



MEJO 153 WRITING and REPORTING

Spring 2023 | Professor Claire Thornton

Instructor: Claire Thornton, claireat@unc.edu

Time & location: Monday; Wednesday at 11:00 a.m.-12:15 p.m. in room Carroll Hall room 142

Office Hours: Mondays before or after class or by appointment

Course description

This course teaches fundamentals of information gathering and media writing. Students will learn how to write news stories, press releases, broadcast scripts and on deadline according to acceptable professional standards. Students will learn about different types of journalistic media and there will be lots of writing exercises. We will also read and engage with journalism from major news organizations as well as essays from great writers.

Objectives

At the end of the class, each student will have elevated the style and clarity of their writing and developed a strong foundation on which to build in-depth reporting skills. Students will also leave the class with a firm grasp of reporting basics: observations, interviews with sources and documents.

Required reading / Course materials

Reaching Audiences: A Guide to Media Writing, Sixth Edition

The Associated Press Stylebook Online and *The UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media Style Guide* (no cost)

Webster's New World Dictionary (just Google Merriam-Webster)

Course Format and Assignment Expectations

We will meet as a class on Mondays and Wednesdays except where noted. Attendance is mandatory. You are required to check our Canvas site to stay informed about changes, deadlines, and assignments.

Assignments

Most assignments will be daily assignments students will turn in during class.

There is no way to succeed without planning and preparation; you cannot leave reporting or your project work to the last minute. Please manage time accordingly. We will discuss time and project

management to help ensure your success, but at the end of the day, the responsibility for execution is yours and yours alone.

NOTE: The stories and releases you write in class should NOT be posted online or given to a potential employer as examples of your writing/reporting ability. The exercises are for class use only and sometimes will not represent real events. To that end, never feature a REAL person or use their name in a story about FAKE events, because that could spread confusion or misinformation.

Filename conventions

All assignments submitted online must adhere to the following filename conventions:
LASTNAME_FIRSTNAME_DAY-MONTH-YEAR.

That means an assignment filename submitted by student Mrs. Juan Doe on December 10, 2021 would correctly look like this:

Doe_Juan_12-20-2021

Please note: If you ignore follow file-naming conventions, your assignment will be reduced by -25 points each time your work fails to meet standards.

Wait... Canvas? What's Canvas?

This semester we are using Canvas, the backend content management system replacing Sakai at UNC in the coming months.

The UNC Canvas help webpage is: <https://canvas.unc.edu/training/>

Attendance policy

Please approach this class as you would a job. Regular class attendance is mandatory; one unexcused absence is permitted. Any and all excused absences must be arranged in advance. We are doing a lot of work collaboratively this semester, and you will be letting others down if you aren't present, on time, and engaged. Students are bound by the [Honor Code](#) when making a request for a University approved absence. For more information on University attendance policies, [please see here](#).

COVID-19

If you are feeling unwell, do not attend class. You will not be penalized. We must care for each other. Please rest and advise both myself and your group as soon as possible to coordinate make-up work. Communication is key. Don't worry about your grade. We'll figure out a plan.

UNC has certain protocols in place for those who test positive for Covid. The main source for information from the University are the following websites:

Campus Health: <https://campushealth.unc.edu/services/covid-19-services>
Carolina Together: <https://carolinatogether.unc.edu/>

Mask Use

UNC has decided that all mask use is optional. At the same time, some recent epidemiological models have shown the newest Omicron variant is 5X as transmissible as the Omicron variant that was surging at this time last year.

As your instructor, I prefer we practice caution and wear masks when we're all around each other in class, but cannot mandate mask wearing.

Wellbeing

The university has a number of counseling services available to students. These include UNC Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) <https://caps.unc.edu>. To reach CAPS, please email caps@unc.edu or call [919-966-3658](tel:919-966-3658). CAPS is available at all hours 24/7 for urgent concerns. The CAPS office is located in the James A. Taylor Building, 3rd Floor, 320 Emergency Room Drive, CB# 7470, Chapel Hill, NC 27599.

Community Agreements

- Respect for all
- Challenge the idea, not the person
- Commit to being comfortably uncomfortable
- Leave with more questions than answers
- Be OK with silence
- Be as present as possible with audio, video, and chat
- Take care of yourself
- Have fun!

Grading

Daily assignments: 60%

Quizzes: 10%

Midterm exam 1: 10%

Midterm exam 2: 10%

Final exam story: 10%

Instructors in the Hussman School of Journalism and Media are known for their high standards and their fair but rigorous grading. The following statement sets forth the School's grading standards, which are followed in evaluating work in all of its writing and reporting courses. Instructors consider each assignment as a professional editor would, applying the same professional guidelines and standards that any good editor would in accepting or rejecting stories from reporters. The grading system here is the basis for other writing courses such as MEJO 253, "Intro to Public Affairs Reporting," and MEJO 332, "Public Relations Writing."

News and other professionals must be able to report and write and produce newsworthy, accurate, fair, complete, interesting, readable and mechanically clean stories. Thus, grades reflect a student's performance as a reporter, as a writer and as one who uses the language correctly. In evaluating the writing, the instructor considers the quality of the lead, use of language, economy of expression, readability, organization of material and transition, among other factors. In evaluating the mechanical dimension, the instructor considers spelling, grammar, punctuation, conformity to AP and UNC-CH style, proper copy editing symbols and similar factors. In evaluating the reporting, the instructor considers news judgment in gathering, evaluating and selecting information used in the story, accuracy, approach to the story, choice and use of appropriate sources, thoroughness, use of appropriate information-gathering methodologies and related factors.

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

The faculty believes strongly that it is absolutely essential for anyone planning a career in mass communication to demonstrate at least minimum competency in MEJO 153. Undergraduate journalism majors must pass the course with a C- to receive credit. Graduate students must earn at least a B-

Grades will be entered in Canvas throughout the course; you will be able to see where you stand as we proceed through the semester.

Evaluation of Writing Assignments

Your instructor devotes a great deal of time and effort to evaluating your papers. In courses in which students write frequently, instructors try to return graded papers as soon as possible, often before assigning a new writing exercise. Review your papers immediately and thoroughly. It's an important part of your learning.

Grades are determined by plus and minus points on each assignment. Plus points are added when the work is above the ordinary, but not when the work is at an average level. Superior papers containing few errors can achieve scores above 100. Minus points will be deducted for each error and from work that falls below the minimum level of acceptability.

Below is a grading guide to three main areas your instructor will consider in deducting or adding points to your stories.

1. 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 for an exceptionally effective lead and supporting material

+5 to +10 for exceptionally effective organization and treatment of material

+2 for effective transition or introduction of material

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

-2 for ineffective or missing treatment of transition or introduction 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

-5 to -10 for an ineffective lead that needs work or story that lacks supporting material for a lead

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

2. Mechanics

Some otherwise good writers fail to communicate clearly because they are weak in grammar, punctuation or spelling skills. That is unacceptable in any communications profession, and that is why such fundamental language skills are emphasized. Points are deducted for style, spelling, grammar and punctuation errors according to this scale:

- 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 style
- 2 for excessively long or complicated sentences or paragraphs
- 5 for each spelling error, and a typographical mistake (a typo) is considered a spelling error
- 5 for each punctuation error, such as incorrect use of a comma, semicolon, colon or dash
- 5 for each grammatical error, such as improper subject-verb agreement or noun-pronoun agreement, or misplaced modifier
- 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 the School of Medias and Journalism would be a -50 because there is no "s" on the end of Media. (Besides, it's the Hussman School of Journalism and Media.) Until the first competency exam in MEJO 153, each major factual error will result in a deduction of 25 points, not 50, from a paper's total grade. This grace period will allow you to become familiar with standards of verification and accuracy expected of communications professionals. After the first competency exam, such errors will receive the 50-point deduction. This deduction is not an arbitrary punishment. Such errors go to the heart of credibility for you and your organization. Errors can also have serious legal ramifications, such as libel suits. -10 for misspelling a person's name on second or later references (e.g., Brown on first reference, Brwon on second reference)

3. Reporting

These reporting criteria apply to stories for which you gather the information:

- + 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 (students could lose points here for relying too heavily on online sources, not having a variety of sources or not including a human source)
- + or - 5 to 20 for thoroughness of story — existence of loose ends, holes or unanswered questions; development of significant angles; inclusion of needed detail; information to make story fair and complete
- + or - 5 to 15 for story backgrounding — research necessary to make the story complete or to provide needed explanations; preparation for interviews or meetings; shows understanding of the general topic
- + or - 20 for legal errors, such as libel, violation of legal right of privacy, copyright violation and others

NOTE: Many of these plus and minus points may be applied to the same story for recurring errors or for continual superior performance.

D. Key to Writing Assignment Comments

As your instructor grades papers, he or she indicates specific observations and problems on the paper. Here are some of the abbreviations commonly used in grading MEJO 153 papers:

ag = agreement error	AP or UNC = style error
awk = awkward phrasing	ce = copyediting error
gr = grammatical error	pct = punctuation error
red = redundancy	rep = repetition
sp = spelling error	tense = incorrect verb tense
tr = transition problem	
wc = incorrect or inappropriate word choice	
wordy = excessive language that could be tighter	

Honor Code

The school expects that each student will conduct themselves 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 Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism and fabricating sources, information, or quotes results in automatic failure.

Seeking help

If you need individual assistance, it is your responsibility to meet with me. If you want to improve your performance in the course, seek help as soon as possible. Office hours are Mondays before or after class or by appointment.

Recordings

At times, this class may be recorded for educational purposes only, and I will make recordings available via Canvas/Panopto. Any use of a recording of this class by a student shall be for educational purposes only.

Unauthorized student recording of classes on personal devices or on any other format is prohibited. Students requesting the use of assistive technology as an accommodation should contact Accessibility Resources & Service. Any violation of these prohibitions shall constitute an honor code violation.

Flexible Class Format

As long as it is possible to do so safely, we will meet in person this semester. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic may require changes to this plan and we will monitor the situation closely. If I need to change the format of the course temporarily due to outbreaks of illness, I will announce this via email and the course Canvas site. If you need to attend via Zoom, let me know in advance and we will work to facilitate your request. I plan to make Zoom calls available via the class Canvas site.

Syllabus Changes

All Hussman professors reserve the right to make changes to syllabi, 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.

If you require special accommodations to attend or participate in this course, please let me know as soon as possible. If you need information about disabilities visit the Accessibility Resources & Services site at <https://ars.unc.edu/>.

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.

Diversity and Anti-Racism

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/>.

Additionally, it is important to understand expectations around class conduct and discussion for all course participants, including instructors, guests, and collaborators. This is 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.

The Hussman school says that it strives to make classrooms inclusive spaces for all students and 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 says it 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.

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.

Weekly Breakdown of MEJO 553 for Spring 2023

I. Weeks 1-8: Competencies

At the end of eight weeks of classes, students should be able to demonstrate the following competencies when writing a news story based on a set of facts:

1. Select appropriate information from a set of facts to write a solid, concise summary lead;
2. Organize the story properly, accurately and completely;
3. Copyedit the story according to AP and UNC-CH style;
4. Intro to writing online;
5. Use proper spelling and grammar;
6. Develop interviewing techniques;
7. Use quotes and attribution appropriately; and
8. Develop basic research skills

Week 1:

Monday, January 9
Introductions, syllabus review

Wednesday, January 11
Copyediting; nature of news
Before class, read textbook chapter 1 “Understanding Today’s Audiences”

Week 2:

Monday, January 16 – NO CLASS DUE TO Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. HOLIDAY

Wednesday, January 18
Leads, organization
Before class, read textbook chapters 4 and 5

Week 3:

Monday, January 23
Leads, organization
Before class, read textbook chapter 6 “Beyond the Lead: Writing the Message”

Wednesday, January 25
Editing as part of writing
Before class, read textbook chapter 3 “Editing for Audiences”

Week 4:

Monday, January 30
Spot news; quotes; attribution
Before class, read chapter 2 “Tools for Writers: Spelling, Grammar, and Math”

Wednesday, February 1
Extra credit: <https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-bold-joan-didion-story-you-probably-never-read/>
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1991/01/17/new-york-sentimental-journeys/>
Read Joan Didion essay on Central Park case and submit a response

Week 5:

Monday, February 6
Interviewing; traditional and online research
Before class, read textbook chapter 9 “Research and Observation”

Extra credit: Read *The New Yorker* COVID-19 pandemic article and submit response

Wednesday, February 8
Interviewing; traditional and online research
Before class, read textbook chapter 10 “Interviewing, Quotes, and Attribution”

Week 6:

Monday, February 13 NO CLASS – ENJOY YOUR WELL-BEING DAY!

Wednesday, February 15

Story formats

Before class, read textbook chapter 7 “Specific Story Formats”

Week 7: Halfway point

Monday, February 20

Libel; bias; accuracy/evidence; “objectivity” and harm reduction/ethical representations

Listening assignment: “The View from Somewhere” podcast

Wednesday, February 22 NO CLASS IN LIEU OF INDIVIDUALS CONFERENCES

Week 8:

Monday, February 27

Writing for online platforms

Before class, read textbook chapter 8 “Writing for Digital Delivery”

Wednesday, March 1

Writing for online platforms

Extra credit: Read chapter of Robert Caro’s *Working* and submit a response

Week 9:

Monday, March 6

Review for Competency Exam 1

Wednesday, March 8

Competency Exam 1 administered

March 13-17 – NO CLASSES – ENJOY YOUR SPRING BREAK!

II. Weeks 10-15: Competencies

At the end of 15 weeks of classes, students should be able to demonstrate the following competencies while conceptualizing, reporting and writing an event-based news story:

1. How to research, organize and write a variety of types and formats of news stories;
2. Techniques of good writing and editing;
3. Intro to public relations writing;
4. Intro to broadcast writing;
5. Ethics;
6. Familiarity with public records and documents.

Week 10:

Monday, March 20

Extra credit: Read David Remnick essay on Al Gore and submit response

Wednesday, March 22

PR writing

Before class, read textbook chapter 14 “Strategic Communication”

Week 11:

Monday, March 27

Radio, podcast and television writing

Before class, read textbook chapter 13 “Broadcast Media”

Wednesday, March 29

Radio, podcast and television writing

Before class, explore NPR’s training materials: <https://training.npr.org/>

Week 12:

Monday, April 3

More difficult stories; speeches; news conferences

Wednesday, April 5

More difficult stories; speeches; news conferences

Week 13:

Monday, April 10

Review for Competency Exam 2

Wednesday, April 12

Competency Exam 2 administered

Week 14:

Monday, April 17

In-depth instruction/review on final topic TBA

Wednesday, April 19

In-depth instruction/review on final topic TBA

Week 15:

Monday, April 24

Final exam prep

Wednesday, April 26

Final exam prep

TBA – Final exam administered