

**JOU 4930**  
**Reporting from Ground Zero**  
Thursday periods 6-7 (12:50 p.m. to 2:45 p.m.), On Zoom

**Professor: Moni Basu (Prof B)**

**Office: 3327 Weimer Hall**

**Email: [Mbasu@ufl.edu](mailto:Mbasu@ufl.edu)**

**Phone: 352.273.3529 (o) or 404.217.1235 (m)**

**Chat sessions: Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. – 9 p.m.** Need to talk about class? The pandemic? Anything that is bugging you? I will make myself available either by phone or Zoom to meet with you during these hours. Please make an appointment first.

## **WELCOME!**

We are living in troubling and trying times. The news can be daunting amid a coronavirus pandemic that we have not yet been able to control, incidents of police brutality and racial injustice protests that have sometimes turned violent. We are coming up on a presidential election in an extremely polarized nation. There are weeks to go in the hurricane season. And devastating wildfires are raging in California. We live knowing that any day, people could die in another mass shooting or a terrorist attack. If all that were not enough, we go forward with the possibility of other major breaking news events erupting. We have no way to predict them.

These chaotic and often tragic events don't bode well for the planet, but they can result in amazing stories for journalists.

How do you report a story when you are in the line of fire? Or when you are caught in waist high in water and winds gusting at 150 miles an hour? How do you get your story out safely under such trying circumstances? And how do you ensure you are reporting fairly and accurately when you are under so much pressure?

These are the kinds of questions we will tackle in this class.

My intent is to expose you to reporting that can be difficult and dangerous and raise your awareness level of this kind of work. I hope this course will help prepare you to cover such stories – physically, mentally and emotionally. That last category is, sadly, often overlooked but critical.

We will discuss logistics and preparedness; the challenges journalists face when they are reporting across racial, cultural and national boundaries, including linguistic barriers; and how to report sensitively on victims of trauma and traditionally underrepresented communities. Last but not least, we will explore what you can do as journalists to develop self-care methods after being exposed to violence and tragedy.

Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, this class will be held online via Zoom. This is far from ideal and I am truly sorry it has to be this way. But these are circumstances beyond my control and the health and safety of everyone at UF are paramount. I assure you I will try and make this class as engaging as possible even though we will not be physically together.

You will hear from guest speakers – veteran journalists, disaster experts and people who have suffered loss – who will discuss reporting as well as essential life skills needed to operate in challenging situations.

You will go through simulated exercises and also be asked to report news stories that might be happening around us.

**In this course, you will:**

- Dissect the coverage of the big news stories of our day.
- Discuss why it's important to have journalists on the ground.
- Learn ways to prepare yourself – physically and mentally -- for parachuting into unfamiliar and potentially hostile or dangerous territories.
- Get training in emergency preparedness.
- Hear testimonials of veteran reporters who have covered challenging stories.
- Discuss best practices when covering people who have suffered trauma.
- Understand how to ethically and safely report across barriers of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality and language.
- Identify and utilize sources of information for international stories, including but not limited to online databases, think tanks, NGOs, UN agencies, experts, scholarly research, activists and people on the ground.
- Understand the pros and cons of digital technology.
- Be presented with difficult scenarios that you will work through.
- Report a breaking news event (could be elections, protests or pandemic).
- Discuss how to take care of yourself during and after a traumatic event.

**DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION**

Please take careful note of this section of the syllabus. These are principles that have always been extremely important to me and given the current climate in the United States, I believe them to be critical.

The UF Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions. UF journalism courses are expected to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

One of the topics we will be discussing in this class is how to report difficult stories about people who are vastly different from you or people who have been underrepresented in every segment of society, including in the media. And how to report them with empathy. By that I mean not only differences in race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but also class, age, religion, nationality, disability, culture and other visible and non-visible differences. I consider our differences to be a great asset and this class is intended to realize the greatest potential of that asset. You will be exposed to a diverse array of reading materials and speakers.

I will show the utmost respect for you, no matter your background or perspective, and I expect that you will do the same for me as well as your fellow students. I hope to foster a Zoom classroom environment in which you will feel free to voice your thoughts and opinions without fear, intimidation, embarrassment or shame. Please let me know if you have any thoughts on how to improve inclusivity or if someone or something has made you feel uneasy.

Diversity in journalism is critical, as we have seen from issues that have surfaced over the last few months over police killings and the mass protests in American cities and towns. I expect you to

engage in storytelling that is fair, complete and based on information gathered from diverse sources. That means conducting interviews that may feel uncomfortable or daunting even. But that is a fundamental objective of this class and I hope you will lean on me and your classmates to help you navigate the reporting process.

## **ACCURACY, FAIRNESS AND STYLE**

Your assignments must be factually correct. You must review them and double check every fact. That includes the names of people, places and organizations. You are expected to have a strong command of spelling and grammar as well as AP style and will lose points (at my discretion) for mistakes. This is an advanced journalism class and I expect your copy to be clean and polished when you turn it in.

## **HONESTY AND INTEGRITY**

The media plays a vital role in our democracy. The public depends on journalists for news and a deeper understanding of the world around them. As such, there is nothing more important than our honesty, fairness and credibility.

I cannot stress this enough: Plagiarism, fabrication and conflicts of interest will not be tolerated, and **you will fail** not just the assignment but the entire class.

Plagiarism is stealing someone else's ideas or work, including chunks of copy from the Internet. Fabrication is the use of invented information or the falsification of material. Conflicts of interest include writing about your roommate, boyfriend, parents, business partners or others with whom you have close relationships or financial ties. If you are unsure about whether you are facing a conflict of interest, please discuss with me.

You are expected to abide by the **UF Honor Code**, which you can read here:  
<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>

## **DEADLINES**

In the world of professional journalism, deadlines are critical, as they will be in this class. You will be expected to meet the deadlines set for each assignment and will lose points for every day that you are late without a valid excuse.

## **ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION AND PROFESSIONALISM**

This class meets only once a week and your attendance is mandatory. You are expected to log into Zoom on time and turn your video on. You are expected to look and behave in a manner that is professional and respectful to me and your fellow students. Consider your wardrobe and hygiene just as you would if we all in the same room, as well as your audio and visual backgrounds. (Please don't log into Zoom sitting in bed with your pajamas on.) You are encouraged to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you want to protect the privacy of your environment or surroundings. If you go to black screen for a significant amount of time, you will lose points for participation. All classes will be recorded for educational

purposes. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance and privacy, please discuss with me.

You are expected to attend class each week fully prepared to participate in activities and discussions in class as well as on Canvas. Participation is more important than ever as we proceed online. Please note that it doesn't just mean speaking or writing a lot; you will be judged on the quality of what you say and how focused you are in class, even when you are not speaking. Your insights and comments should be respectful to all. We will discuss what participation means on the first day of class. I welcome your ideas on how to make this process go smoothly as we proceed virtually.

I expect you to inform me ahead of time of absences. Absences will be excused for pandemic-related emergencies and illnesses and for other extenuating circumstances, but only if you notify me before class begins. You will still be responsible for making up in-class assignments, submitting on time all homework on their due dates and for material covered in class. Instructions for assignments will be given in class so it's in your best interest to be present on Zoom each week.

### **REQUIRED READING:**

There are no textbooks for this class. But you will be assigned weekly readings. You will also be expected to keep up with the news of the day from reading media outlets online such as The Associated Press, The New York Times and CNN.com as well as Florida-centric press including The Tampa Bay Times, The Miami Herald, The Gainesville sun, WUFT.org and The Independent Florida Alligator. You will be quizzed on current events as well as on the reading material. Good reporters are voracious readers!

### **SUPPLIES**

You will need notebooks and a recording device, if your phone does not have a voice recorder for any in-person assignments you may be able to do. In the age of COVID, will need good connectivity for Zoom interviews and also to participate in class. You may be asked to buy basic safety equipment (like tourniquets) for a training class on emergency procedures.

### **ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMS:**

There will be occasional quizzes, in-class assignments as well as a final exam. You will be given writing assignments and may also be expected to produce stories (print or visual) depending on the news.

### **GRADING**

You will be judged on the quality of your work and how well you comprehend the material presented in this class. Your final grade will be determined by the points you earn for each assignment. We will use Canvas for filing your work and your grades will be posted there. Because the class is online, it is vital, now more than ever, that you participate in discussions and activities. That is why the professionalism and participation grade accounts for 30% of your final grade.

### **Total points: 500**

Final exam: 100 points

Homework assignments: 150 points  
In-class quizzes and assignments: 100 points  
Professionalism and class participation: 150 points

**Grading scale:**

A	465-500
A-	450-464
B+	435-449
B	415-434
B-	400-414
C+	385-399
C	365-384
C-	350-364
D+	335-349
D	315-334
D-	300-314
F	0-299

More information on grades and grading policies is here:  
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

**STUDENT RESOURCES**

If you need a little extra help with writing, organizing and editing your stories, the **UF Writing Studio**, located at 302 Tigert Hall, may be able to help. You can also get online tutoring. For more information, go to: <https://writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/>

As you will learn in this class, mental health is extremely important. The **UF Counseling and Wellness Center** is free for all students. Please use this fantastic resource if you are having trouble coping. You can reach a support staff member between 8am-5pm Monday through Friday at [352-392-1575](tel:352-392-1575). The center's address is 3190 Radio Road. You can see all the services the center provides at: <https://counseling.ufl.edu/>

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the **Disability Resource Center** by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester. Call 352-392-8565 or go to: [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)

**ABOUT ME**

If you are an intrepid reporter, you will have Googled me by now. I began my career as a journalist in Tallahassee (home of that "other" university) and have been reporting and editing now for 37 years. I covered presidential elections, hurricanes, earthquakes and the Iraq War since its inception in 2003. On several trips, I was embedded with the U.S. Army and earned the moniker, Evil Reporter Chick -- affectionately, of course. My e-book, *Chaplain Turner's War* (2012, Agate Publishing) grew from a series of stories on an Army chaplain at war. I'm not a superhero but I was

featured in Marvel Comics' "Civil War" series. Most recently, I was a senior writer at CNN. I began teaching at UF in 2018 and earlier this year, I was named the university's Undergraduate Teacher of the Year. I also teach in a low-residency MFA program in narrative media at the University of Georgia.

Most students at UF know me as Prof B. Those who have taken my classes will tell you that I love true stories about ordinary people. I love good writing and am here to help you become better writers. I want you to reach out and ask for help. I will make myself available.

**My website:** [www.monibasus.com](http://www.monibasus.com)

**Twitter:** @TheMoniBasu

**Instagram:** @evilreporterchick

And my journalist **Facebook** page: <https://bit.ly/2KCXScI>

(I'm not doing the **TikTok thing**, though I have an account to see what you are up to.)

## **COURSE EVALUATIONS**

I encourage you to fill out the evaluation for this class online via GatorEvals at the end of the semester. You will be notified when the evaluation period opens. I take student evaluations seriously and try to improve the class based on your comments. Please be respectful with your comments.

Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>

## **SCHEDULE**

This is only the second time this course has been taught at UF and the first time that it is entirely online. The schedule that follows is **an estimation** of how we will proceed this semester. It is **subject to change** depending on guest speakers and other needs of the class. All readings and assignments should be completed by the assigned due date. Quizzes will be unannounced.

### **Week 1, September 3**

*Introduction to the class. Personal introductions.*

Why we need journalists on the ground.

Go over syllabus and expectations.

### **Week 2, September 10**

*Introduction to Journalism Safety*

B.E. S.A.F.E.: Before Everything, Stop, Assess, Focus, Enact. Safety is more than just responding to uncomfortable and/or dangerous situations. We will discuss how you can develop habits that will equip you to practice your craft, no matter the story.

### **Week 3, September 17**

Developing safe habits. Assessing risks. What's in your bag? Creating a culture of safety in the newsroom.

**Week 4, September 24**

Mitigating risks on assignment. Understanding journalists' rights.

**Week 5, October 1**

**Emergency safety training with Lt. David Sutton, district chief of training for the Gainesville Fire Department.**

**Week 6, October 8**

Reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health issues.

**Week 7, October 15**

Diversity and inclusivity. Understanding identity and who you are as journalists. Is it OK to be marching in BLM demonstrations? Can you do activist journalism? What are special safety risks women and journalists of color face?

**Week 8, October 22**

Journalism and trauma. Covering victims who have suffered loss and experienced traumatic events. The art of the interview.

**Guest speaker: Sara Sidner, CNN**

**Week 9, October 29**

More on interviewing: When a source is hostile.

**Week 10, November 5**

Covering mass shootings and terrorist attacks.

**Guest speaker: Caitie Sitwalski, WLRN**

**Week 11, November 12**

Digital security. Cyberbullying.

**Week 12, November 19**

Covering conflict and natural disasters (part 1).

**Guest speaker: Diane Foley, founder, James Foley Legacy Foundation**

**Week 13, November 26**

Thanksgiving. No class. Enjoy!

**Week 14, December 3**

Taking care of yourself. PTSD among journalists. Things you can do for self-care after witnessing tragedy.

**Guest speaker: Bruce Shapiro, executive director of the Dart Center on Journalism and Trauma at Columbia University.**

**Week 15, December 10**

Last class. Open discussion.

**Week 16, December 17**

Final exam.