

MEJO 356.001 Syllabus

“Feature Reporting & Writing”

Spring 2023

2-3:15 p.m. MW

CA 11

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**Foreword:** This syllabus is a plan based on hope and ambition. My hope is that you will all be safe and well this semester; my ambition is to make this course helpful, rigorous and fun. My goal is that you succeed and become better, smarter, more interesting writers. If you encounter issues or fears or concerns that are in the way of your growth – be it COVID or homelife or internet or stress – please let me know and I will try to support, accommodate and help.

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

Feature stories use reporting as their foundation. The reporting can be in the form of collecting facts, data, documents, but also in the gathering of quotes, descriptions, scenes and anecdotes. Excellent feature writers use all the techniques that fiction writers use: setting scenes, foreshadowing, tone, mood, narrative openings, dialogue and descriptive detail.

You learn good writing by reading good writers, writing yourself and rewriting. Each week in this course, we will read outstanding pieces of feature writing and analyze what makes them remarkable. And you'll write, rewrite and rewrite.

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

What You Could Learn from this class:

- \* How to determine what's a good feature idea.
- \* How to structure a long-form story, organize it and have it engage a reader.
- \* How to characterize sources, characters in your stories, describe them, judge them, capture them and convey that to readers.
- \* How to “show” more and “tell” less.
- \* How to become a better writer and reporter.

But the smartest students will tell me one-on-one what they want to learn and I will try to help them learn it.

### Workflow

Each class day, we will discuss the day's story, text assignments and the recorded lecture. Attendance is mandatory. If you're feeling ill, do not come to class, but let me know BEFORE the class. Unexcused absences will result in a lower grade.

Outside of class, you will spend the bulk of your time reading, researching topics, interviewing subjects, and writing and rewriting.

### Resources and Textbooks:

Required texts are: "**Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer**" by Roy Peter Clark. (Available through Amazon); (Clark has an earlier edition -- **50 Essential Strategies**. Either edition is fine.) The **AP Stylebook** and **Hussman Stylebook**, <http://jschoolstylebook.web.unc.edu>.

You will get assigned readings for each class.

### Three Major Feature Stories:

A story will be due once every three or four weeks. **A key to success: Start thinking about and planning for ALL assignments at the beginning of the semester. A key to failure: Last-minute scrambling for a topic and/or interviews.**

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

The class will be divided into two groups for the purpose of story deadlines. That allows me to spend class time with a small group of students to review their story approaches and to give them the opportunity to workshop their stories.

**Three major** feature story due dates are: **Feb. 6 & 8; March 6 & 8; and April 3 & 5.** These stories may be copyedited by Professor Andy Bechtel's editing class and published online. Be sure to be clear with your sources that your story WILL BE PUBLISHED. (An admonition: Do not write anything that you do not want published.)

A properly formatted email pitching your story is **due approximately 10 days** before the story is due. Failure to submit this on time will be reflected in your grade because it means that you haven't planned well, don't take the deadline seriously and/or have no idea what you're going to write about. Each is a recipe for failure.

Each of the three feature stories will be 1,000-1,200 words long and must have **at least four human sources** listed at the end of the story with contact information. Each student must write one profile.

Things you may NOT do for these three feature stories or the final:

- Write in first-person;
- Write about a family member;
- Use anonymous sources;
- Submit stories you wrote for another class or a publication.

### Final story:

The **final story** will be a narrative non-fiction feature in which you will shadow a source or sources for some time and write the story from a narrative perspective. Reporting for this story is crucial. Writers must set up their follow/shadowing reporting early to have enough time to gain experience with the source to be able to tell the story from inside. Due date: **April 24 & 26.**

The format is the same as a regular feature except the word length is 1,500-2,000. **At least five human sources are required.**

Two smaller stories:

- A first-person story, 800 words long. Date due TBA.
- A 150-word Tiny Story. March 27.

A word on deadlines: Late stories are docked one letter grade for each day they are tardy.

### Quiz

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

### Classwork

**Stories:** In most classes we will discuss one or two stories, chosen by me and you. The class has a Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/JOMC256Robinson](http://www.facebook.com/JOMC256Robinson). We will use it to post feature stories of interest for in-class discussion. Students are required to "like" the page and to check it frequently. I will post links to feature stories that we will be discussing in class. Each student will select a feature story for the class to read. Students will comment on the stories on the Facebook page **ON THE DAY PRIOR TO THE CLASS DISCUSSION. BE AWARE: This counts as part of your class participation grade. If you do not comment on the Facebook page by the deadline, you will lose one point off your final grade.**

Your selected story must be posted on Facebook four days prior to your presentation. Your date is listed on the week-by-week below.

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

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

### Grading:

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

Grade breakdown:

Classwork	15%
Tiny story March 27	5%
First-person story	5%
Feb. 6, 8 story	10%
March 6, 8 story	15%
April 3, 5 story	20%

## Final story (April 26) 30%

The 1,000-1,200-word stories will be graded twice. Each grade will have the same weight.

>For each story, I will grade it and comment on its reporting, writing and form. I will return it to you, and you may then rework your story to improve it and **resubmit it within three days.**

>I will read, comment on and grade your story on its rewrite. This grade will be based on the story's final form AND how much you've improved it. Rewritten stories canNOT get a higher grade than a 90. If you rewrite, I will record the average of both grades

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

90 and above	= A
80 - 89	= B
70 - 79	= C
60 - 69	= D
below 60	= F

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

The points system of 153 Reporting and Writing is in play. Errors in proper names are minus 50 points. Errors in spelling are minus 10 points. Errors of grammar 5 points. Factual errors are an F.

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

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

Generally speaking, for stories:

**A** = publishable story with no factual or style errors and written well.

**B** = near-publishable story with minor errors of style or logic; no fact errors; needs revision.

**C** = unpublishable story with serious errors of style, logic, reporting or readability.

**D** = sub-par, unpublishable work with major errors of style, logic, approach; reporting gaps; low level of engagement with the story

**F** = unacceptable work, including factual errors, many style errors, major logical errors, minimal reporting; generally embarrassing to the writer. Don't go here.

### **Final exam:**

Students are also required to attend the class scheduled for the final exam, which has not been scheduled yet. Failure to do so will result in an "incomplete" for the course.

### **Seeking Help:**

If you need individual assistance, it's your responsibility to meet with the instructor. If you are serious about wanting to improve your performance in the course, the time to seek help

is as soon as you are aware of the problem – whether the problem is difficulty with course material, a disability, or an illness.

### **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).

### **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 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](mailto: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](mailto:titleixcoordinator@unc.edu)), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at [safe.unc.edu](http://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](http://safe.unc.edu)) or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#), 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.

## **ACCREDITATION:**

The Hussman School of Journalism and Media's accrediting body outlines a number of values you should be aware of and competencies you should be able to demonstrate by the time you graduate from our program. Learn more about them here: <http://hussman.unc.edu/accreditation>. No single course could possibly give you all of these

values and competencies; but collectively, our classes are designed to build your abilities in each of these areas. The values and competencies associated with this course include being able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race ethnicity, sexual orientations and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
- Think critically, creatively and independently;
- Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications, professions in which they work;
- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
- Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions.

#### Tentative week-by-week schedule

Jan. 9	Introduction
Jan. 11	Feature stories v. news stories
Jan. 16	No class
Jan. 17	Hussman school's MLKing Day of Action
Jan. 18	Finding stories, BARNHILL <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Tools 1-5</li></ul>
Jan. 23	Finding stories, CARROLL <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Tools 6-10</li></ul>
Jan. 25	Profile stories, WALKER

- Jan. 30      Event stories, WILDER
- Tools 11-15
- Feb. 1        Cake, WARE
- Feb. 6        Group 1 -- First 1,000-word story due
- Feb. 8        Group 2 – First 1,000-word story due
- Feb. 13      No class
- Feb. 15      Interviewing, SINGLETON
- Tools 16-20
- Feb. 20      Narratives, McCONNELL, HORTON
- Tools 21-25
- Feb. 22      Role play, SWANSON
- Feb. 27      Description, HAILEY, REILLY
- Tools 26-30
- March 1      Metaphors, HUTTO
- March 6      Group 1 – Second 1,000-word story due
- March 8      Group 2 – Second 1,000-word story due
- March 13     No class
- March 15     No class
- March 20     Tiny stories lecture, CONNORS
- Tools 31-35
- March 22     First person, ATWELL
- March 27     Scenes, ALLEN
- Tools 36-40
  - Tiny stories due
- March 29     Tools quiz, BRADDISH
- April 3        Group 1 – Third 1,000-word story due
- April 5        Group 2 – Third 1,000-word story due



April 10	Sense of place, ALLEN
April 12	Narrative, LE BARON
April 17	Writing with voice, SNYDER
April 19	Cutting/Editing, GILLUS
April 24	DOBSON
April 26	Final story due

Final exam date: Noon, May 2