

MEJO 753 Reporting & Writing News – Fall 2021

M 5-7:45 p.m. | Carroll 253

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Student hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 11 a.m.-1 p.m.

Introduction

The goal of this class is to teach you not just how to report and write, but to think critically about how we do it, why we do it, and who we do it for. This will include discussion of ethics, platforms, funding models, and our role in the broader public discourse. We will also discuss the additional challenges of covering the news in a rapidly-changing environment, and doing so in a safe and socially responsible way.

Each of you will pick a beat that is of interest to you personally and to the broader public. You will learn how to develop sources on your beat, uncover new information, advance public knowledge, and provide context and analysis for the news. We will spend time on the basics like inverted pyramid, AP Style, and interview techniques. We will spend a lot of time talking about current events and how journalists are doing when it comes to covering them. We will also spend time talking about issues like freedom of the press, libel law, the role of journalism in broader society.

This syllabus is a living document. I will be updating and making additions/changes throughout the term. I will always inform you of any adjustments, but please bookmark this page and come back to it regularly.

The four core elements of the practice of journalism:

- *Writing* — Grammar and spelling; ability to tell a story well, using of quotes, anecdotes and descriptive detail; use of active voice and strong verbs; ability to write ledes that are compelling and get to the point; ability to write tightly and organize information in logical, compelling sequence; recognizing how long a story needs to be.
- *Reporting* — Enterprise and diligence; ability and eagerness to find promising angles; ability to identify the people, details, and documents that build your story; cultivating strong sources; understanding the need to include multiple viewpoints and stakeholders.

- *Speed, efficiency, and accuracy*— Knowing how to work on deadline; ability and willingness to manage more than one assignment at a time; skill with basic factual information such as names, addresses, dates and figures.
- *Judgment* — Commitment to fairness and understanding multiple points of view; ability to discern between facts and beliefs; respect for diversity in all its forms; knowing not just how to report the news, but why and for whom.

The four core elements of the philosophy of journalism:

- How should we think about “facts,” “truth” and “objectivity”?
- What is our role in public discourse?
- Who is our audience?
- What role do journalists play in promoting or challenging the status quo?

Beats

The first assignment in this class is selecting your beat. I ask you to do this not to limit you, but to provide some focus as you report this semester. Developing a beat will help you get to know the subject and its key issues and controversies. It will help you get to know the playing field, like what other reporters and outlets are covering it, or the gaps in their coverage. It will also help you start to develop ongoing relationships with people and organizations who will be your sources.

Options include, but are not limited to: Environment, Health care, Immigration, Education, Economic inequality, Race/racism, Housing, Elections, LGBTQ+ rights. You can see the [beat doc assignment here](#), and an [example beat doc here](#).

Required Texts

On Writing Well, by William Zinsser

AP Stylebook (you can buy a copy or [subscribe to use the online version](#))

Elements of Journalism, by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel

The Journalist and The Murderer, by Janet Malcom

The Oxygen of Amplification, by Whitney Phillips ([available free online](#))

The View from Somewhere, Lewis Raven Wallace

Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism, Allissa Richardson

News Discussion

In addition to the assigned readings, I expect you to be engaged consumers of news in many forms. Reading the work of others is crucial to developing your own voice and expertise, as well as your ability to critique that work (and your own!). Each week [one of](#)

[you will be assigned to lead a discussion of the news; sign up here](#). By 5 p.m. on Thursday, the discussion leader will post three articles of their choosing to our Google Group. They should be linked thematically in a way that helps facilitate discussion of not just the stories but the issues they cover. The discussion leader should also post three question prompts to get the rest of us thinking. Everyone should respond on the email thread at least once before we meet. *This portion of class will be done all online to include our classmates who are attending remotely and ensure that they can engage meaningfully.*

To further your news engagement, I suggest subscribing to at least one national newspaper (i.e. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*) and one high-quality periodical (*The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, *The Atlantic*). You should also subscribe to at least one podcast on journalism (“On The Media,” “It’s All Journalism,” “The Digiday podcast,” “The Kicker,” “Catch and Kill,” etc.).

Assignments

Here is a short breakdown the types of story assignments you will have:

- Covering speeches, public meetings, and press conferences
- Covering public opinion, through “(wo)man on the street” reporting and/or survey data
- A news story built around a published report
- An “explainer” on a topic of relevance to current news
- A profile of a candidate or public figure
- A “trend” story relevant to public life
- An audio story of ~2 minutes
- An enterprise story on your beat
- A social and distribution plan for your enterprise story

All assignments should be turned in via Google Docs at the date/time specified. Please share them with both my Gmail and my UNC email (at the top of this page). Please make sure you have set the permissions so I can edit!

Final exam - Friday, Dec. 3, 7 p.m.

20% of final grade

[Your enterprise story](#) will be due during our final exam period. You will present your article, multimedia element, and plan for social promotion and audience development.

Weight of assignments in final grade:

- News discussion leadership -- 10%

- Beat doc and pitches -- 10%
- Attendance and participation -- 10%
- Stories -- 50%
- Final project - 20%

Late Assignments

This is the news -- we live and die by deadline. Your starting grade for a story submitted after deadline will be a C. If you think you are going to miss a deadline for reasons outside of your control, please let me know as soon as possible so we can discuss how to address it.

Assignment Grade Scale

- A (90 and above) - Could be published with little to no major editing
- B (80-89) - Could be published with moderate editing
- C (70-79) - Requires significant editing to be publishable
- D (60-69) - Not publishable -- poorly conceived, written, or sourced
- F (below 60) - Did not complete, or completed with major factual or ethical problem

Graduate Student Final Grade Scale

- H - High Pass - Clear Excellence
- P - Pass - Entirely Satisfactory Graduate Work
- L - Low Pass - Inadequate Graduate Work
- F - Fail

Attendance

Our class will be held in-person, but if there's a need to attend via Zoom (individually or collectively), we will adjust. Here's what our time together will look like, for the most part:

- *News discussion* -- Reading to be completed on your own time before we meet in class. We will use the first ~20 minutes of class for peer-led discussion.
- *Practice lecture/discussion* -- About 1 hour of class time will focus on the practice of journalism.
- *Theory lecture/discussion* -- About 1 hour of class time will focus on the theory of journalism.

- *Individual editing and coaching* -- I am available during office hours for questions and additional feedback, and can also set up calls or Zoom meetings as needed.

You are graduate students, so I do expect you to approach this class as you would a job. You will be expected to complete the work and engage with the rest of your classmates. If you experience a major obstacle -- a death in your immediate family, an illness that requires seeing a doctor, caring for a loved one -- please let me know as soon as possible so we can adjust expectations accordingly. Communication is key, so please be in contact with me at the point where you first encounter that obstacle, not when you are already falling behind on work.

Communication

I will create a Google Group for this class, which will be the primary means of communication with each other throughout this semester, and for me to communicate with all of you collectively. Please make sure to check the email account you link to this group! All of the class documents and resources will also be stored in a shared Google Drive folder for this class. I check email quite often, so that is the best way to reach me -- but please copy both kateshep@email.unc.edu and kateshepUNC@gmail.com.

Diversity and Anti-Racism

The official school note is below, but I feel it is important to set out my expectations for class conduct and discussion -- both my own and yours. I do so in accordance with the main purposes of both academia and journalism: to distinguish between valid and invalid knowledge and judgments, and to broaden our perspective on the world and the experiences of others.

In my class, I expect students to:

- Refrain from judging individuals according to the collective groups they may belong to (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.);
- Assess ideas and arguments according to the evidence and not based on the identities of the individual who created them;
- Acknowledge and seek to better understand the historical and contemporary systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism that have created real disparities in people's lives, how they see the world, and the opportunities that are available to them;

- And consider the often invisible systems of power at play in a given situation and the perspective of those who do not have that power.

Week-by-week schedule

Class/ Date	Topic	Readings	Deliverables
1- August 23	Introduction to course, beats, news values	Fluid Beats ; Press freedom and government transparency during COVID-19 ; CPJ Journalists Security Guide ; Coronavirus Reminds Journalists To Prepare for Public Health Emergencies	In-class writing activity
2- August 30	Writing basics - Styles, formats, ledes / What is journalism for?	<i>On Writing Well</i> , Chapters 1-10; <i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 1-2	Beat docs due
3- Sept. 6	Labor Day - No class		
4- Sept. 13	Peer editing / What is the role of journalists in public life?	<i>On Writing Well</i> , Chapters 11-15, 23, 25; <i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 3-6; Reading on quotes	DRAFT breaking news story due
5 - Sept. 20	Reporting basics - Quotes, interviews, public opinion stories, pitching / What is the role of journalists in public life?	<i>Elements of Journalism</i> , 7-9; On public opinion stories	FINAL breaking news story due
7- Sept. 27	Research basics - verification, database, library and online, w/ Stephanie Willen Brown / Explainers / Our role in public life (continued)	<i>Elements of Journalism</i> , Chapters 10-11, An explainer on explainers and explainer examples: Popeyes , the 25th Amendment , Vaping	Public opinion story OR Planned event story due

8 - Oct. 4	Libel, press freedom and FOIA / Source development and our responsibilities as journalists	US Press Freedom Tracker ; <i>The Journalist And The Murderer</i> ; WaPo 2012 followup	Research story due
9 - Oct. 11	Profile writing + grammar special / Audiences and emerging technologies in news	Bearing Witness, Part 1; Profile examples: Gwyneth Paltrow , William Barber , Tucker Carlson	Explainer story due
10 - Oct. 18	What do we cover, and how? / Discussion of trend and enterprise stories	<i>The Oxygen of Amplification</i> ; Voice of Hate in America ; Normalizing a Nazi: 10 tips for covering white supremacy	
11 - Oct. 25	Audio fundamentals and writing for the ear w/ Adam Hochberg; Discussion of trend and enterprise stories	Print to Radio , Active Sound ; Trend story examples: White Claw , Baby Shark , Millenials and Cereal , Trend Piece	Profile due
12- Nov. 1	Recording tech and interviewing for radio w/ Hochberg	Finding Emilie , Listen to recent episodes of The Daily ; script example	Trend story due
13 - Nov. 8	Pitch feedback and selection	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 1-3; The View From Nowhere (podcast, episode 1)	Pitches for audio due
14- Nov. 15	Enterprise pitches	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 4-7; Fatal Force and A Reckoning Over Objectivity	Pitches for enterprise story due

15- Nov. 22	Review audio; enterprise planning	<i>View From Somewhere</i> , Chapters 8-11	Audio story due
16-Nov. 29	So, you really want to be a journalist? / Peer-editing		Draft of enterprise story due
FINAL	Friday, Dec. 3, 7 p.m.		Enterprise story due and presentations

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](#) (EOC)
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](#) (EOC).

Class Policy: You should approach this class as you would a job at a startup. I allow two unexcused absences, but anything beyond that will negatively impact your final grade. Because this class is largely based on teamwork, you will be letting your teammates down if you aren't present and on time. Please communicate with me early about potential absences. Please be aware that you are bound by the [Honor Code](#) when making a request for a University approved absence. [More info here.](#)

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.

Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS)

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill 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. [More info here.](#)

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

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](https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/), or online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>.

Diversity

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.

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 will ask you to leave immediately, and I will 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 additional information, see <https://carolinatogether.unc.edu/university-guidelines-for-facemasks/>.

ACEJMC Core Values and Competencies

The accrediting body for the Hussman School of Journalism and Media 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](#).

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. Specifically, this course is designed to help you:

- Understand and apply the principles of freedom of speech and press, including the right to monitor and criticize power.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity.

- Think critically, creatively and independently.
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the professions, audiences and purposes we serve.
- Critically evaluate your own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.