

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING – JOUR310

Spring 2008

TUESDAY 2:00- 5:20 pm

ASC 329

Marc Cooper

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES

The goals of this course are to teach you the practical skills and the ethical principles that will allow you to become an outstanding investigative journalist. The course will focus on the basic tools of the trade including: interviewing techniques, identification and nurturing of human sources, mining of data bases, public record searches, the Freedom of Information Act, and the shaping of large amounts of information into a compelling and powerful narrative. Along the way there will be exercises to refine your writing, reporting and critical thinking skills.

There will be a number of guests speakers in the class whose presentations will be directly linked to reporting assignments. The class will mostly operate as a simulated newsroom so you are required to come to class on time, prepared (i.e., having done your readings and homework assignments, and followed the news), and ready to discuss various news-related topics as well as your ongoing main project.

You learn best by doing. So expect in-class and take-home writing assignments. Be prepared to do considerable fieldwork and reporting. This class must be approached with a sense of discipline and commitment or you will not be successful.

All homework assignments must be brought into class in hard copy. I will not accept your homework via email unless I have asked you to do so

Typing skills are essential in this course. You must be able to use a computer, type fast, and use Word. 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” will not be accepted as an excuse.

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 any significant factual error will result in an automatic “F” on that assignment. Multiple typos will earn you the same reward.** 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. You must carefully proof-read all of your work. If you are not interested in closely reading your own work, why should I?

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. We will have a session on how to write book reviews.

REQUIRED TEXTS/ READINGS

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

“Nickel and Dimed,” by Barbara Ehrenreich (Holt Paperbacks)

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

The following two books are not required but highly recommended.

Title: Creative Interviewing

Author: Ken Metzler

Title: The Investigative Reporter’s Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases and Techniques

Author: Brant Houston, Len Bruzzese and Steve Weinberg

ASSIGNMENTS / GRADES

There will be approximately 6 homework assignments asked of you. These will include specific exercises in interviewing, public record searches, computer-assisted reporting, field reporting and book reports.

These assignments, all together, will constitute **25%** of your grade.

Your final project will be a thoroughly researched, wonderfully reported and superbly written investigative article of approximately **2500-3500 words** in length. You must choose and start working on your topic as early as possible in the semester. You must do this 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, possible sidebars, 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. A story pitch and a rough draft of the final project are due long before the final version, so you will have a chance to switch course if you find your original idea is not panning out. The final project will constitute **50%** of your grade.

In addition, you must submit a written, weekly “story memo” which accounts for how you spent your time working on your major project and/or other assignments.

This memo, due at the beginning of each class, should specify who you interviewed and who you tried to interview and why. The memo will also detail which lines of inquiry you are pursuing, how successful or not they have been and your plan for the coming week’s reporting. The memos will constitute **25%** of your grade.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Don't even think about it. You must turn in assignments on the day they are due. You must bring a properly formatted, clean, hard copy to class. You will not be allowed to print your homework out in class, have it ready before you arrive. Even if you know you will miss class and have contacted me beforehand your homework is still due. Send it to me via MS Word e-mail attachment. The story must arrive by the beginning of that day's class session (2 p.m. on Tuesday) or it will be considered a late assignment.

Late assignments will be graded as an F. However, you are required to complete them anyway so I can edit them and provide feedback on your progress. Uncompleted late assignments i.e. missing assignments, will be counted as a ZERO. You don't want any zeroes.

If you miss class, it is up to you to contact someone in the class (another student, not me) to find out what you've missed and what's due next.

INTERSHIPS

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course who undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall 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. Plagiarism is a serious violation of the School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity, and a student found guilty of plagiarism is subject to dismissal from the journalism major.

The following is the School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the University catalogue

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. In short, don't even think about it. If I can't immediately recognize copied text, Google can.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

Students are expected to be in class every week barring some compelling and unavoidable emergency. In-class assignments and exercises can't be made-up. If you know you are going to have to miss a class for some absolutely unavoidable reason, let me know before – not after.

TAPE RECORDER:

You will be expected to purchase a simple portable tape recorder or a digital voice recorder to conduct the interviews necessary for this class. This is a must. Budget about \$100.

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, be advised that no one else will. While conducting interviews and field research for this class you are expected to dress in proper business attire.

DISABILITY SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

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. Its phone number is 213-740-0776.

INSTRUCTOR BIOGRAPHY

I have reported for print and broadcast media for more than 30 years from around the country and across the world. My articles, essays and interviews have appeared in publications ranging from The New Yorker, The Atlantic and Harper's to the L.A. Times, Playboy, and Rolling Stone. I have produced and/or reported TV news documentaries for the Christian Science Monitor, PBS Frontline and CBS News. I'm the author of three non-fiction books, including the L.A. Times best-seller "Pinochet and Me." I'm Associate Director of Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism and a member of the Annenberg Journalism faculty. I currently serve as contributing editor to The Nation magazine, Senior Editor at The Huffington Post, and I write a weekly politics column for L.A. Weekly.

CLASS SCHEDULE

(subject to radical changes)

WEEK 1 – January 15

Course introduction and goals. Why bother with journalism anyway? What's the difference between investigative journalism and regular-old journalism? Investigative reporting and investigative listening.

How do reporters think? How to find stories. Some basic interviewing tips.

Assign book chapters and discussion leaders.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT for January 22 Find three ideas for investigative stories and write them up as short pitches explaining why they would make compelling reading. One idea should involve USC; a second should be about a specific neighborhood or community; the third should have broader, perhaps, national implications.

For January 29 Identify and find author of a major investigative piece/series. Interview the journalist by phone or face to face (not email) about the story behind the story. Write up a 700-1000 word report (not a news story).

WEEK 2 – January 22

Book discussion

Guest Speaker: TBD

Public records and the paper chase.

Review story pitches.

Handouts: The Paper Trail; Interviewing tips.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Go to County Courts and pull a criminal file. Bring back a written memo on the case.

READING ASSIGNMENT: The Shipbreakers Parts 1-3. Read and be ready to discuss.

WEEK 3 – January 29

Book discussion

Turn in reports on investigative series

Guest Speaker: TBD.

How to put together an investigative project.

Sources: primary and secondary, authoritative and anecdotal, people and paper.

Review ongoing projects: Compile source list and work plan.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Restaurant ratings.

Assignment ratings due next week. 700-900 words. Go to the restaurant and ask for a copy of county ratings and report.

WEEK 4 – February 5

Book discussion

Guest Speaker: Anat Rubin, Daily Journal

Review developing project ideas. Get ready to finalize your project if you haven't yet. Formal and final pitch proposal is due on the 7th week of class. If you're falling behind, let me know.

Individual presentations on restaurant stories. Success and horror stories.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Conduct the research necessary to prepare for an intensive interview with an elected or prominent public official. Please review all web-based info, Nexis, campaign contributions, profiles, fair practices filings etc. Come back with a memo outlining areas to be probed and key questions to be asked. What's your interview strategy for: Zev Yaroslavsky, Lee Baca, Jim Battin, Sheila Kuehl, Maria Elena Durazo, Henry Waxman, Fabian Nunez, Bonnie Garcia?

Start finishing book review.

WEEK 5 – February 12

Book discussion – review due next week.

Guest Speaker: Henry Weinstein, L.A. Times Legal Affairs Writer

Some fundamental How-To's
Coordinating the paper work.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Interview a politician, a campaign staffer, or an operative. 700 word news piece.

WEEK 6 – February 19

Book review due today.
Book discussion.

Guest Speaker: Bill Boyarsky

Ethics/Shmethics

Where's the line? Their ethics. And ours.

Report back on interview subject. Who'd you talk to? What did you find out?

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Write your final project pitch if you haven't already turned it in.

WEEK 7 – February 26

Book discussion.

Guest Speaker: Rob Greene, L.A. Times Editorial Board.

Reporting on pols, spinners and agencies.

Review previous week's homework assignment.

Review final project proposals.

Discuss and strategize.

Homework: TBD

WEEK 8 – March 4

Book discussion.

Guest Speaker: Bob Sipchen, L.A. Times

Investigative interviewing. Investigative listening. Interviewing as conversation.

WEEK 9 – March 11

Class time this week will be used for individual meetings with students to review final project status.

WEEK 10 – March 18

No class. Spring Break. Continue work on projects/

WEEK 11 – March 25

Book discussion.
Project discussions.

Justice and Journalism. Comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. And how to “really” talk to cops.

Guest Speaker: Joe Domanick.

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Finish up first draft of your final project.

Finish up book report.

WEEK 12 – April 1

Second book report due today. Book discussion.

Project discussions. Preparation of draft of final project.

WEEK 13 – April 8

Turn in first draft of final project.

Project discussions.

READING ASSIGNMENT: Read the entire L.A. Times series on King-Drew hospital. Deconstruct it and be prepared to identify and discuss its moving parts.

WEEK 14 – April 15

Discuss King-Drew series.

Discuss final projects.

Fine-tuning your narrative.

WEEK 15 – April 22

FINAL PAPER DUE