

## **FEATURE AND MAGAZINE WRITING/JOU 4308**

Instructor: Nicole Neal

Contact: nicolepneal@gmail.com; 561-827-9822 (cell); 212-556-7263 (work).  
Please contact me via email to set up a time for personal meetings/office hours.

### **DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

In this course, you'll build upon what you've already learned about reporting and writing hard news in order to craft compelling, creative, and factually sound feature articles.

Good feature writing is a combination of solid reporting techniques and creative writing skills. The feature article dramatizes and supplements facts by giving detailed information that also appeals to the reader's imagination and emotions. You will need to demonstrate competency in collecting, interpreting, and communicating information from various sources (human, printed, and writer's observations) through a variety of forms (those other than inverted pyramid style). You will also learn to identify differences in target audiences, as well as how to tailor ideas to appeal to that particular audience. The less rigid story format affords the writer the opportunity to make use of voice, moving narration and vivid description in presenting various types of information to diverse audiences.

Based on the premise that good writers learn through practice, as well as by deconstructing and critiquing the work of others, class time will be a combination of lecture/discussion and hands-on activities. We will explore such elements of writing as voice, style, language usage, and techniques of story structure, characterization, and description. Hands-on activities will be spent working on writing lessons, as well as reading and reviewing writing selections.

Please note, my experience is professional and not academic. I will treat you more like new reporters or writers than like students. If you are confused by anything – expectations, assignments, etc. – please do not be shy about asking for clarification.

### **REQUIRED READING**

There is no textbook for this course, but there will be required readings throughout the semester. I strongly recommend you also make a habit of reading at least one daily national newspaper and as many magazines as you can get your hands on. The best way to learn how to write is to read the work of professionals critically.

## ATTENDANCE

Attendance is mandatory. We will miss two classes due to holidays and Spring Break, and, although I will try to avoid this, my work may take me away for an additional class, so it is important that we not lose more class time. Absences for serious illness (with doctor's note), family emergencies or other urgent situations may be excused, at my discretion, with notification prior to the start of the class that will be missed. If you miss class on a day when something is due, you are still responsible for submitting the assignment by the start of class to avoid late assignment penalties. You are also responsible for all material covered in class on the day of your absence; consult a reliable classmate to be sure you don't fall behind.

Class starts promptly and ends when I wrap it up. Arriving to class after we have begun or leaving early is disruptive and unprofessional. One tardiness of less than five minutes will be overlooked; after that, points will be deducted from class participation. Permission to leave early will be at my discretion, and should be outlined *well in advance of class*. Excessive requests will not be tolerated.

## CELL PHONES AND LAPTOPS

Please turn the sound completely off on your phone and put it out of sight. We'll normally have a short break in the middle of class, and you can use that time to check your phone. Looking at or using your phone during class will result in a deduction from your class participation grade.

Bring your laptop to class every week, as we will have in-class writing exercises. Using your laptop during class for non-course-related activities will result in a deduction from your participation grade.

## LATE ASSIGNMENTS

*Writing is a deadline driven business. Unless otherwise instructed, all stories – both the emailed Word documents and the hard copies -- are **due at the start of class** on the date marked in the course schedule. You will not be permitted to print your story during or after class. Every day an assignment is late will incur a 10-point reduction in your grade for that assignment. Assignments submitted on the due date but after the start of class will be considered one day late. *All deadlines are strict.* Please do not ask for an exception. Take your hits and let us all move on.*

I understand things happen—an idea falls through, a source stands you up, etc. That's why it's crucial to start contacting sources as soon as your idea is approved so there's plenty of time to adjust before the deadline. If an issue does arise, it is your responsibility to contact me right away so we can discuss a course of action. Short

extensions may be granted, at my discretion, in rare cases when circumstances are truly beyond your control and you can prove to me it's not merely a result of procrastination.

## **SUBMISSION GUIDELINES**

### **Approval:**

Story ideas must be approved by me. All story ideas are to be submitted via email on *or before* the due date. I'd recommend having more than one idea for each assignment, although you should submit only the story you want to do.

Each fully summarized idea must include: 1) the topic or subject; 2) the proposed angle or what you plan to write about the topic; 3) the names (or general types, if names unknown) of the people you anticipate using as sources, as well as any published materials you anticipate using as background information; 4) the readership for this story (who are you writing for?), and a list of publications that would be interested in this story.

Sometimes story ideas don't work out. You must have an immediate replacement idea on hand (hence the above recommendation) so that you do not lose valuable time.

### **Submission of articles:**

Unless otherwise instructed, all assignments should be submitted in both print and digital (emailed) versions. *Failure to submit both versions* by the start of class *on the due date will result in late assignment penalties*. Use double-spaced 12-point Times New Roman font and include your name and the assignment title.

## **GRADING**

Your grade will derive from a combination of class participation, activities and writing assignments. There will be no midterm or final exam.

### ***Class Participation = 20%***

Your participation grade will include the following factors: Taking part in class discussions, readings and activities; giving me and your fellow students your full attention when others are speaking; not using your phone or laptop in class for any purpose not directly related to the course; not creating distractions during class (this includes eating). Any tardy or unexcused absence on the day of an activity will result in a zero for that assignment.

## ***Writing Assignments = 80%***

**Please note:** An additional short feature may also be assigned. Grading will be adjusted to accommodate this piece.

All assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale, but some will be weighted more than others.

### **Feature #1, The Profile = 25%**

(Story pitch: 10 points, First Draft: 30 points, Revision: 60 points)

Hone key skills including interviews, observation and anecdotes by reporting and writing a 1,000- to 1,200-word profile.

### **Feature #2, Targeted feature piece = 25%**

(Story pitch: 10 points, First Draft: 30 points, Revision: 60 points)

Select a publication and analyze the intended publication's tone (straight, general, humorous, conversational, conservative, advocacy, etc.), target readership (college students, young mothers, fitness fans, enthusiasts, etc.), and feature needs. Your story can be a trend piece, an informational piece, a color piece, a how-to, etc. Both the story and sidebar idea and the publication must be approved by the instructor in advance. (800-1,000 words, plus additional sidebar).

### **Feature #3, The In-Depth Feature = 30%**

(Story pitch: 10 points, First Draft: 30 points, Revision: 60 points)

A narrative feature of 1,500 to 2,000 words.

**Supplementary material:** A list of all human sources used in the article, *including phone numbers at which the individuals can be reached*, must be turned in with each feature assignment. No story will be graded without a source sheet, and points will be deducted from your assignment until the source list is turned in to me.

## **GRADING CRITERIA**

Everything you turn in must be polished! Every pitch, every email, every first draft and certainly every revised story. You are being judged at every turn by your editor – me.

## **Deductions:**

Feature writing requires accurate and factual information. Do not confuse feature writing with fiction writing. It is not an opportunity to fabricate material or to fail to verify all information (or as a substitute for journaling or blogging). Making up quotes and/or inventing sources are grounds for disciplinary action, as detailed in the student handbook. Don't guess, don't assume, and don't get creative with facts. Verify everything.

Spelling and major grammatical errors indicate a lack of attention to detail—and attention to detail is the bread and butter of feature writers. If I find the mistake, it indicates to me that your writing skills are below average or you are lazy. Both will cost you.

A spelling error, typo or other “loose bolts” issue will result in an automatic 10-point deduction from your grade for that assignment.

Minor factual errors will cost you at least half a letter grade, while major fact errors will result in an automatic failure.

A list of all human sources used in the article, *including phone numbers at which the individuals can be reached*, MUST be turned in with each feature assignment. No story will be graded without a source sheet, and points will be deducted from your assignment until the source list is turned in to me.

You will also follow some of the basic Associated Press style rules (mainly numbers, addresses, titles, etc.), unless you can convince me that the rule was broken for creative reasons.

## **Grading Scale**

See current UF policies for assigning grade points at:  
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

## **ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE**

***Subject to change or revision***

Note that we do not have class on January 16 or March 6.

Thursday, January 19:

- Pitch for Feature 1 emailed to me by midnight (You are encouraged to get subsequent pitches in earlier!)

Monday, February 6:

- First draft of Feature 1 due
- Pitch for Feature 2 due by this date

Monday, February 20:

- Revision/final of Feature 1 due
- Pitch for Feature 3 due by this date

Monday, February 27:

- First draft of Feature 2 due

Monday, March 13:

- Revision/final of Feature 2 due

Monday, March 27:

- First draft of Feature 3 due

Monday, April 10:

- Revision/final of Feature 3 due

*This syllabus includes excerpts by previous instructors.*

*About me:*

*I am the managing editor of the New York Times Editing Center. I spent 13 years as features editor at The Palm Beach Post. Prior to that, I wrote features for the Post as well as the (then) St. Petersburg Times. I have a degree in literature from Sarah Lawrence College, and an MS in communication from Purdue University. I have won several national writing awards.*