

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING (J-310)

SPRING 2008

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Time: Wed. 9 a.m. to 12:20 p.m.

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

What is investigative reporting? In his introduction to "The Reporter's Handbook: An Investigator's Guide to Documents and Techniques," Newsday Assistant Managing Editor Robert W. Green writes, "It is the reporting, through one's own work product and initiative, matters of importance which some persons or organizations wish to keep secret." I have a slightly broader view of what constitutes investigative reporting. To me, being an investigative reporter means being "proactive" rather than "reactive," whether or not you dig up something secret. For example, lots of raw data is now available on the Internet or on tapes. This data, which is analyzed using software programs such as Excel and Access, have unearthed great investigative stories. The data was not "secret." It's just that no one bothered to crunch the numbers. The use of so-called Computer Assisted Reporting (CAR) can help you do your job better, whether you're quickly researching facts for a breaking news story or spending months gathering a wide variety of information from numerous sources for a major project.

By the end of this course, you should know the nuts and bolts of responsible investigative reporting. Most important, you should be familiar with the wide variety of public documents that are available to reporters, understand the type of information they contain, and know how to get your hands on these records. You should understand the various ethical dilemmas that investigative reporters often face. And you will also become better writers by producing an original investigative story for your final project.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course requires active participation. As such, you will be expected to keep up with your readings, ask questions and be heavily involved in the give and take of class discussions. Your participation will be an important factor in my grading. I place a high value on listening to students' opinions regardless of what these opinions might be. Learning is a collaborative and social experience, and students learn from each other. Therefore you owe it to your classmates to come and make your contribution to their learning.

You will be asked to complete various public record searches using public records, the Internet, Lexis-Nexis and a pamphlet titled "Along the Paper Trail: A Guide to Public Records in Los Angeles County." One will result in a story. The other will result in a "backgrounder" memo about a Los Angeles public official and a brief description of two or three possible story ideas. This story and memo must be typed and double-spaced. Just like in a newsroom, if you miss your deadline, you're out of luck. If you don't have a car, you will be allowed to partner with someone else to complete these assignments.

Reading good books is essential to becoming a better reporter and writer. There are two required books in this course, and 750-word book reviews will be required on each of them. The first is titled "A Woman in Charge," by Carl Bernstein. The second is "The Looming Tower: The Road to Al-Qaeda and 9/11," by Lawrence Wright (Vintage). During the semester each of you will be required to lead a discussion about chapters from the books.

All of these assignments will be described in depth in class. Rubrics and examples will be posted on Blackboard.

The final project is a longer investigative piece. You must start as early as possible. You must work on this project on your own. You cannot work in teams for the final project. We will discuss in class the news value of each person's project, possibly sidebars, charts and graphics, and where to go to get the information needed for each project. We will constantly evaluate what each person has found and discuss what to do next. The total word count for the final project is 2,000 and 3,000 words. **Please note: the bulk of your final course grade will be based on your final project, so start it early! A story pitch and draft of your lead and nut graf are due before the final version, so you will have a**

chance to switch direction a bit if you find your original idea is unfocused. You will be graded on your story pitch and lead/nut graf draft.

If it appears that you are falling behind on the readings or news events, and cannot discuss them intelligently in class, I reserve the right to add pop quizzes.

Typing skills are essential in this course. You must be able to write on a personal computer. When working on a computer, save often, make a back-up copy of your work, and print it out at various stages of the writing process. Always keep a hard copy for yourself. **Claims that “the computer lost it” or “the computer crashed” will not be accepted as an excuse.**

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis. Each will be returned with written comments and explanations of any editing that is more than routine. Our style guide will be “The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual.”

Your copy should not contain any misspelled words, style or grammatical errors, factual errors or omissions. **In fact, any misspelled proper word (even if it’s due to a typographical error) or 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. In case of doubt, check your facts, consult the AP Stylebook or a dictionary. It only takes a minute or two to avoid mistakes.

REQUIRED READINGS:

“A Woman in Charge,” by Carl Bernstein (Knopf).

“The Looming Tower: The Road to Al-Qaeda and 9/11,” by Lawrence Wright (Vintage).

GRADES:

Your grade will be determined as follows:

Class Participation (leading a class discussion)	10 percent
Book Review No. 1	10 percent
Book Review No. 2	10 percent
Record Searches (One story; one backgrounder)	20 percent
Final Project, Pitch, Lead and Nut graf	15 percent
Final Project, Final Draft	35 percent
Total	100 percent

Traditional grades and grade point averages are assigned as follows:

“A” stories/memos are accurate, clear, and comprehensive. They are well-written and require only minor editing.

“B” stories/memos require more than minor editing, and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of fact or omission.

“C” stories/memos need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have spelling, style or factual errors.

“D” stories/memos require excessive rewriting and have numerous errors, and should not have been submitted.

“F” stories/memos have one proper name misspelled.

Please note that you must repeat this course if you earn a grade of C- or lower.

ATTENDANCE:

Attendance is required for all classes, and roll will be taken at the beginning of each class meeting. Although I will not deduct from your grade, missing class makes it impossible for you to participate in class, and thus will affect your class participation grade. Missed classes due to work, internships, job interviews, assignments for other courses, car troubles, etc., will not be tolerated. If you expect to miss class due to a family emergency, a medical problem, or a religious holiday, you will only be excused if you contact me to let me know (either send me an e-mail or give me a call). **Tardiness is unacceptable. If you expect to be more than 15 minutes late to class, don't bother coming.**

LATE ASSIGNMENTS:

Late assignments will not be accepted. They are due at 9 a.m. sharp. You cannot sit at the computer in class and print it out at the last minute. You must turn in assignments on the day they are due even if you know you will miss class and have contacted me beforehand. You can either give it to another student to hand in for you, leave it in my mailbox, or send it to me via e-mail attachment.

INTERNSHIPS:

The value of professional internships as part of the overall experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion this course, any student enrolled in this course who undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall will earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to one percent of the total available semester points for this course.

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 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 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." If you have any doubt about how you are presenting information, please contact me and I will be happy to help you.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS:

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. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 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'S BIO:

I have been a staff writer and columnist for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and a staff writer and editor at *The Associated Press* in San Francisco, New York and Mexico. I have worked as a freelance journalist specializing in business, and have written for *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *BusinessWeek Online*, *Women's Wire*, and *Hispanic Business*, *Latina*, and *Latina Style* magazines. I have also freelanced for *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review* and *Online Journalism Review* magazines. Scholarly articles have appeared in *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* and *Media Studies*. I am co-editor of a book that was published last year by Sage Publications titled "News and Sexuality: Media Portraits of Diversity." I am the co-author of "The Latino Guide to Personal Money Management," which was published by Bloomberg Press in 1999. The Spanish version of the book was published in 2001. I earned undergraduate degrees in journalism and international relations from USC, a master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, and was awarded a Knight-Bagehot Fellowship in business and economics reporting from Columbia University. In addition, I spent a year as an assistant professor of journalism at Temple University in Philadelphia during Fall 1999 and Spring 2000 before joining the USC faculty in Fall 2000.

COURSE OUTLINE: (Readings are to be done prior to the class on the indicated date. The syllabus is subject to change):

- Week One (Jan. 16) --** Review Syllabus
Preparation of Copy
Key AP Stylebook reminders
Review how to lead book chapter discussions
Review upcoming Restaurant Ratings story; Pick a restaurant to focus on; start reporting/researching.
Sign-up to lead book chapter discussions.
- Week Two (Jan. 23) --** Components of Investigative Reporting
How to Find and Develop Story Ideas
Press conference with health official, **Hector** Dela Cruz (cq), R.E.H.S., M.S.
Consultation & Technical Services, Environmental Health
Restaurant ratings story due next week; 750 words.
Bernstein, Chapters 1-4.
- Week Three (Jan. 30) --** Public Records -- What they are and how to find them
Using the Internet to Conduct Research
Lexis-Nexis and Dow Jones Interactive
Guest speaker – Katharin Peter (cq), Social Sciences Data Librarian
Bernstein, Chapters 5-8.
RESTAURANT RATINGS STORY DUE TODAY; 750 WORDS.
- Week Four (Feb. 6) --** Book Reviews
Guest speaker David Ulin, Book Review Editor, Los Angeles Times.
How to write book reviews
Bernstein, Chapters 9-12.
- Week Five (Feb. 13) --** Investigating People, Places and Entities
Pick a city official to background; do some research in class on this person.
Math for Every Reporter (this is key skill to review when looking into issues such as campaign donations, city budgets, etc).
Bernstein, Chapters 13-16.
- Week Six (Feb. 20) --** Social Justice and Investigative Reporting
Guest Speaker – Robert Lopez, Investigative Reporter, Los Angeles Times.
Bernstein, Chapters 17 and 18, plus the "Notes on Sources."
STORY PITCHES FOR FINAL PROJECTS DUE TODAY.
Book Review No. 1 due next week (750 words).

Week Seven (Feb. 27) – Investigating Health Care
Wright, Chapters 1-3.

BOOK REVIEW NO. 1 DUE TODAY; 750 words.

Week Eight (March 5) – Business/Consumer Abuse and Investigative Reporting
Wright, Chapters 4-7.

Week Nine (March 12) -- Investigating Non-Profits and Charitable Organizations.
Wright, Chapters 8-10.

Week 10 (March 19) – Spring Break!

Week 11 (March 26) – Government and Investigating Reporting
Wright, Chapters 11-13.

Sign up for individual meetings for next week.

Week 12 (April 2) – Individual meetings with students during class; throughout the day; throughout the week.

Week 13 (April 9) -- Ethics and Investigative Reporting
Wright, Chapters 14-17.

Background memo on public official, brief in-class presentations, due next week.

Please note: April 11 is the last day to drop a class with a mark of “W.”

Week 14 (April 16) -- Radio investigations
Guest Speaker Cheryl Devall, Deputy News Editor, 89.3 KPCC Radio.
Wright, Chapters 18-20.

Book Review No. 2 due next week; 750 words.

BACKGROUND MEMO ON PUBLIC OFFICIAL, BRIEF IN-CLASS PRESENTATIONS, DUE TODAY.

Week 15 (April 23) -- Television investigations
Guest Speaker, Randy Paige, Investigative Reporter, CBS.

BOOK REVIEW NO. 2 DUE TODAY; 750 WORDS.

Week 16 (April 30) – **Final Project Presentations TODAY (leads and nut grafs only) and Pizza!**
FINAL PAPERS DUE ON FRIDAY, MAY 2.

May 2 -- **Classes end**
May 5-6 -- **Study Days**
May 7-14 -- **Finals**

Your Name
J-310
SLUG
Lead count (12)
Word Count (75)
Jan. 11, 2008

Start your story at least one-third of the way down the screen (page).

Be sure to double space all stories, use 12-point type, and 1-inch margins. Indent the first line of each paragraph three to five spaces (or just use the tab key). Use a left justification, leaving a ragged right margin. Do not break words at the end of lines.

Be sure to provide a word count for your lead, and your total story.

-30- or ### (should be placed at the center bottom of the page if your story ends here).

