

**JOU 4930 – Class #24067**

# **Solutions Journalism**

**Spring 2022**

**Class Meetings:** Monday, Periods 7-9

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**Office Hours:** Thursdays 9:30-11:30 and by appointment.  
In general, it's best to make an appointment to be sure that I'll be available to you when you come by.

## **About the Course**

One of the most important roles journalism plays in society is to keep the public informed about societal problems, whether it's poverty, homelessness, drug addiction, suicide, teen pregnancy, wage stagnation, unemployment, climate change, racism or any of the seemingly hundreds of problems we face in modern society. Traditionally, in-depth stories about any of these problems focus on explaining the extent of the problem, who is most affected, what those effects are, and who or what caused the problem. Eventually, many stories get around to discussing proposed or attempted solutions to the problem. However, the solutions sections of these stories often center around who's supporting and who's opposing particular solutions, or they simply report that solutions are being tried, without offering much evidence about their effectiveness.

**Solutions journalism stories, by contrast, offer carefully researched, evidence-based reporting focusing on successful responses to social problems.** These stories require and explain evidence supporting the effectiveness of a particular solution, going beyond simply reporting what advocates say about the approaches they're promoting. This is not "fluff" or mere "good news" reporting; it demands adherence to the highest standards of journalism. And it is story-telling, not report writing. The point is to help readers see the solution in action, to understand how it works, what its limitations are, and whether it could work in your own community.

### **What You Will Learn in this Class**

- What is solutions journalism? What is *not* solutions journalism?
- How to use solutions journalism approaches to increase the impact of your reporting and increase audience engagement with your stories
- How to ensure that your reporting meets the highest standards of journalistic practice, avoiding advocacy, fluff and "hero worship" reporting
- What kinds of stories work with a solutions journalism approach

- How to “do” solutions journalism – how to find stories, how to find and evaluate the evidence, and how to structure the stories to make them as compelling as possible

## Required Readings

**Required:** *No text is required. However, you are expected to do ALL assigned readings, including any that are added later in the semester. These will be made available through the Canvas site for the course or emailed to you, on occasion.*

**Recommended:** *You will be required to adhere to AP style in all of your assignments, so keep your AP Stylebook handy. Your written assignments also will be graded for spelling, punctuation and grammar, so make sure you have a dictionary available, if you need it.*

### Other Resources

- Solutions Journalism Network website, [www.solutionsjournalism.org](http://www.solutionsjournalism.org). I would strongly suggest that you bookmark the site on your computers. In addition, you will be required to sign up for the SJN Hub, which gives you access to thousands of solutions journalism stories in the SJN Story Tracker. It’s free. I also would encourage you to sign up for the SJN email newsletter (at the bottom of the home page), follow the [blog feed](#), and follow SJN on Twitter (@soljourno).
- Find at least one news outlet that has a dedicated solutions journalism section and follow its solutions reporting. Here’s a [list](#) to get you started.

## Class Policies

**Classroom Atmosphere:** Each of you plays an important role in shaping this course. I encourage you to be actively involved in class discussions and activities. Please also be appreciative of the contributions of others, including the guest speakers, and help create a class environment that is respectful and inclusive. This does not mean you should never disagree, but you should **always** do so courteously.

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:** The University of Florida’s College of Journalism and Communications embraces a commitment to 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 courses to help foster an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communication in a global society.

People of all backgrounds have important contributions to make to this class. Please be respectful of that. If, at any point, you believe someone in the class – including me – has expressed ideas in inappropriate ways, please say something. My goal is to make certain everyone feels comfortable participating in and listening to class discussions, even when the topics themselves may be uncomfortable, and for class discussions to support a diversity of perspectives and experiences and honor your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, abilities, etc.).

If you prefer a name and/or pronouns that differ from those in the official records, please say so. If experiences outside this class are interfering with your performance in the class, please tell me in confidence; I can connect you with appropriate support services. And if you prefer to speak with someone outside the course, Joanna Hernandez, CJC’s director of inclusion and diversity, is an excellent resource. You can reach her via email at [jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu](mailto:jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu).

**Cell Phones and Computer Use in Class:** As a matter of courtesy to your fellow class members, please turn off all cell phones and pagers prior to the start of class. Likewise, ***all electronic devices should remain off*** except when we're doing online research or, perhaps, discussing a story that you're reading online. I strongly recommend that you take handwritten notes for the class; [research](#) documents that hand-writing your notes increases your likelihood of remembering and understanding the material. DO NOT *instant or text message during class*. Multi-tasking is not [effective](#).

**Attendance:** I will not take roll for every class, but because the class is so small, you can be sure I will notice when you're missing. I reserve the right to lower grades due to excessive absences *or tardiness*. Class starts at 1:55, not 2. Your attendance and *participation* are important to making this class a success. I expect that you will attend every class unless an emergency prevents you from doing so. If you find that you do have to miss a class due to an emergency, please let me know immediately.

**COVID Safety:** DO NOT come to class if you are sick. Depending on the circumstances, I may offer the Zoom meeting option, but unless UF requires it, this is not guaranteed. If meeting online does become an option, you **MUST** keep your video camera turned on at all times during class. If your camera is turned off, I will assume you are not paying attention. Given the very rapid spread of the Omicron variant of COVID, you will be expected to wear a face mask at all times in class.

**Missing Deadlines or Assignments:** In journalism, meeting assignment deadlines is vital. The same holds true in this class. If you believe you have an exceptional reason for missing a deadline, please discuss it with me *immediately* and *in advance*. Please note that poor planning, including underestimating how long it will take to set up and complete interviews, does not constitute an acceptable reason for missing a deadline. Fairness, both to me and to your classmates, requires that you meet all deadlines. Unless we have agreed in advance to change your deadline, there will be a significant grade penalty, up to and including failure on the assignment. *All assignments are due at the times specified in Canvas. Failure to turn in your assignments by the deadline will result in a late penalty, at a minimum.*

**Accommodations for Special Needs:** If you have a legitimate, documented special needs situation, I am more than happy to work with you to find accommodations. University policy requires students requesting classroom accommodation to register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide appropriate documentation to you, and you should provide this documentation to me at the beginning of the semester. Please do so, even if you do not believe you will need the accommodations. It is your responsibility to initiate this conversation early in the semester.

## Plagiarism and Academic Honesty

Plagiarism on any writing assignment in the class will result in a failing grade *for the class*.

For the communications professional, there hardly exists a graver crime than plagiarizing another writer's work. In short, it is *your* responsibility to make certain you understand what constitutes plagiarism and to ensure that you give proper credit every time you draw on someone else's writing.

- **Do not rely on what you think you've learned before.**

- Prof. Mindy McAdams has put together an excellent guide: <http://www.macloo.com/cheat/index.htm>.
- **If you have questions, ask me!** There's no penalty for asking questions, but the penalties for plagiarism are severe.
- **Treat Internet sources like any other book, journal article or other print source.** Make *certain* you copy down correct reference information when you copy material from a website, even if you're paraphrasing.
- **Upload all assignments to the e-learning site. They will be automatically run through Turnitin.com, which can help you to identify plagiarism issues before the final submission deadline.** In some cases, I also will want hard copies of your papers; I will let you know if I want a hard copy.
- **Do not turn in to me any work you previously have submitted to another instructor or that you plan to submit for any other class at UF or any other institution.** If you want to write on a topic you've worked on before, that may be acceptable IF you discuss it with me and get permission *in advance*.

Please see the UF Office of Student Judicial Affairs website for definitions of academic dishonesty (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/policies/student-honor-code-student-conduct-code/>). The violations most likely to be potential problems for students in this class include plagiarism, misrepresentation and fabrication. It is **your** responsibility to understand what kinds of actions are prohibited. If a situation ever arises in which you think something you're contemplating might constitute one of these types of academic dishonesty, **ask before you do it**. Apologies after the fact will never resolve the problem for anyone. I consider it part of my duty as a professor and as a journalism educator to report academic dishonesty to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs.

## Course Grading and Assignments

I use minus grades so that individuals who do superior work receive GPA points reflecting that accomplishment. Grades will not be curved. You can see how letter grades relate to grade points assigned at this [website](#). Final grades will be based on these break-points:

A- = 90-93.5%	A = 93.6%+	
B- = 80-83.5%	B=83.6-87%	B+=87.1%-89.9%
C- = 70-73.5%	C=73.6-77%	C+=77.1%-79.9%
D- = 60-63.5%	D=63.6-67%	D+=67.1%-69.9%
E = 59.9% or lower		

In general, I am reluctant to assign incomplete grades because they create an additional burden for both the student and the instructor for the following semester. In exceptional circumstances (e.g. serious illness), I may agree to assign an "I" grade. Your final grade will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

SoJo/Imposter Analysis	40 points
Extreme Journalism Makeover Analysis	40 points
Idea Memo, Data Report & Characters	50 points

One solution story	100 points
Problem definition story	100 points
Spectrum of solutions story	100 points
Complete story draft	130 points
Final Solutions Journalism package	250 points
Other assignments, including quizzes	50 points
<u>Class participation</u>	<u>140 points</u>
Total	1,000 points

**Assignments:** You will receive more detailed instructions for each assignment. However, here’s a basic rundown of each assignment so you’ll have a sense of what each one entails.

**SoJo/Imposter Analysis:** You’ll be asked to read a selection of stories. Some will be actual solutions journalism stories, while others will be “imposters” of various types. You’ll be asked to identify which ones are imposters and to explain how and where each imposter story went wrong – which of the four qualities of solutions journalism are missing. For the solutions stories, you’ll identify where/how each story demonstrates the four key qualities required for good solutions reporting.

**Idea Memo, Data Report & Cast of Characters:** This is the first step in writing your Solutions Journalism stories for the semester. It will tell me what solution you want to focus on (and, of course, what problem that solution addresses), list/explain at least 3 sources of data that support the effectiveness of this solution, and identify 3 academic or expert sources (meaning people) and at least 3 “everyday person” sources you could interview to help you tell the story.

**Extreme Journalism Makeover Analysis:** Many traditional stories could be re-written as solutions journalism stories. For this assignment, you’ll find a traditional news story about a social problem in any legitimate media outlet of your choice; explain how the journalist(s) could have done the story using a solutions approach. What evidence would they have needed, and where might they have found that evidence? What kind of sources would they need? What would the solutions angle be? (Hint: You’ll need to do some reporting here to identify real existing data and sources.)

**Solutions Journalism story, in 4 parts:** Ultimately, what you’re going to end up with is one solid (I hope) solutions journalism story. However, to make the assignment more manageable, it’s broken down into three preliminary stories, parts of which you will then weave together to produce the final, complete story. Think of each preliminary story as a stand-alone shorter piece. Not everything in each of the three preliminary stories will be included in the final story, but going through the process of writing the earlier stories will set you up to have all the information you need for the final story. (Acknowledgment here to Prof. Jim MacMillan of Temple University, who designed this set of assignments.)

**Part 1 – Identifying a solution:** For this story – which is meant to be shorter than a full solutions journalism story – you will describe in depth the approach that seems to be the **most successful** in addressing the problem you’ve chosen. You must be able to include evidence, other than individuals’ opinions and anecdotes, demonstrating that this approach is effective. You don’t need to spend a lot of time explaining the problem, but do summarize the problem, at least to show how extensive or common it is or how much impact it has. This story must include at least **one expert source** who is familiar with the solution, **data showing the solution’s effectiveness**, and **one everyday person character**; ideally, this “real person” will be someone who has benefitted from the solution you’re describing. Another

good option for the “everyday person” is someone who works directly with implementation of the solution – a sort of “in the trenches” character. There must be at least two human sources, as well as some sort of document-type source (e.g. information from a database, a journal article or other scientific report, etc.)

**Part 2 – Explaining the problem:** This story can be much like a traditional story about the social problem that is being solved or mitigated by the solution you’ve selected; in other words, it really doesn’t need to address solutions at all. The purpose of this story is simply to inform people about the problem – what is it, what causes it, who’s most affected, how the problem affects the rest of society indirectly, etc. You *must* interview at least **one expert source** and, ideally, **one “real-person” source** – someone who is experiencing (or has experienced) the problem personally. There must be at least three human sources, total, in the story.

**Part 3 - Spectrum of solutions:** This story will describe at least three approaches that have been or are being used in response to the problem; one of them can be the solution you’re writing about. You don’t need to spend much time in this story explaining the problem, but do include at least two-three paragraphs summarizing the problem. Include at least two expert sources; one of them should be **someone who works directly with individuals experiencing the problem**. This story also should include **data** showing how/why the three “solutions” or approaches to addressing the problem have worked (or haven’t worked). The point here is to help you clarify why the solution you’re writing about is better than other approaches that have been or are being tried.

**Part 4 - Final multi-media solutions journalism story:** This final story will incorporate material from the three previous segments. (Yes, you can copy and paste in well-written sections of your previous stories.) The story will clearly define the problem you’re discussing, including explanations of the primary causes. It will discuss briefly a range of solutions that have been used to attempt to reduce or eliminate the problem, but it will *focus on* (Hint: **lead with**) the solution you’ve described in Part 1. This story will include new material not included in any of the previous three. The ideal story will include “howdunnit” information discussing the process solutions managers went through to develop, refine and evaluate the solution, as well as talking about how they overcame challenges. It must address limitations of the solution. **Your final submission should include at least one relevant video or audio clip you’ve collected through your reporting and at least three relevant photos, with captions.** Bonus points for including a highly relevant and appealing infographic or animation that helps to tell your story. You don’t have to create this yourself – you can include a link to one you found through your research.

**Quizzes, if necessary:** I really don’t like to give quizzes. I will only do so if it seems to me that people aren’t reading the assigned articles. If everyone comes to class ready to discuss the readings, I won’t give quizzes, and everyone gets 50 points “free” for the semester. Seems like a pretty good deal to me.

**Class participation:** You all play an important role in the success of the class. Come to class energized, prepared and ready to discuss the readings and the issues we’re dealing with. Help each other out by sharing your knowledge. Each of you will know what the others are working on, so if you come across information or sources that might be useful to someone else, jot down a note or two so you can share that information with others. Bring in examples of good solutions journalism stories you run across or of stories that *could* have taken a solutions journalism angle but didn’t. The benefit you receive from the class will be directly proportional to how much effort you put into it, and collectively, the whole class will gain more if everyone is fully engaged. We’re going to shoot for having your stories published, which means there’s potential for your classwork to benefit the entire community.

**Collaboration:** It's possible, depending on your interests, that I might allow two students to collaborate on producing a single story. However, if I do, I will require the team to provide clear evidence that each person has contributed equally to each story.

## Schedule of Topics & Assignments

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments Due
1/10	Introduction – Syllabus review, goal discussions, personal introductions	<b>Sign up:</b> Register at the <a href="#">Solutions Journalism Network</a> . It's free, and you'll have to register to access some of the readings.
1/17	<b>No class – However, I will want to meet individually with everyone this week.</b>	
1/24	Getting started: What SoJo is (and is not); Story types & initial questions for using SoJo; What's Working?	<b>Read:</b> <a href="#">Solutions Journalism Basics Toolkit: Welcome and Basic Reporting sections (Finding a Solutions-Oriented Story and Vetting a Solutions-Oriented Story)</a> ; <a href="#">Framing</a> ; <a href="#">77 Places to Find Solutions Story Ideas</a> ; <a href="#">10 SoJo Stories Written On Campus</a>
1/31	The case for SoJo	<b>Read:</b> Stearns, <a href="#">Journalism's Theory of Change</a> ; SJN, <a href="#">The Top 10 Takeaways from the Newest Solutions Journalism Research</a>  <b>Due 1/31: Idea memo, data report &amp; cast of characters</b>
2/7	Finding sources; Using fiction techniques to add life to your writing	<b>Read:</b> Wilczek, <a href="#">Research strategy guide for finding quality, credible sources</a> ; Klems: <a href="#">The Secret to Writing Stronger Feature Articles</a> ; Luthern & Cyzon: <a href="#">If violence spreads like a disease, it can be interrupted. How a new team in Milwaukee is trying to stop one shooting leading to another.</a>  We'll spend time discussing each person's story focus, the problem, potential sources, solutions, etc.  <b>Due 2/7: Find the Imposters assignment</b>
2/14	Interviewing for solutions journalism; Focusing on HOW, not WHO	<b>Read:</b> SJN, <a href="#">Conducting Interviews for a Solutions-Oriented Story</a> ; SJN: <a href="#">22 Questions that 'Complicate the Narrative'</a> ; Fancher: <a href="#">Appreciative Inquiry Interviewing</a> ; Boston Globe Spotlight Team: <a href="#">San Antonio became a national leader in mental health care by working together as a community.</a>  <b>Due 2/14: Extreme Journalism Makeover assignment</b>

2/21	How to know what's working; avoiding fluff, advocacy and "good news" Story workshop	<b>Read:</b> Journalist's Resource, <a href="#">Statistical terms used in research studies</a> ; <a href="#">Academic research and studies</a> ; <a href="#">How to tell good research from bad: 13 questions journalists should ask</a> ; <a href="#">Covering scientific consensus: What to avoid and how to get it right</a> <b>Due 2/21:</b> Single solution story
2/28	Looking for positive deviants	<b>Read:</b> Gertner, <a href="#">Positive Deviance</a> ; DataJournalism.com: <a href="#">Finding data outliers for solutions journalism</a> ; Wise, 18 <a href="#">Databases You Can Use in Your Solutions Reporting</a> ; SJN Health Guide, <a href="#">Positive Deviants</a> ; Judin: 'We Can Get It Done': How Jefferson County Became First In Mississippi For Vaccination <b>Due 2/28:</b> Problem story



3/14	Reporting on failure	<b>Read:</b> McCann, Solutions Journalism is Biased! (And Other Myths); New York Times, <a href="#">Report Finds Juvenile Program Failed to Reduce Robberies, but Police Are Expanding It</a> ; Roby, Press & Sun Bulletin, <a href="#">Reading, Writing &amp; Results in Binghamton classrooms</a> <b>Due 3/14:</b> Spectrum of solutions story
3/21	Shooting better video; Story workshopping	Guest speaker Houston Wells, 3/21 <b>Read:</b> NiemanStoryboard, <a href="#">"14 Tips for Building Character"</a> & <a href="#">"Six Tips for Crafting Scenes"</a>
3/28	Engaging with communities; Restorative narrative	<b>Read:</b> Tow Center, <a href="#">Engaging Communities Through Solutions Journalism</a> ; Holman, <a href="#">Engaging Communities Changes How Journalists Work</a> ; Tenore, <a href="#">"Restorative narratives: Defining a new strength-based genre"</a> ; IVOH, <a href="#">"Guiding questions for media practitioners wanting to pursue Restorative Narratives"</a> <b>Due 3/28:</b> Complete story first draft; only the text is required
4/4	Flex week -- TBA	
4/11	Structuring the SoJo story	<b>Read:</b> Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 28-41; SJN, <a href="#">Structuring a Solutions-Oriented Story</a> ;

4/18	Solutions Journalism in one day; SoJo your beat	<b>Read:</b> Solutions Journalism Toolkit, pgs. 24, 25 Due 4/18: Complete SoJo story, with multi-media