation (part 2)

Bring your laptops. You'll get with your team to look at 8-K filings and proxy statements from your company. We'll spend the last 15 minutes of class talking about what you found.

Tuesday, Sept. 28: Wall Street

The basic principle behind Wall Street is not that complicated. Reporters should think of Wall Street as a huge marketplace, where investors from all over the world gather each day to buy and sell stocks, bonds and other investments. Yet few experienced journalists, let alone beginning business reporters, understand enough about what's happening to be able to write a cohesive and clear story about how the stock market performed in a single day or why the stock prices of particular companies might have risen or fallen.

What you should read for class: Ch. 8 in *Show Me the Money*; Ch. 7, *The New York Times Reader*

Thursday, Sept. 30: The stock market

Thirty years ago, few people in the country owned stocks, so covering the markets wasn't that important for the media. Now more than 50% of all households own stocks, so the ups and downs of the market can be front-page news. Covering stock prices isn't easy, however, because journalists have to be able to assess sometimes conflicting pieces of information and determine which one had the bigger influence on a particular stock. Even then, the stock market often operates and reacts in irrational ways. How does a journalist explain a market falling after the unemployment rate released the same day has also fallen and when the market has risen the past eight times the unemployment rate fell? Writing about the stock market requires a reporter to think on his or her feet and understand that what may affect one stock price could have no effect on another.

What you should read for class: Chs 12-13, *Writing about Business*

Tuesday, Oct. 5: Discussion

Let's talk about what we've learned about Wall Street and the stock market from your readings and from watching the documentary "Freakonomics."

What you should do for class: Watch the documentary "Freakonomics."

Thursday, Oct. 7: In-class work on group project

Tuesday, Oct. 12: No class (University Day)

Thursday, Oct. 14: Team meetings w/Margaret about portfolios

- 12:30 p.m.: Team 1
- 12:50 p.m.: Team 3
- 1:10 p.m.: Team 5

Tuesday, Oct. 19: Team meetings w/Margaret about portfolios

- 12:30 p.m.: Team 2
- 12:50 p.m.: Team 4

Thursday, Oct. 21: No class (Fall Break)

Tuesday, Oct. 26: Regulation — federal and state (part 1)

The interaction of businesses and the federal government is often overlooked by many reporters looking for stories. Federal agencies can be a trove of information about companies, particularly privately held firms not required to release other information. Many companies are required to obtain regulatory approval, for example, before they increase the rates that they charge consumers. Others need government approval before they can start selling their product on their market. Government regulations also keep track of how employees are being treated and whether they have a safe workplace, and how businesses are polluting the environment. They also will determine whether one company can buy another, as we saw in the mergers and acquisitions assignment. Business coverage is also influenced by politicians who discuss and pass laws that impact how businesses operate and how much money they can make. Virtually everything related to the government has an aspect that can be considered a business story.

What you should do for class: Ch. 14, *Show Me the Money*

Thursday, Oct. 28: Regulation — federal and state (part 1)

Bring your laptops. You'll get with your team to look for examples of ways your company has been regulated by the state or federal government. We'll spend the last 15 minutes of class talking about what you found.

Tuesday, Nov. 2: The overall economy

Understanding numbers and what they mean is an essential part of writing about the economy. If the unemployment rate is rising, that typically means that more people are out of work. Or if the Consumer Price Index climbs, that means that you're likely paying more for your groceries or transportation. When you can take statistics and make sense of them in a compelling way, you've performed a service. Once the economy is explained in terms that readers can understand, then the business writer can explain why it's happening. Did a local plant close, laying off hundreds of workers? Has the price of a barrel of crude oil jumped? Was there a freeze in Florida that killed oranges, causing the price of orange juice to rise? The story of the economy helps put what is happening to consumers and businesses into broader perspective, giving readers information that allows them to make decisions about their own lives.

What you should do for class: Chs 1-5, *Writing about Business*

Thursday, Nov. 4: The economy and real estate

Virtually every aspect of the economy needs real estate to operate, although the businesses that need it most are builders and developers. Public records on real estate transactions typically disclose how much the buyer paid for the property and the assessed tax value. Go back far enough and you can see all the times a property was bought and sold to see how the price fluctuated. These records can be valuable in writing about businesses or individuals. How much did a company spend to buy the land for its new headquarters? Did a city council member sell his land to a company at a significantly higher price than he paid? Real estate records can also tell you when a developer wants to build a new subdivision or high rise, they have to file plans with a zoning or planning board. You'll likely use your knowledge of real estate in a number of different stories.

What you should do for class: Ch. 37, *Writing about Business*; Ch. 13, *Show Me the Money*

Tuesday, Nov. 9: Marketing (part 1)

We'll talk about strategies public and private companies use to get their names out into the world in a positive way. We'll talk about press releases, sponsored content and social media. We'll also compare/contrast how the media reports news vs. how companies "spin" the information.

Thursday, Nov. 11: Marketing (part 2)

Bring your laptops. You'll get with your team to look for examples of your company's marketing strategy. We'll spend the last 15 minutes of class talking about what you found.

Tuesday, Nov. 16: Business journalism ethics (part 1)

In the past 20 years, operating ethically in business journalism has been one of the field's biggest issues. While there is no quantitative evidence that more reporters are investing in companies they cover, anecdotal examples suggest such unethical behavior may be on the rise. More than any other journalist, business reporters must be free of any appearance of impropriety. Without the trust of readers and viewers, anything the journalist writes in the future will be viewed with more skepticism than usual. While most journalists would agree that they should not own or invest in stocks they cover, there is no unanimity about this topic. Nor is there an agreement on many other ethical issues, such as taking favors from companies or sources. For example, if you interviewed a mortgage banker for a story on home buying, and he offered you a low mortgage rate the next time you were shopping for a home, would you accept it? The answer to this question isn't as concrete in the minds of reporters as some would like.

What you should do for class: Ch. 31, *Writing about Business*

Thursday, Nov. 18: Business journalism ethics (part 2)

We'll talk about contemporary issues in business journalism ethics. Be prepared for robust discussion.

Tuesday, Nov. 23: Review for final exam

Thursday, Nov. 25: No class (Happy Thanksgiving!!)

Tuesday, Nov. 30: Team presentations

Final exam: Friday, Dec. 3 at noon

INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES

(Note: All assignments due by 5 p.m. on due dates)

#1: Due Thursday, Sept. 14

For 100 points — Write 350 words on one (1) of the following:

- Think about what beat you would be most interested in covering as a business reporter. Find a U.S. media outlet that covers that topic, then list three things you like and three things you dislike about its coverage.
- List 10 types of people you would want to develop as sources if they covered North Carolina's banking industry and the information you'd like to get from each one. These sources can be inside or outside the companies on the beat.

#2: Due Thursday, Oct. 7

For 250 points — Watch one of the following movies: "The Big Short" (2015); "The Wolf of Wall Street" (2013); "Boiler Room" (2000); or "Wall Street" (1987). Write a 500-word paper on how well you think the movie reflects the realities of finance/Wall Street/trading/etc. A ton of reviewers/reporters have written about this; feel free to cite them as sources in your paper if you'd like.

3: Due Thursday, Nov. 4

For 150 points — Write 300 words on the relationship between a chief executive officer and a business reporter. Examine the potential conflicts in the relationship between a chief executive officer and a business reporter and how an executive could manipulate a reporter.

Team Project: Portfolio on Public Company (875 points)

What: Your team will create a portfolio of information about a public company that includes the following elements:

1. A 4- to 5-page report on the company that includes the following sections:
 - An overview of what the company does and the sector in which it's positioned.
 - A brief history of the company
 - A brief profile of the CEO
 - A description of the company's structure
 - A list of the major shareholders and the percent each owns.
2. 1-2 pages on the most interesting news from the latest 8K report.
3. 1-2 pages on the most interesting news from the latest proxy statement.
4. 1-2 pages on its stock performance since Jan. 1, 2017. (charts and graphs welcome)
5. 1 page on the CEO's compensation, including bonuses, stock options and other perks.
6. 2-3 pages on the company's media strategy and recent coverage from the media
7. An example of a press release from the company written in the last two years.
8. A 1-page analysis of the press release.
9. 1-2 pages on something interesting you found out about this company through your research that's not covered above. Some examples might be:
 - A fine it received from a government agency.
 - A class-action lawsuit filed against it, or another high-profile suit.
 - The impact an upcoming merger or acquisition is having on stock prices.

List of companies from which to choose (first-come, first-served basis):

- Activision Blizzard (gaming)
- AMC Entertainment (theaters)
- Chipotle Mexican Grill
- Lowe's Home Improvement
- Lululemon Athletica (apparel)
- Odyssey Marine Exploration (deep-sea minerals)
- Publix Super Markets
- Red Hat (IT)
- SAS Institute (software)
- Sheetz
- Snap
- Sonic Automotive
- Square
- Starbucks
- Uber
- VF Corp. (North Face, Vans, Timberland)
- WWE (wrestling)
- Zoom

Due date: 5 p.m. Monday, Nov. 22

What else: Your team will give a 10-minute presentation on a few interesting things you've learned about your company on Tuesday, Nov. 30.

Advice: Your team should start working on this as soon as possible, since it accounts for 35% of your grade. I've built in some class time for you to work on this ... so don't put it off.

Teams

Team 1: Bansai, Ellis, Roach

Team 2: Buckles, Ferris, Sills

Team 3: Caudle, Kelly, Somasundaran

Team 4: Crumpler, Morgan, Springer

Team 5: Deol, Quinn