

**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 2011  
Class sessions: **Thursdays, 3:30pm – 6:20pm**  
Meeting Place: GAB 114, Denton, Texas

**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:**

**We will be using Blackboard (<http://ecampus.unt.edu>).** You must check it to get assignments and to post assignments. I will post your grades to Blackboard, and in many cases will grade your work electronically. If you miss a deadline in submitting a story, you will not be able to submit it late because Blackboard will lock you out. **You will receive a zero for that assignment.** Late assignments are completely unacceptable. You must get used to the notion that newsrooms function reporters and editors filing their stories in time to be posted and/or produced.

**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.

**Final Project.** Traditionally, I have waited until about midway through the class to discuss the final project, but this semester, I am going to give you more time to do a more thorough and analytical job. Around the fourth week, we'll discuss the project and around mid-term, you'll be expected to provide a cogent outline of what you'll be investigating. The goal of this project is to combine all of your journalism skills into an enterprise, investigative article that stretches your ability beyond the norm. You will draw upon your experience on what we've learned throughout the semester. The expectation is that this 1,000 to 1,500 article, including a presentation to class about your findings, is a great opportunity for you to have a very solid piece for your portfolio.

**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.

**Grading:**

Civic Leader article	10%
Meeting article	10%
Police Story	10%
Court case article	10%
Education article	10%
Public Records Research	10%
Government & News Media	10%
Final Project Outline	5%
Final Small Group/Public Records Project	20%
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/csrr](http://www.unt.edu/csrr)

**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
<b>Week 1 – Aug. 25</b>	Introduction to class. What is public affairs? How much do you know about your government?	<b>DUE Next week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Read Chapters 1 -4, Essentials of Journalism</b></li> <li>• <b>Essay on the role of the journalist</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 2 – Sept. 1</b>	What makes a journalist? What is civic journalism? Why it matters? Covering meetings / Covering local government. Beat Assignments.	<b>DUE Next week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Cover a local city council meeting. Max. 500 words. Typed. Double-spaced. Include source list. A copy of the city council agenda and any other related documents that are relevant to the story.</u></b></li> <li>• <b>Also, please review the following website:</b> <a href="http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/index.html">http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/index.html</a></li> </ul>
<b>Week 3 – Sept. 8</b>	Covering Local Government continued. Mapping your beat. Developing sources. Seven Knowledge keys. Engaging sources.	<b>DUE Next week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>ASSIGNMENT Due Feb. 9: Based on “Step 3” in the Pew Center for Civic Journalism (<a href="http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/step3.html">http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/step3.html</a>), find a civic leader, interview him or her about what they do, what has changed and how the media cover them? WRITE a 300 – 500 word, double-spaced, typewritten story based on your interview. Be prepared to discuss.</b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 4 – Sept. 15</b>	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. Discussion of Final Project.	<b>DUE Next week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Read the following chapter on the “Covering Crime and Justice” website, <a href="http://www.justicejournalism.org/crimeguide/chapter01/chapter01_pg02.html#crimebeatbasics">http://www.justicejournalism.org/crimeguide/chapter01/chapter01_pg02.html#crimebeatbasics</a></b></li> <li>• <b>Be prepared for in-class exercise on key crime terms.</b></li> <li>• Profile of a civic leader. Read Chapter 1 on “Covering Crime Beats” on the “Covering Crime and Justice” website, <a href="http://justicejournalism.org">http://justicejournalism.org</a></li> </ul>
<b>Week 5 – Sept. 22</b>	Covering law enforcement. Key terms. Types of courts. Developing sources. Writing compelling cop stories.	<b>DUE Next Week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>Write a 500-word story police story. The story must include original reporting, interviews and quotes. Include a source list, and if it is based on an actual crime, include a print out of the police report. Be prepared to discuss.</u></b></li> </ul>
<b>Week 6 – Sept. 29</b>	Covering courts & the legal process.	<b>DUE Next Week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story on trial at civic, criminal or federal court</li> <li>• Read: “Covering Courts: The Associated Press Manual for Reporters,” <a href="http://www.ncpress.com/LegalFiles/intro.html">http://www.ncpress.com/LegalFiles/intro.html</a></li> </ul>
<b>Week 7 – Oct. 6</b>	Covering Education / Final Project Discussion	<b>DUE Next Week:</b> <b>READ:</b> Assigned stories on covering political campaigns
<b>Week 8 – Oct. 13</b>	Covering Politics/Elections / Assignments on local/political campaigns.	<b>DUE Next Week:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>500 word story on your assigned politician, including campaign finances, key themes; platform, etc.</u></li> <li>• <b>Final Project Outline Due.</b></li> </ul>

<b>Week 9 – Oct. 20</b>	Business/Financial Reporting Writing effective business stories <b>READ:</b> * Beginners Guide to Financial Statements, <a href="http://sec.gov/investor/pubs/begfinstmtguide.htm">http://sec.gov/investor/pubs/begfinstmtguide.htm</a> * The following sections at <a href="http://businessjournalism.org">http://businessjournalism.org</a> : - “Tips to make Numbers Your Best Friends,” by Curt Hazlett - “Make Sense of Numbers When Writing About Business,” by Curt Hazlett
<b>Week 10 – Oct. 27</b>	Public v. Private lives / Government & News Media / WikiLeaks <b>DUE:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Washington Post &amp; Salons: The tenuous role of journalists and government officials</li> </ul> <b><i>Discussion of Wikileaks</i></b>
<b>Week 11 – Nov. 3</b>	The basics of investigative reporting <b>DUE: Familiarize yourself with the IRE database: IRE Net Tour at <a href="http://ire.org">http://ire.org</a></b>
<b>Week 12 – Nov. 10</b>	Investigative Reporting: Case Studies – <b>FINAL Project Detailed Outline DUE.</b> <b>DUE: Read assigned investigative stories</b>
<b>Week 13 – Nov. 17</b>	Ethical Issues <b>READ: Chapters 6 – 11, The Essentials of Journalism</b>
<b>Week 14 – Nov. 24</b>	Thanksgiving – NO CLASS
<b>Week 15 – Dec. 1</b>	Diversity & Ethnic Media – FINAL PROJECT DUE
<b>Week 16 – Dec. 8</b>	Final Project Presentations