

INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING—JOUR 310

Spring 2008

Matt Lait

Scott Glover

Mondays, 6:45-10:05 p.m.
ASC 330

Course objective: Our goal, in short, is to inspire you to become the best investigative reporter you can be. We will encourage your natural curiosity, help you identify potential stories and show you how to dig for information. You will learn how to make the most of public records, cultivate sources, conduct fruitful interviews and write fair, accurate and powerful stories.

Course structure and grading: There will be a number of assignments, both in-class and out-of-class, as well as a final project. You should begin thinking immediately about the topic of your final project, which must be submitted to us for approval by **2/11**. You will be expected to work on the final project throughout the semester. It is worth 50% of your grade. The other assignments will count for 40% of your grade. Class participation will account for the remaining 10%. Because we meet only once a week, attendance is important. Tardiness is unacceptable. **Three unexcused absences will result in an F.** Your assignments will be edited and graded for accuracy, fairness, thoroughness, writing and effort.

Course readings: There is one required book: *Shadow Divers: The True Adventure of Two Americans Who Risked Everything to Solve One of the Last Mysteries of World War II*, by Robert Kurson. There is no textbook. However, *The Reporter's Handbook: An Investigator's Guide to Documents and Techniques* is recommended. Articles and other reading handouts will be distributed to the class prior to lectures. We expect you to read them and to be prepared to discuss them when the time comes. You also will be expected read at least one daily newspaper every day.

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 Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity as published in the University catalog: "Since its founding, the USC School 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."

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 when adequate documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to us as early in the semester as possible. DSP is open Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. The office is located in the Student Union room 301 and their phone number is (213) 740-0776.

Class schedule: *Subject to change.* We will attempt to make this class as relevant and timely as possible. To do that we may rearrange the schedule to accommodate guest speakers or address topics that come up during the course of the semester.

Week One (1/14)

- Introductions and course overview: Who we are, who you are, and why we're here.
- Lecture: What are investigative reporters? Where do investigations come from? Where to look for ideas and how to get started.
- In class exercise: Reading an autopsy report.
- Take home assignment: Find an investigative story or project which was based on public records. Interview the author and prepare a brief report (a page or two should suffice) including a summary of the story or project, its findings, which records were used as well as how they were obtained and analyzed. Be prepared to discuss your report in class. **Due 1/28.** Also for next class, a reading assignment: "A Case of Doubt."

Week Two (1/21)

- Martin Luther King Day Holiday

Week Three (1/28)

- Public records: What's available, how to get them and how to use them.
- In class: Students' presentations on public records based investigative reporting.
- In-class: Exercise demonstrating the potential use of public records.
- Reading assignment in preparation for next week's class.
- Take home: Public records assignment due: **2/11.**

Week Four (2/4)

- Lecture: Mining the criminal and civil courts for investigative gold.
- In class: Viewing of PBS documentary on LAPD shootings.
- Shadow Diver's discussion, Chapters 1-4.
- Turn in homework assignment.
- Take home: Criminal and civil court research assignment, **due 2/25.**
- Reading assignment for next week's class.

Week Five (2/11)

- In class exercise: An interactive case study of an investigation into a high-ranking police official. Class participation is vital.
- Turn in public records assignment.
- Submit final project idea for approval. Be prepared to give a five-minute presentation.
- Reading assignment in preparation for next week's class.

Week Six (2/18)

- President's Day Holiday

Week Seven (2/25)

- Investigating public officials and campaign finance records.
- Take home: Background a public official in Los Angeles County, **due 3/10**.
- Turn in court records assignment.
- Reading assignment for next week's class.

Week Eight (3/3)

- Project status meeting, part 1.
- Shadow Diver's discussion, Chapters 5-9.
- Turn in and discuss public official assignment.

Week Nine (3/10)

- Lecture: Interviewing techniques. Getting information from people who don't want to give it up.
- Turn in public official assignment.
- In-class interviewing exercise.

Week 10 (3/17)

- Spring Break

Week 11 (3/24)

- Lecture: Cultivating sources. How you find them; how you keep them. Drawing the line between source and friend. Making sure you don't burn sources and that they don't burn you.
- Take home reading assignment.

Week 12 (3/31)

- Guest speaker Gary Cohn. Cohn will explain how he and another reporter at the Baltimore Sun used about a half dozen basic journalism skills to report on the little known ship breaking industry. The result was a compelling series of stories that won a Pulitzer Prize.

Week 13 (4/7)

- Lecture: Computer assisted reporting and using the Internet as an investigative reporting tool.

- Shadow Diver’s Discussion, Chapters 10-15.
- In-class exercise: Surfing the web and sifting through mountains of seemingly boring data to find stories that aren’t.
- Clip from 60 Minutes.
- Take home reading assignment.

Week 14 (4/14)

- Project status meeting, part 2.
- Take home: Reading assignment in preparation for next week’s class.

Week 15 (4/21)

- Lecture: Ethics, Fairness, the Law and Investigative Reporting.
- In class exercise: Discussion of ethical issues described in the reading material assigned last class.

Week 16 (4/28)

- You’ve been gathering information for months or even years and now it’s time to sit down and write your investigative story. How do you make your story something people actually want to read?
- Course review. Last chance for one on one help on final project

Finals (5/12)

GRADING:

Grade Distribution

Grades are based on a percentage scale. The grade breakdown is as follows:

A	95 -100	C	74 - 76
A-	90 - 94	C-	70 - 73
B+	87 - 89	D+	67 - 69
B	84 - 86	D	64 - 66
B-	80 - 83	D-	60 - 63
C+	77 - 79	F	Below 60

Definition of Grades (See the current catalog “Undergraduate Degrees”):

A	Outstanding Achievement:	<i>Significantly exceeds standards</i>
B	Commendable Achievement:	<i>Exceeds standards</i>
C	Acceptable Achievement:	<i>Meets standards</i>
D	Unsatisfactory Achievement:	<i>Below standards</i>
F	Failing	
I	Incomplete	

WRITING STANDARDS:

Students are expected to demonstrate writing skills in describing, analyzing and evaluating ideas and experiences. Written material must follow specific standards regarding citations of authors’ work within the text and references at the end of the paper.

NOTE: *Letter grades may be assigned for any or all of the following reasons:*

“A” Range: Outstanding achievement, significantly exceeds standards

- Unique topic or unique treatment of topic, takes risks with content; fresh approach.
- Sophisticated/exceptional use of examples.
- Original and “fluid” organization; all sentences and paragraphs contribute; sophisticated transitions between paragraphs.
- Integration of quotations and citations is sophisticated and highlights the author’s argument.
- Confidence in use of Standard English; language reflects a practiced and/or refined understanding of syntax and usage.
- Sentences vary in structure, very few, if any mechanical errors (no serious mechanical errors).

“B” Range: Commendable achievement, meets or exceeds standards for course.

- Specific, original focus, content well handled.
- Significance of content is clearly conveyed; good use of examples; sufficient support exists in key areas.
- Has effective shape (organization), effective pacing between sentences or paragraphs.
- Quotations and citations are integrated into argument to enhance the flow of ideas.
- Has competent transitions between all sentences and paragraphs.
- Conveys a strong understanding of standard English; the writer is clear in his/her attempt to articulate main points, but may demonstrate moments of “flat” or unrefined language.
- May have a few minor mechanical errors (misplaced commas, pronoun disagreement, etc.), but no serious mechanical errors (fragments, run-ons, comma splices, etc.)

“C” Range: Acceptable achievement, meets standards for course.

- Retains overall focus, generally solid command of subject matter.
- Subject matter well explored but may show signs of underachievement .
- Significance is understood, competent use of examples .
- Structure is solid, but an occasional sentence or paragraph may lack focus .
- Quotations and citations are integrated into argument.
- Transitions between paragraphs occur but may lack originality.
- Competent use of language; sentences are solid but may lack development, refinement, style.
- Occasional minor mechanical errors may occur, but do not impede clear understanding of material.
- No serious mechanical errors (fragments, run-ons, comma-splices, etc.)

“D” Range: Unsatisfactory achievement; does not meet acceptable standards.

- Significance of content is unclear.
- Ideas lack support, elaboration.
- Lacks sufficient examples or relevance of examples may be unclear.
- Support materials is not clearly incorporated into argument.
- Expression is frequently awkward (problematic sentence structure.)
- Mechanical errors may often impede clear understanding of material.
- May have recurring serious mechanical errors (fragments, run-ons, comma splices, etc.)

“F” Range: Fails to meet minimal standards.

- Ignores assignment.
- Lacks significance.
- Lacks coherence.
- Includes plagiarized material (intentional or unintentional.)
- Lacks focus.
- Difficult to follow due to awkward sentence or paragraph development.
- Mechanical errors impede understanding.
- Problems with writing at the college level.

Instructor Bios

Scott Glover has covered the LAPD for the Los Angeles Times since he arrived at the paper in 1997, most recently focusing on police corruption. A graduate of San Francisco State University, Glover has worked at daily newspapers in Oregon, New Jersey and Florida during his 14-year career as a journalist. He has won numerous local, state and national awards for investigative reporting, including the prestigious Livingston Award for Young Journalists in 1996. In 2005, he received the Heywood Broun Award in Washington, D.C. for stories undermining the 20-year-old murder case against a San Fernando Valley man imprisoned for killing his mother. Glover was also a key contributor to The Times’ coverage of the 2003 California wildfires, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for breaking news.

Matt Lait has been with the Los Angeles Times for 17 years. Currently, he is an editor responsible for legal affairs and criminal justice issues. Prior to joining The Times, he worked as an editorial assistant and reporter for two years at the Washington Post, first at the paper’s Los Angeles bureau and then in D.C. He has won more than a dozen local and state awards for his reporting. He played roles in two staff efforts that resulted in Pulitzer Prizes for The Times, one for coverage of the 1997 North Hollywood Shootout, the other for coverage of the 2003 California wildfires. In 2005, he received the Heywood Broun Award in Washington, D.C. for stories undermining the 20-year-old murder case against a San Fernando Valley man imprisoned for killing his mother. Lait graduated from the University of California, San Diego, in 1987 where he earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and history.

