

News Writing – Print (J-501)

FALL 2007

Professor Laura Castañeda

COURSE OBJECTIVE:

By the end of this course you should be able to walk into any small newsroom in the country and write a basic 500-word hard news story for publication on deadline in a clear, concise, accurate and fair manner.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

My goals are to sharpen your writing, reporting, and critical thinking skills, as well as teach you about news values/judgment, ethics, and how to accurately write about our increasingly diverse world.

Journalism School Director Michael Parks writes that “good journalism starts with good reporting, but good writing tells the story.” Our Core Convergence Curriculum begins with news writing. We believe it is easier to teach students how to be good reporters after they’ve had a chance to learn about what makes a story newsworthy, and what elements should be included in basic news stories. **That means we will use fact sheets to complete print assignments for the first three or four weeks of this course.** After that, we will begin to go out on “live” reporting assignments.

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 various news-related topics. In fact, for the first time ever at Annenberg, current events quizzes will count a whopping 25 percent of your total grade. So if you’re not yet a newshound, I suggest you become one immediately.

I will work hard to make sure you understand the concepts covered in class, the importance of convergence and how it works, that assignments are logical and clear, and that we are moving at the right pace. You should feel free to talk to me at any point during the semester via e-mail, by telephone, or in person.

You learn best by doing. So expect weekly in-class and homework assignments. The in-class assignments will be on deadline, and will usually be based on fact sheets. Early in the semester will emphasize the basics of news judgment, and writing news leads, briefs and short stories. Eventually, we will zero in on how to cover specific types of news stories that are commonly assigned to beginning reporters.

All homework assignments should be turned in to me via e-mail attachment no later than one week after they are assigned (i.e., they are due by 2 p.m. the following Tuesday). I will return your edited homework and in-class assignments via e-mail attachment within a week, and often sooner. Please bring a hard copy of your homework to class so we can discuss everyone’s work (by this, I mean I will usually have everyone read their leads aloud in class).

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.**

You must know how to insert accents, tildes and other symbols in Word, or be sure to write them in before turning in assignments. Also, see copyediting/proofreading symbols in AP Stylebook.

Every student is required to schedule a one-on-one meeting with me sometime during the semester. You’re all welcome to meet with me more often, of course.

REQUIRED TEXTS/READINGS:

“**Inside Reporting: A Practical Guide to the Craft of Journalism**,” by Tim Harrower. First Edition. McGraw-Hill.

“**Course Reader, Fall 2007**” available in the USC bookstore. **Bring this book with you to every class for the in-class assignments.**

“**The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law**,” edited by Norm Goldstein, 2007. Perseus Books. **Bring this book with you to every class for the in-class assignments.**

Dictionary: The following online dictionary will be the official reference for in-class assignments, homework, midterms, and finals:

Merriam-Webster: www.m-w.com

DAILY NEWS READINGS, AP STYLE:

Journalists must know what’s happening in the world around them. For the aspiring writer/reporter, reading the newspaper and news Web sites thoroughly every day, listening to radio news, and watching television newscasts, are essential and strengthen your skills. Read at least one major daily newspaper, as well as weekly newsmagazines. I recommend the Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Time or U.S. News and World Report. For news Web sites, try MSNBC.com.

You will be given a current events quick once a week. This is worth 25 percent of your total grade. In addition, you will be given a weekly AP Stylebook Quiz, which is worth 5 percent of your grade. This is an open book test. See the course reader for details.

WHAT WE WILL COVER:

After week three or four of this course, I will begin sending you out on regular reporting assignments each week. I will ask you to cover USC and its surrounding neighborhood, which is known as West Adams, or downtown Los Angeles. In addition to reading The Los Angeles Times (www.latimes.com) and looking for news about this area, for example, you should also be reading local newspapers such as The Downtown News (www.downtownnews.com), Los Angeles Alternative and LA Weekly (www.laweekly.com). If you can read newspapers in languages other than English, also read newspapers such as La Opinión (www.laopinion.com).

RESOURCES:

Please check Blackboard regularly for any articles, messages, etc. In addition, the following Web sites may be useful to you when conducting research, or if you’re looking for journalism tips: Journalism Research Page -- <http://jusc.wordpress.com>, News University at www.newsu.org, and the Poynter Institute at www.poynter.org.

GRADES:

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis. Each story 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 errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. There should not be any omissions, either. **In fact, after the first week, any misspelled proper noun (even if it’s due to a typographical error) or any inaccuracy, 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.

Please don't be discouraged if your writing receives low grades at the beginning of the semester. Your grades will improve. News writing is hard work, but the only way to get better is to keep writing, regardless of the difficulties. I'm more concerned with how you do in the final weeks of the course than how you do in the first weeks of the course. In fact, I will drop two assignments on which you've received your lowest grades before I compute your final course grade. In addition, grades on assignments in the first four weeks will be weighted much less heavily towards your final grade in the course. This policy does not apply to tests. And if you miss class, you cannot make up any missed quizzes.

Your course grade will be determined as follows:

Weekly writing assignments	45 percent
AP Stylebook Quizzes	5 percent
Current Events Summaries	25 percent
Final Part 1 (in-class, on deadline)	10 percent
Final Part 2 (outside of class)	15 percent
Total	100 percent

Traditional grades and grade point averages are assigned as follows:

"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 minor spelling errors or an error of omission.

"C" stories are stories that need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many minor spelling and style errors.

"D" stories require excessive rewriting; have numerous minor spelling and style errors, and should not have been submitted.

"F" stories have at least one proper name misspelled, and/or one factual error.

Furthermore, all of your assignments will be graded on a scale of 1-100, and then translated into traditional grades. For example, here is what every error on an assignment will cost you:

AP Style, Punctuation, or minor spelling errors = Two to five points each.

Clarity, organization = Five to seven points for short stories; seven to 10 points for longer stories.

Omissions = Five points.

Misspellings (of proper names) and/or factual errors = Automatic "F" on the assignment.

And here's how these points will translate into traditional grades:

A (4.0) = 95-100	B- (2.7) = 79-75	D+ (1.3) = 59-55
A- (3.7) = 90-94	C+ (2.3) = 70-74	D (1.0) = 50-54
B+ (3.3) = 89-85	C (2.0) = 69-65	D- (0.7) = 49-55
B (3.0) = 80-84	C- (1.7) = 60-64	F (0) = 44 or lower

WRITING COACHES:

Students are required to review at least four stories with a writing coach, two of which must be reviewed before Week 8. Writing coaches are available in ASC 227 during posted drop-in times and by appointment. Our coach is Bob Berger, who can be reached at rberger@usc.edu.

ATTENDANCE:

Attendance is required for all classes. If you expect to miss class due to a family emergency, a medical problem, or a religious holiday, please contact me beforehand (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, please stay home.

If you miss a class, please get the notes from another student. I will not hold separate "catch-up" sessions or send you my notes. Again, in-class assignments and quizzes can't be made-up, either.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS:

You must turn in assignments on the day they are due even if you know you will miss class and have contacted me beforehand. Send it to me via e-mail attachment. The story must arrive by the beginning of that day's class session (2 p.m. on Tuesday).

Late assignments will receive no credit. However, you are required to complete them anyway so I can edit them and provide feedback on your progress.

Again, 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.

PLAGIARISM:

Plagiarism is defined as taking ideas or writings from another and passing them off as one's own. 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."

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 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 the USC Student Counseling Services office 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: All readings are to be done before each class. The syllabus is subject to change based on news events, guest speaker availability.

Week One (Aug. 28) – Review Syllabus; What is News? What is Convergence?

Current Events Quiz

Review syllabus, copy Preparation, using the AP Stylebook

What is News?

What the heck is convergence?

In-class writing assignment (This will not be graded. It is a diagnostic tool to see what your writing is like).

Homework

Week Two (Sept. 4) – Basic Newsroom Structure, Leads

How are newspaper newsrooms structured? What are the components of a basic hard news lead?

AP Style Quiz

Current Events Quiz

In-class assignment

Homework

Readings:

Readings. Harrower, Chapters 1, 2, 3 (Pgs. 34-41), and 7.

"Code of Ethics," and "Guidelines for Countering Racial, Ethnic and Religious Profiling," by the Society of Professional Journalists at www.spj.org

Week Three (Sept. 11) – Briefs, Stories

What are the components of short news briefs and stories?

How to Use Press Releases

AP Style Quiz

Current Events Quiz

In-class assignment

Homework

Readings:

Harrower, Chapters 3 (Pgs. 42-64).

Week Four (Sept. 18) – Pounding the pavement

How do you find sources, conduct telephone and e-mail interviews, etc.?
AP Style Quiz
Current Events Discussion
In-class Assignment (look for news event to cover on campus, do a “backgrounder” on the event).
Homework
Readings:
Harrower, Chapter 4.

Week Five (Sept. 25) – Speeches, News Conferences, Meetings

What is a beat? How do you cover a basic speech and news conference?
AP Style Quiz
In-class current events quiz.
In-class assignment
Homework – Find and cover a speech or news conference on campus

Readings:
Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 90-91; 102-103)

Week Six (Oct. 2) – Meetings and Panel Discussions

How do you cover meetings and panel discussions?
AP Style Quiz
In-class current events quiz.
In-class assignment
Homework – Find and cover a meeting or panel discussion on campus, around the USC neighborhood, or downtown.

Readings:
Harrower, Chapter 5, (Pgs. 104-105).

Week Seven (Oct. 9) – Police and Crime Stories

How do you cover a basic crime story?
AP Style Quiz
In-class current events discussion
In-class assignment
Homework – Cover a local crime.
Sign-up for individual student meetings next week.

Readings:
Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 98-99)

Week Eight (Oct. 16) – No class.

We'll have individual student meetings all week.

Week Nine (Oct. 23) -- Accidents and Disasters

How do you cover a basic accident story?
How do you update stories?
In-class current events discussion
In-class assignment
Homework—Cover an accident

Readings:
Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 94-95).

Week 10 (Oct. 30) -- Covering Courts

How do you cover a basic trial story?
In-class current events discussion
In-class assignment
Homework: Cover a trial for a day.

Readings:

Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 100-101)

Week 11 (Nov. 6) – Obits

How do you write a basic obituary?
In-class current events discussion.
In-class assignment (Pick a faculty member and conduct some background info on them).
Homework – Write an “advance” obituary on this journalism faculty member.

Readings:

Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 92-93)

Week 12 (Nov. 13) – Untold Stories

The best, most compelling stories are often the ones that have not yet been told. How do you find these stories?
In-class assignment
Homework: Find a story about a segment of the community at or around USC that is often ignored.

Readings:

Check Blackboard.

Week 13 (Nov. 20) – Covering Government, Elections

How do you cover basic government, elections?
In-class current events discussion
In-class assignment
Homework: Cover results of a local election tonight.

Readings:

Harrower, Chapter 5 (Pgs. 106-107).

PLEASE NOTE: NOV. 16 IS THE LAST DAY TO DROP A CLASS WITH A MARK OF

“W.”

Week 14 (Nov. 27) – Writing Longer Stories

How do you report and write longer stories? How to write story pitches.
In-class current events discussion.
In-class assignment
Homework – Pitch story idea for Part 2 of Final. Story pitch is due next week. Part 2 of the Final is due Dec. 7.

Readings:

Harrower, Chapter 6.

Nov. 22 – Happy Thanksgiving!

Week 15 (Dec. 4) – Final, Part 1, in-class.

Part 1 of your final will be an in-class, deadline final. We will probably have a guest speaker come in, and you will be asked to cover this person's speech. This story should be 500 words long.

The Final, Part 2, is due on Wednesday, Dec. 12, at 12 noon via e-mail attachment. This story should be between 500 and 700 words long.

Dec. 7 -- Classes End

Dec. 8-11 – Study Days

Dec. 12-19 – Finals

Dec. 20-Jan. 13 – Winter Break

ASSIGNMENT FORMAT

Using the “Header” tool in Microsoft Word, put the following information in the header of each page:

Your Name

Instructor Name

SLUG – a slug is a one-word description of the story, along with your last name and the version of the story. **Ex:** Fire_Smith1. Assignments will be e-mailed back to you as follows: Fire_SmithEdit.

Total Word Count – in Microsoft Word, highlight the story, then click Tools/Word Count.

Lead Count – Follow the steps above and tell me the length of your lead.

Date – put the date the assignment is due

Start your story about one-third of the way down the page/screen to allow space for your grade and the instructor’s notes. Be sure to double-space all stories. Use 12-point type and 1.5-inch margins. Do not use italics, underline or bold.

Indent the first line of each paragraph five spaces. Use a left justification, leaving a ragged right margin. Do not break words at the end of lines. Put two spaces after the period of each sentence.

Type or write “-30-“ or “#####” at the bottom of the last page.

STYLEBOOK REMINDERS

I suggest trying to memorize the topics below in **bold type**!

Abbreviations

Addresses

Ages

Burglary, larceny, robbery, theft

Courtesy titles

Datelines

Days of the week

Dimensions

Doctor

Geographic names

Governmental bodies

Judge

Legislative titles

Military titles

Names

Numerals

Percentages

Political parties and philosophies

Religious titles

Second reference

State names

Temperatures

Time element

Time of day

Times

Titles

Yesterday