

**University of North Texas
The Mayborn School of Journalism
JOUR 4410: Reporting of Public Affairs**

Instructor: **Neil Foote**
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Office hours: By appointment

Semester: Fall 2010
Class sessions: **Thursday, 3:30pm – 6:20pm**
Meeting Place: GAB 337

Course Description

Read the newspaper, look at television ... go online. Public affairs reporting is all around you. As a reporter, one of your early assignments will be covering cops, courts, governments, civil servants and politicians. It's what makes villages, towns, cities, states and federal governments tick. Public affairs stories address the most mundane issues, but in the long run the subjects of these stories are directly impacting the lives of every reader and viewer. Many of the most coveted awards in journalism are won by journalists who have gone beyond the ordinary, and dug deep to reveal tremendous inconsistencies, illegal behavior and wrongdoings by those in the centerpiece of public affairs.

Course Objectives

At the end of this class, you will have achieved the following:

- Report and write stories about public institutions
- Learn the organizational structure and basic functionality of key public institutions, such as police departments, the court systems and the school boards/independent school districts
- Learn how to report, research and write short- and long-form investigative stories
- Learn about the depth and breadth of public documents and how to access them
- Understand how to file a Freedom of Information Act letter
- Understand the fundamental role of a free press, the role of the First Amendment and the importance of open government
- Learn the importance of fairness and ethics in covering government institutions and politicians

Reading and Textbook Requirements

- Read daily print or online editions of *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*.
- Read additional articles and essays.
- You are encouraged to bring examples of articles to class on relevant subjects to discuss.
- You are expected to be proficient in the use of AP Stylebook. The Freedom of Information Act Handbook is optional. You can order it from the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas.
- **All articles written for the class must include a source list with the names, phone numbers and emails of people interviewed as well as any website used to source content.**

Required: "The Elements of Journalism, What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect," by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel, (Three Rivers Press, 2007, 288 pages) (Revised updated edition)

Attendance: You are required – and expected - to attend every class. Your participation is absolutely essential to your personal success, and to completely engage the class in the learning experience. You can not make up missed assignments if you have an unexcused absence. The goal is to treat this class as if it were a newsroom. If you're going to be absent, call me/email me and bring to class

the next class meeting immediately following your absence a signed note or letter that supports your absence.

Class assignments:

You will be doing extensive reporting and writing in this class. All of your assignments must have your byline, your email, the date, and must be typewritten, double-spaced and must include a source list. Some assignments may require you to post them online. The following assignments should be written as if they were being published in print or online. If some of the stories are strong enough, they will be offered to the editors of the NT Daily and NTNewsNet.com.

Guest speakers: To help make the class more relevant and interesting, we will have guest speakers – journalists, county officials, attorneys – and others to help you get an up close, in person opportunity to talk to people. **You will be required to write a one-page summary of each speaker that must be posted on the class blog by the beginning of the next class.**

Grading:

Civic Leader article	10%
Meeting article	10%
Police Story	10%
Court case article	10%
Education article	10%
Public records research	10%
Diversity & Media essay	10%
Final Small Group/Public Records Project	25%
In-class exercises, participation, attendance	5%

Grades: You will be graded on your ability to turn in your assignments on deadline. They've got to be accurate, clear, use AP style correctly and must be fairly reported. All of the above components will be part of determining your grade.

Semester grades:

- A = 90 to 100
- B = 80 to 89.9
- C = 70 to 79.9
- D = 60 to 69.9
- F = 59 and below

Academic dishonesty: Plagiarism, fabrication and resubmission or double submission of work performed for another class all are considered to be acts of academic dishonesty under the UNT Code of Student Conduct. You should never quote friends or family members in news stories unless you have advance permission from the instructor.

Any of the above violations will result in an automatic failing grade on the assignment and a referral to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities. The stories you pursue independently outside of class should rely entirely on YOUR OWN reporting. If you must include information reported by another journalistic outlet (and I suggest you do this rarely, because there is almost always a way to find the information yourself), cite the publication. The instructor reserves the right to contact sources listed on your source sheet and will perform spot checks throughout the semester.

Additionally, this course addresses each of the ACEJMC core competencies:

1. Understand and apply First Amendment principles and the law appropriate to professional practice;
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications;
4. Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
5. Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
6. Think critically, creatively and independently;
7. Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
8. Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
9. Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
10. Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
11. Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

Department of Journalism statement on plagiarism

Plagiarism, in a nutshell, is using other people's written words as your own. Some people consider the use of 7-10 words in a row, copied from another source, as plagiarism. Be sure to include citations when using other people's writing, because plagiarism is a serious offense in any discipline, especially in journalism. It's a firing offense in the professional world. In the Department of Journalism and Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at UNT, students face a range of penalties for plagiarism (depending on the importance of the assignment):

- a grade of "F" on a minor assignment;
- a request that the student drop the class;
- withdrawal of the student from the class, initiated by the professor;
- an "F" in the course
- a referral to the UNT Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities;
- a notation on the student's transcript;
- and expulsion from the university.

A combination of these penalties may also be used. If you need more information or have questions about plagiarism, ask your nearest journalism professor or visit the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities.

Acceptable Student Behavior: Student behavior that interferes with an instructor's ability to conduct a class or other students' opportunity to learn is unacceptable and disruptive and will not be tolerated in any instructional forum at UNT. Students engaging in unacceptable behavior will be directed to leave the classroom and the instructor may refer the student to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities to consider whether the student's conduct violated the Code of Student Conduct. The university's expectations for student conduct apply to all instructional forums, including university and electronic classroom, labs, discussion groups, field trips, etc. The Code of Student Conduct can be found at www.unt.edu/csr

Saving your work: You are responsible for making copies of all of your work thumb drives or by e-mailing finished assignments to yourself. You cannot save material on the computers in the lab. Save all graded copies of your work that have been returned to you, since this is the only way to resolve any potential discrepancy between the grade you are assigned and your own calculation of your grade.

Disabilities: The Journalism Department, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, makes reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. If you require any such accommodation, please contact the instructor within the first three weeks of class.

Tentative Class Schedule (subject to change)

	Subject Area	Assignment
Week 1	Introduction to class. What is public affairs? How much do you know about your government?	Read Chapters 1 -4, Essentials of Journalism
Week 2	What makes a journalist? What is civic journalism? Why it matters? Covering meetings / Covering local government.	DUE: Essay on the role of the journalist
Week 3	Covering Local Government continued. Mapping your beat. Developing sources. Seven Knowledge keys. Engaging sources.	DUE: City Council story Read Pew Center for Civic Journalism. http://pewcenter.org
Week 4	Role of civic leaders. Covering law enforcement. Crime beat basics. Key terms. Understanding the arrest process. What makes a good cop story? Understanding crime stats.	DUE: Profile of a civic leader. Read Chapter 1 on "Covering Crime Beats" on the "Covering Crime and Justice" website, http://justicejournalism.org
Week 5	Covering law enforcement. Key terms. Types of courts. Developing sources. Writing compelling cop stories.	DUE: Police beat story.
Week 6	Covering courts & the legal process.	DUE: Read: "Covering Courts: The Associated Press Manual for Reporters," http://www.ncpress.com/LegalFiles/intro.html
Week 7	Covering Education	DUE: Story on trial at civic, criminal or federal court READ: "School Stories" section on http://coveringeducation.org & identify key education sources on Educational Writers Association website: http://ewa.org
Week 8	Covering Politics/Elections	DUE: Education beat story READ: Visit http://opensecrets.org and write campaign finance report on a US Congressman or Senator.
Week 9	Business/Financial Reporting Writing effective business stories Final Project Discussion	READ: * Beginners Guide to Financial Statements, http://sec.gov/investor/pubs/begfinstmtguide.htm * The following sections at http://businessjournalism.org : - "Tips to make Numbers Your Best Friends," by Curt Hazlett - "Make Sense of Numbers When Writing About Business," by Curt Hazlett
Week 10	Public v. Private lives	DUE: Election-related story - Write one-page overview of final project
Week 11	The basics of investigative reporting	DUE: Familiarize yourself with the IRE database: IRE Net Tour at http://ire.org
Week 12	Investigative Reporting: Case Studies	DUE: Read assigned investigative stories
Week 13	Ethical Issues	READ: Chapters 6 – 11, The Essentials of Journalism
Week 14	Diversity & Ethnic Media	
Week 15	Final Project Presentations	