

**USC Annenberg School of Journalism**  
**Syllabus**  
**REPORTING (Journalism-302 Print)**  
**Spring 2008**  
**Thursdays, 7 p.m. to 9:45 p.m.**  
**ASC 236**

**Michael Muskal**

Office Hours by appointment before and after class

**COURSE OBJECTIVE:** By the end of this course you should be able to report and write a well-researched news story of at least 1,500 words on deadline in a clear, concise, accurate and fair manner. You should also be able to incorporate basic computer-assisted reporting concepts in your stories.

**COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OUTCOMES:** Journalism 302 (Reporting) is really an extension of Newswriting. That means it is as much about writing as it is about reporting. We will spend the semester learning how to cover a newspaper beat. We will learn how to report and write a variety of stories from hard news to news features. We will spend a lot of time writing and learning how to do the things that journalists do all of the time and that you will be expected to do if you chose to become a professional journalist. Think of me as a city editor who will help shape your assignments and hopefully improve your execution. At the end of the course, you should be able to carry out the duties and responsibilities of an entry-level reporter at any small newspaper in the country. You will be covering Alhambra, a small city facing most of the same problems as its far larger neighbor, Los Angeles.

**With each assignment, you will be asked to provide a source list so I can spot fact-check your stories for accuracy. A sample form for your source list is attached.**

There will **not** be an official mid-term test or project. The final project will be a 1,500-word hard news feature story about a topic of your choice. The topics for the final – and for as many other weekly writing assignments as possible -- must be approved by me beforehand. You will get story approval by submitting a budget line.

I expect you to come to class on time, prepared (i.e., having done your readings and homework assignments, and followed the news), and ready to discuss news-related issues.

Every student is required to schedule at least one meeting with me sometime around the semester's mid-point to know how you are doing.

**PROFESSIONAL DRESS CODE:** For the purposes of this class, you are a bona fide member of the working press. You should expect to be treated with all of the normal courtesies and privileges afforded to the press. In return, you are expected to represent the profession in a dignified and appropriate manner. If you do not take yourself seriously, no one else will. While conducting interviews and field research for this class you are expected to dress in proper business attire. That means when you conduct interviews do not dress like you are going to a nightclub or to the beach. You don't have to wear business suits, but dress appropriately.

**E-MAIL:** You should use your USC e-mail address rather than a personal e-mail address, which is usually not that professional, when corresponding with sources via the Internet.

## **TEXTS/READINGS:**

### **Required:**

1. “**Associated Press Stylebook**,” Norm Goldstein, Editor, ISBN: 0465004881, Basic Books/Perseus
2. “**Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism**,” Tim Harrower, ISBN: 0073526142

### **Optional:**

1. “**Creative Interviewing**,” 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Ken Metzler, ISBN: 0205262589, Allyn & Bacon

**Dictionary:** The following online dictionary will be the official reference for in-class assignments, homework assignments, midterms and finals: Merriam-Webster Dictionary, [www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)

### **Useful Web Sites:**

<http://www.cityofalhambra.org/>  
<http://www.egpnews.com>  
<http://www.spj.org/ethics>  
<http://www.copydesk.org>  
<http://www.poynter.org>

**WRITING COACHES:** Writing coaches are available in ASC 227 during posted times and by appointment. They will review graded papers only, not help you write assigned stories. They are:

Bob Berger, Print: [rberger@usc.edu](mailto:rberger@usc.edu)  
Ed Boyer, Print, [edjboyer@ca.rr.com](mailto:edjboyer@ca.rr.com)  
Brad Hanson, Print, [brad.hanson@latimes.com](mailto:brad.hanson@latimes.com)  
Mike Daniels, Broadcast, [danielsm@usc.edu](mailto:danielsm@usc.edu)

**QUIZZES:** There will be weekly quizzes throughout the semester on current events and lectures and related reading assignments. Reporters must know what is happening in the world around them. For the aspiring reporter, reading the newspaper thoroughly every day and watching television newscasts are essential and strengthen your writing skills. If you find this to be a chore, you'll never be a journalist.

Read at least one major daily newspaper, The Los Angeles Times. For news Web sites, try MSNBC.com or CNN.com For radio, listen to KNX (1070 AM) or KFWB (980 AM).

**ASSIGNMENTS:** With each assignment, you must provide a list of your sources so I can spot fact-check your stories for accuracy. This includes people, web sites, articles or reference books. A sample form for your source list is attached.

As you know, fabricating quotes or sources is unacceptable and will result in an "F" for the course and possibly expulsion from the Annenberg School of Journalism and the University.

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis. Each story will be returned with a grade and written comments and explanations of any editing that is more than routine. Our style guide is "The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual." You are expected to know AP style.

**GRADES:** Grades will be based on overall contents and construction of the story. Did you get the lead correctly? Is it well written? Your copy should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. There should not be any omissions, either. In fact, after the first week, any misspelled proper word (even if it's due to a typographical error) will drop the grade one-half grade on that assignment. A factual error will result in an automatic "F" on that assignment. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. Professional journalists are expected to get their facts right, to spell and punctuate correctly, and to respect grammar and syntax.

Please don't be discouraged if your stories receive low grades at the outset. Your work will improve. Reporting and writing are hard work, but the only way to get better is to keep at it, regardless of the difficulties.

**Course:** Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Weekly Assignments	55 percent
Quizzes	10 percent
Final	35 percent

Generally speaking,  
"A" stories are accurate, clear, comprehensive stories that are well written and require only minor editing (i.e., they are publishable).  
"B" stories require more than minor editing, and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of omission.  
"C" stories are stories that need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have spelling, style or omission errors.  
"D" stories require excessive rewriting and have numerous errors, and should not have been submitted.  
"F" stories have one proper name misspelled or a factual error.

**ATTENDANCE:** Attendance is required for all classes, particularly since we will have two fewer classes because of school holidays. If you expect to miss class due to a family emergency, a medical problem, or a religious holiday, you should contact me beforehand by sending me an e-mail or giving me a call. Tardiness is unacceptable. It reflects on your credibility, not only with me but with your sources. Students are responsible for getting class notes from other students in the class. Students can not make up in-class assignments or quizzes with extra credit assignments.

**LATE ASSIGNMENTS:** Assignments are due Thursdays at 7 p.m. in class or via e-mail as a Word attachment if you are not attending.

All assignments must be in 12-point Times New Roman, double-spaced. Staple your assignment pages together.

On the top left-hand corner of the first page, write:

Your name

Journalism 302

Page number

Word count:

Date assignment is due

Title of assignment: e.g. City council story, police story, beat note.

All stories MUST include a COMPLETE source list (people must have title, organization, phone number and e-mail address; Web sites must have URLs; printed sources must have bibliographic information). Stories without source lists will get an F. Stories with partial source lists will be downgraded.

Late assignments will not be accepted and an "F" will be given to any missed assignments.

**REWRITING ASSIGNMENTS:** You may rewrite a homework assignment, but it requires my permission. The grade will be an average of the original grade and the new one.

**PLAGIARISM:** Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one's own. In journalism, this includes appropriating the reporting of another without clear attribution. The following is the School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the University catalog: "Since its founding, the USC Annenberg School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found guilty of plagiarism, fabrication, cheating on examinations, or purchasing papers or other assignments will immediately receive a failing grade in the course and will be dismissed as a major from the School of Journalism. There are no exceptions to this policy."

**USC STATEMENT ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:** USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty.

**ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS:** The following is the University's policy regarding students with disabilities: *"Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when adequate documentation is filed."*

Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in the Student Union room 301 and is open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is 213-740-0776.

**STRESS AND ANGST:** I realize that today's students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is USC Student Counseling Services at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

**INSTRUCTOR BIO:** Michael Muskal is currently a staff writer for the Los Angeles Times web site. He previously worked as the paper's economics editor and spent two years on the foreign desk. At Newsday, he served as deputy foreign editor, deputy science editor and head of the night city desk of New York Newsday. He was a reporter covering politics and investigations as well as a variety of municipal beats in Albany, N.Y.

## COURSE SCHEDULE:

(Readings are to be done prior to the class on the indicated date. The syllabus will be flexible and is subject to change consistent with the class's progress or the availability of speakers or extenuating circumstances.)

### Week 1 (Jan. 17): Course Overview/Syllabus Review

The first session where we discuss the course goals, expectations and requirements. We will explore the role of newspapers, reporting, writing and professional dress. We will learn how beat reporting differs from specialized reporting and begin our review of journalism genres such as hard news and soft news.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Chapters 1, 2  
<http://www.cityofalhambra.org/>

<http://www.spj.org/ethics>

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler: Chapters 1,2

**HOMEWORK:** First visit to Alhambra. Look for an interesting place, describe it and explain why it is interesting in 300 to 500 words.

### Week 2 (Jan. 24): Developing a Beat

Welcome to Alhambra, a racially diverse city of about 82,000 people in the San Gabriel Valley. We learn about the city, who lives there and some of the issues. We discuss story lists, source lists and how to use them. We also review hard-news ledes, soft-news ledes, nut paragraphs and some of the basics we learned last semester.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Chapters 3, 4

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler: Chapters 5, 6

**HOMEWORK:** Go to Alhambra and develop a list of 10 story ideas.

### Week 3 (Jan. 31): Elections and Interviewing

We discuss the vocabulary of local politics as the California presidential primaries loom.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Pages 106-107.

Optional:

Check out the section on political reporting on the <http://www.poynter.org> website.

**HOMEWORK:** Report on the California primary, producing a 500-word piece on an Alhambra political personality working the race or a process piece on how any campaign turned out the vote.

### Week 4 (Feb. 7): News Conferences (I)

Journalists need to be able to go to an event, listen, question and decide what is important. Inevitably that is the press conference. We will precise covering the news conference.

**HOMEWORK:** Watch “Meet the Press,” “Face the Nation” or another weekend news interview television show and write a story about one of the issues discussed on the program.

### **Week 5 (Feb. 14): Features (I)**

How do features differ from news? Can they be combined? Refining the nut paragraph. The role of the vignette.

**HOMEWORK:** After consultation with the instructor do one of the feature stories on your beat list, about 500 words.

### **Week 6 (Feb. 21): Mathematical Skills and Census Data**

Schedule your student-teacher conference!!

Numbers are a reporter’s friend, creating a backbone of information that helps structure any story. We will learn some common mathematical tools, such a mean and median and how to apply them to census data on gender, race, class and age.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Pages 84, 85

Check out mathematics tools on <http://www.copydesk.org>

<http://www.census.gov>, click on American FactFinder on the left.

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler: Chapters 3, 4.

**HOMEWORK:** Write a 600-word story about any aspect of Alhambra diversity.

### **Week 7 (Feb. 28): Police Reporting**

Whether a two-car fatal or a multiple homicide, crime reporting is the usual entry point for someone seeking a career in journalism. We learn some of the basics, how to know a cop short from a story that is worth covering more deeply. We learn about suspects’ rights and libel traps for the unsuspecting reporter.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: 98-99

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler: Chapters 11, 12

**HOMEWORK:** Using real police documents or from interviews with cops, write a 300-word crime story.

### **Week 8 (March 6): Courts**

We discuss the differences between civil and criminal courts, between town and superior courts, between state and federal courts. We learn some of the traps in court reporting, what a reporter should avoid and what rights and responsibilities a reporter has in a courtroom.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Pages 100 -101

Read sections on civil and criminal courts on <http://www.lasuperiorcourt.org>

**HOMEWORK:** Go to a trial and write a 350-word story.

### **Week 9 (March 13): The Issue Story**

You are on your first job and have gone to all of your night meetings and your stories are running on Page 25, right next to the truss ads. How do you get on Page One? Welcome to the world of the issue story. It is crucial to learn how to build on breaking news to do the types of stories that elevate a discussion into something worth putting on the front page. We look at trends, analyses and other techniques that can raise your story in prominence.

**HOMEWORK:** Take any issue you have come across in your government, criminal justice or education reporting and turn it into an issues story of 800-1,000 words.

**NOTE: PROJECT PROPOSALS DUE.**

### **SPRING BREAK**

### **Week 11 (March 27): City Council Story**

There is no unit of government closer to the public than the City Council and there is probably no part more misunderstood. We discuss what local government does and doesn't do, what is its relationship to state and federal governments and how policy is set.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Pages 104-105

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler: Chapters 7, 8

**HOMEWORK:** Go to An Alhambra City Council meeting and write a 400-word story about an issue that the council is considering. Make sure to include quotes from proponents, opponents and independent experts.

### **Week 12 (April 3): Covering Education (I)**

It was Mark Twain, in one of his less charitable moods, who famously said: "God made the Idiot for practice, and then He made the School Board." How do school boards differ from city councils? How to cover a school board meeting; the difference between short- and long-term stories – and how to produce both on deadline.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

"Morphing Outrage Into Ideas," by Jia-Rui Chong, Los Angeles Times, Oct. 12, 2005, A1.

#### **OPTIONAL READINGS:**

Metzler, Chapters 15, 16, 17, 18

**HOMEWORK:** Go to a school board meeting and write a breaking news story of 400 words.

### **Week 13 (April 10): Trends and Analyses**

In the newsroom, it is called stepping back and we continue our exploration of how it works. In this section, we look at two very handy techniques: taking an issue and comparing how another city handled the same problem and using experts explaining how to deal with the issue.

**HOMEWORK:** Write an analysis/interpretation of any city council or education issue.

**FRIDAY APRIL 11 IS THE LAST DAY TO DROP A CLASS WITH A MARK OF A "W."**

### **Week 14 (April 17): News Conferences and Speeches (II)**

A news conference or speech is how a person in the news tells his story in a way that ensures a favorable spin. We take a deeper look at this process and explore how a journalist works through the thicket to report on what really matters. How to ask questions without being rude, how to hold a public official accountable.

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Chapter 10.

**HOMEWORK:** Cover a speech or news conference in Alhambra or at USC and write a 500-word story

### **Week 15 (April 24): Specialty Reporting**

Good reporting leads to good writing, which should be lively and authoritative. For the rest of the month, we will concentrate on the techniques that will produce the strongest project. We will also examine some of the other areas of the newspaper such as investigative, entertainment and our first area, business reporting. We will discuss how the economy works and what are business stories that capture a reader's attention. How do we cover consumer affairs, economic development? Entertainment, sports, consumer affairs are all specialty reporting. How are they different from hard news stories?

#### **REQUIRED READINGS:**

Harrower: Chapter 6.

"Opening the Door for China," by David Pierson, Los Angeles Times, Dec. 2, 2007, A1.

**HOMEWORK:** Write a 500-word business or development

### **Week 16 (April May 1): Review and Honing Interview Skill**

**Homework: Work on Final Project. It is due 7 p.m. May 8.**

# # #

**1-1-1-1-1  
SOURCELIST**

**J-302**  
**Name:**  
**Date:**  
**Story:**

**INTERVIEWS**

Name	Title	Telephone Number	E-mail Address
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**WEB SITES**

URLs

**BACKGROUND MATERIAL**

Name and date of publication; story headline; byline.