

JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding

Fall semester 2021, University of Florida

R | Period 7 - 9 (1:55 PM - 4:55 PM)

Final (in class): December 3, 2021 at 1:55 p.m. (in class)

Instructor

Kathleen McGrory (727) 580-4614

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Virtual office hours: By appointment by phone/email

Instructor

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Virtual office hours: By appointment by phone/email

OBJECTIVE

You will learn methods for gathering and analyzing public records used by practicing journalists. You will walk away with an understanding of the importance of public records for backgrounding people and businesses and for uncovering information that can't be found through interviews. You also will leave the course knowing the kinds of records that are critical to traditional news beats. You will get practical experience uncovering those records and using them to generate story ideas. And you will learn how to anticipate when and where records might be available.

Over the course of the semester, you will apply this knowledge in a series of six short quizzes. Thirty percent of your grade will be determined by your performance on the quizzes. Homework assignments, an in-class assignment, a public records assignment, the final exam and class participation will constitute the rest.

CLASS FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS

We are offering Applied Fact Finding this semester as an online course.

Our classes will be held over Zoom. These sessions will be synchronous. They will start promptly at 1:55 p.m. and last between two and three hours. (Don't worry. You will have plenty of breaks.) **You are expected to have your camera on during Zoom sessions.** If you go to black screen for a significant amount of time, points will be deducted from your attendance/participation score at the instructors' discretion. You are encouraged to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you want to protect the privacy of your environment or surroundings. Note that lectures will be recorded for educational purposes. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance, please let us know.

We may offer one optional face-to-face session late in the semester. If we decide to meet, we will hold the session outside. We will abide by social distancing rules. If you do not feel comfortable, you will have the option to attend a similar session online.

ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is mandatory and, because there is no textbook requirement in this course, critical to understanding the concepts. The material covered on the quizzes and final can only be learned by attending class regularly. Log in on time and ready to learn.

Students with unexcused absences may lose points available for participation and quizzes. All absences approved by the instructors **in advance**. Those due to extreme circumstances, such as illness, may be forgiven at the discretion of the instructors.

Discussions in class may include information about stories in progress. Students will be asked at the beginning of the course to agree to keep all class conversations off the record. Students should not Tweet or share information from class on Facebook or other forms of social media.

If you miss class, it is YOUR RESPONSIBILITY to obtain material missed through other students. Requirements for class attendance and make-up exams, assignments, and other work in this course are consistent with university policies that can be found at:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx>.

HOMEWORK

You will be required to complete 10 homework assignments. Each will entail reading a news story and responding to five prompts. You'll submit your responses in Canvas. We're looking for between 250 and 500 words total (NOT per prompt).

The prompts are as follows:

- (1) What did you like about this story?
- (2) What didn't you like about this story?
- (3) How did the journalist use records to uncover information?
- (4) How did the journalist use human sources?
- (5) After reading this story, what follow-up stories would you pursue?

GRADE CALCULATION: 1,000 points total

Quizzes: 300 points

Over the course of the semester, you will take six quizzes. They will be a combination of multiple choice and true/false questions. Each quiz will be worth 50 points.

Homework: 200 points

There are 10 homework assignments, worth 20 points each. Assignments must be submitted through Canvas by 11:59 p.m. the day before class. You will lose points for sub-par work. Late homework assignments may be submitted at any point in the semester for half-credit.

Attendance and participation: 100 points

Absences and excessive tardiness may result in lost points. Deductions will be at the discretion of the instructors.

In-class assignment: 60 points

Public records request: 40 points

Final exam: 300 points

The final exam will be held during the last class of the semester. It will include both a multiple-choice section similar to the quizzes, and a free-response section similar to the in-class assignment.

OUR GRADING SCALE

A = 94-100
A- = 90-93
B+ = 87-89
B = 83-86
B- = 80-82
C+ = 75-79
C = 70-74
C- = 67-69
D+ = 63-66
D = 60-63
D- = 55-59
F = 54 or below

NOTE: The journalism school requires a minimum grade of a C in this course. If you end the semester with fewer than 700 of 1,000 points, you may have to retake it.

CLASS SCHEDULE

August 26, 2021

Instructors: Kat and Neil

Topic: We'll spend the first half of the class on introductions and an overview of the semester. Then, Kat and Neil will give you an introduction to public records and explain why Florida is the best state to practice journalism.

Due next week: Read [Florida medical examiners were releasing coronavirus death data. The state made them stop.](#)

September 2, 2021

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will teach you how to file a public records request in Florida. You'll learn about some of the obstacles you might encounter and how the state public records law can be your friend. Then, you'll file your own public records request to a government agency.

Due next week: Read [For Cops, No Limit](#)

September 9, 2021

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will teach you the records reporters use on the crime beat, including lists of calls for service, police reports, arrest affidavits, jail bookings and autopsy reports. We'll practice reading some of these reports and using them to generate story ideas.

Due next week: Listen [Into the Dark \(Season 2, Episode 1\)](#)

September 16, 2021

Instructor: Neil

Topic: [Quiz #1](#). Neil will teach you how to use court records to break news. The class will cover searching for and accessing records in the criminal, civil and administrative sides of state court and will briefly touch on the criminal and civil sides of federal court.

Due next week: Read [Clear Takeover](#)

September 23, 2021

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #2](#). Kat will teach you the basics of official records, which include property deeds, marriage licenses, lien filings, court judgments and other tools reporters use daily to gather basic facts about people, places and businesses.

Due next week: Read [After father-son bribery bust in Ecuador, family is tied to pricey properties in Miami](#)

September 30, 2021

Instructor: Neil

Topic: [Quiz #3](#). Neil will show you how to locate and read state business filings for privately held companies. You'll learn how to use these records as a reporting tool regardless of whether you cover business. You'll also learn the basics of locating and reading Forms 990 for nonprofits.

Due next week: Read [Failure Factories](#)

October 7, 2021

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #4](#). Kat will give you an introduction to the types of records you can use on the education and local government beats. She'll show you what sorts of records to look for and how to use them to expose official misdeeds.

Due next week: Read [Suffering in Secret](#)

October 14, 2021

Instructor: Neil

Topic: [Quiz #5](#). Neil will show you how to use licensing and regulatory records to reveal information about doctors, teachers and other professionals.

Due next week: Read [Why Cops Shoot](#)

October 21, 2021

Instructor: Neil

Topic: [Quiz #6](#). Neil will give you a mini-lesson on how to request, analyze and deploy data to tell powerful investigative stories. He'll also lead a discussion about how interactive graphics can be a compelling storytelling medium.

Due next week: Read Part 1 of [Targeted](#)

October 28, 2021

Instructor: Kat & Neil

Topic: Kat and Neil will take you behind the scenes of their project Targeted, which won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Local Reporting.

Due next week: [TBA based on your small-group session](#)

November 4, 2021

Small-group sessions TBA (online or in-person)

November 11, 2021

NO CLASS

Due next week: Nothing

November 18, 2021

Small-group sessions TBA (online or in-person)

Due next week: Nothing

December 2, 2021

We'll all log onto Zoom and do the final during our regularly scheduled class block.

GRADING POLICIES

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

ACCOMMODATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions, including race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class and religion. We expect each of our journalism courses 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.

Your instructors are committed to making sure all students feel respected and comfortable in this class. If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official records, please let us know. We also welcome your feedback on ways we can improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.

MAKE-UP WORK

Make-up assignments, quizzes and exams are not permitted. However, under an extreme circumstance, if you have an excused absence AND the professor was notified in advance, an exception may be made.

ONLINE COURSE EVALUATION

Students are expected to provide feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing online evaluations at <https://evaluations.ufl.edu>. Evaluations are typically open during the last two or three weeks of the semester, but students will be given specific times when they are open. Summary results of these assessments are available to students at

<https://evaluations.ufl.edu/results/>.

HONESTY POLICY

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code.” On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Honor Code (<https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult with the instructors in this class.

CONTACTS

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center:

<http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 9-1-1 for emergencies.