

# JOU4123: Investigative Reporting

*“Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed; everything else is public relations.”*  
— Commonly attributed to George Orwell

**Instructor:** Ethan Magoc

**Phone:** 352-294-1525

**Class hours/location:** Thursdays from 12:50 to 2:45 p.m. at 0101 Ustler Hall

**Office hours:** By appointment in 2300 Weimer Hall (The INC)

## What is this course?

**The university’s course description:** Learn to develop and execute an investigative reporting project employing various story platforms. Investigate a data-driven topic of public interest over the course of the semester; melding both primary research and in-depth interviewing.

**Our course description:** Choose a story idea that has the potential for impact and report it. Request and find public records or databases to support your reporting. Interview as many people as possible. Publish or broadcast something worthy of someone’s attention.

**Required textbook:** None. But you will sign up for two subscriptions, one free and one cheap.

- Subscribe to the Local Matters weekly newsletter at <http://bit.ly/localmattersnewsletter>
- The best resources for becoming an investigative reporter are available through a \$25 subscription to Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE) at [ire.org/membership](http://ire.org/membership)

**A note on professionalism:** We meet once a week, but I expect you to report independently as time permits through the week and communicate with me on your findings and progress.

You can, in turn, expect a response within 24 hours. This is an intense course; my expectations are high. Warning: This is not a course in which you procrastinate and file the final project after an all-nighter. Worthwhile investigative reporting takes time and unfolds slowly as you put together pieces of a puzzle over weeks — 15, in our case — of sustained effort. This class requires substantial reporting, research and writing effort weekly. If you don’t think you have the time to put into the class, it’s best to sign up for it when you do.

## What we expect you’ll learn:

- Examine the already-reported work on the subject of interest and build on it.
- Obtain public records and use them in your reporting.
- Refine your ethical research techniques to find information from a variety of sources.
- Identify and cultivate sources and persuade reluctant interviewees.
- Complete interviews with an emphasis on drawing out context, color and other details.
- Gain investigative skills for beat reporting, breaking news and quick-hit enterprise stories, as well as groundbreaking longer-term projects.
- Download databases and use Excel or R to analyze your findings.
- Create a multi-source, contextual story that goes beyond the routine and expected.

## University of Florida policies

**Missing assignments or class meetings:** Standards are consistent with university policies that can be found at <http://bit.ly/ufattendance>. An acceptable absence means you either:

- Did not expect it due to a serious family crisis that has called you home.
- Did not expect it because you became very sick — contagious or requiring a doctor visit.
- Cleared it with me in advance and is truly a can't-miss opportunity.

Unacceptable: Saying you're tired, feeling you "might be coming down with something," or a late deadline the night before. We'll persevere together past the semester's challenges and fatigue. More than one unacceptable absence will result in a loss of 15 percent of your course grade.

**Accommodating students with disabilities:** Students requesting accommodation for disabilities must first register with the Dean of Students Office (<http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/>). The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the student who must then provide this documentation to the instructor when requesting accommodation. You must submit this documentation prior to submitting assignments or taking the quizzes or exams. Accommodations are not retroactive, therefore, students should contact the office as soon as possible in the term for which they are seeking accommodations.

**Academic misconduct (cheating):** Academic honesty and integrity are fundamental values of the University community. This is even more important if you're planning to tell true stories. You should be sure you understand the Honor Code, found at <http://bit.ly/dontcheatUF>. If you are found to have fabricated or cheated any part of an assignment, **you will fail this course**. I will then work to have you expelled from the College of Journalism and Communications.

**The ethical warning:** You may not interview a family member, friend, fellow fraternity/sorority member, coworker, neighbor or any other close associate for an assignment. We, as journalists, refer to these relationships as conflicts of interest in your reporting. They can be valuable sources of tips, story ideas, or background information that you can then verify. Interviewing one, however, will result in **automatic failure of the assignment**.

**On getting help:** For e-Learning issues, call (352) 392-HELP or visit <http://helpdesk.ufl.edu>.

**You matter:** Your well-being is important to the University of Florida. The U Matter, We Care initiative is committed to creating a culture of care on our campus by encouraging members of our community to look out for one another and to reach out for help if a member of our community is in need. If you are in distress, please contact [umatter@ufl.edu](mailto:umatter@ufl.edu) so that its team can reach out. A nighttime and weekend crisis counselor is available by phone at 352-392-1575. The U Matter, We Care Team can help connect students to many helping resources. Please remember that asking for help is a sign of strength. In case of emergency, call 9-1-1.

# The work we'll do

The grading scale: 100-90 A; 89-80 B; 79-70 C; 69-60 D; 59-below E.

Assignment (how many)	Percentage	Points
Attendance and participation	15%	150
Weekly memos (10)	15%	150
Quick-hits and story scouting (7)	20%	200
Peer fact-checking (1)	10%	100
Final story (1)	30%	300
Presentation (1)	10%	100

- **Attendance and participation:** Your on-time presence is essential each time we meet, as is your engaged participation. Please note the acceptable and unacceptable absence criteria above. One unacceptable absence will result in a loss of 5 percent of your course grade; two or more will result in a loss of 15 percent of your course grade.
- **Weekly memos:** At least 300 words each, these are due at 6 p.m. on Wednesday. They keep your instructor informed about story progress to elicit guidance. These memos will also include a review of one story from the “Local Matters” newsletter from IRE. Memos should include a summary of reporting completed the previous seven days with detailed notes and quotes from interviews, people sources contacted (be specific — names, titles, phone numbers), documents reviewed, Internet sites visited and databases examined. Include reporting roadblocks you hit and reporting goals for the week ahead.
- **Quick-hits and story scouting:** A mix of short assignments designed to help you generate a story idea and sharpen your investigative skills. For example: You’ll take a quiz to establish your baseline investigative skills, request a public record or database you think might lead to a story, and explore a community using shoe-leather reporting.
- **Peer fact-checking:** This will be the linchpin to our story bulletproofing process. You will verify every single fact in a colleague’s story after its first draft has been submitted. Fact errors found before publication are what we seek. Fact errors found post-publication can be devastating and lessen the public trust in investigative journalism. For this reason, any fact errors discovered after publication of your colleague’s story results in a failure of this assignment and thus a letter grade deduction in the grade you earn this semester.
- **Final story:** In order to pass, you will report and write one major story for possible publication. You and I must agree on the project in advance. Consider: Why is the topic important? Will it help right a wrong, reveal injustice, or surface previously unknown facts? Does the material lend itself to an investigative storytelling format? Can you finish most reporting and writing on the subject by Nov. 15? A third-person narrative of audio, text, video or a mix of the three is expected. An assignment rubric is on e-Learning.
- **Presentation:** This takes place inside of 10 minutes during our final exam period. You’ll interview and then share with us the methodology and work of a reporter you found through Local Matters. You’ll also walk us through the final story you produced.

# What's due/what to expect when we meet

## Week 1 - Thursday, Aug. 23

- Lecture topics: Course structure; baseline quiz; defining investigative reporting; investigative journalism history; developing a document state of mind.
- Assignments due: None.
- To-do: Join IRE; sign up for Local Matters; craft a public record request.

## Week 2 - Thursday, Aug. 30

- Lecture: Scouting and pitching; tour of Florida public records; how to scour agendas, audits and budgets for story ideas.
- Assignments due: Weekly memo (IRE resources, Local Matters, record request draft).
- To-do: Second weekly memo; background yourself and an elected official; submit public record request; explore public notices.

## Week 3 - Thursday, Sept. 6

- Lecture: Guest speaker on how to go about the work of investigative reporting (TBA).
- Assignments due: Second weekly memo (Local Matters, backgrounding, record request, and public notice pitch).
- To-do: Third weekly memo; explore the community.

## Week 4 - Thursday, Sept. 13

- Lecture: Record request responses; exploring your community; sourcing and interviewing.
- Assignments due: Third weekly memo (Local Matters and initial story scouting thoughts).
- To-do: Fourth weekly memo; attend an event.

## Week 5 - Thursday, Sept. 20

- Lecture: Using R and Excel.
- Assignments due: Fourth weekly memo (Local Matters and shoeleather reporting recap).
- To-do: Fifth weekly memo; complete data analysis exercise.

## Week 6 - Thursday, Sept. 27

- Lecture: Guest speaker on difficult or reluctant interview sources.
- Assignments due: Fifth weekly memo (Local Matters, data analysis results, and story scouting progress).
- To-do: Sixth weekly memo; finalize story idea.

## Week 7 - Thursday, Oct. 4

- Lecture: Dealing with pushback; organizing your information; planning multimedia.
- Assignments due: Sixth weekly memo (Local Matters and final story idea selection).
- To-do: Seventh weekly memo; report.

Week 8 - Thursday, Oct. 11

- Lecture: Reporting guidance.
- Assignments due: Seventh weekly memo (Local Matters, multimedia determinations, and your reporting progress).
- To-do: Eighth weekly memo; report.

Week 9 - Thursday, Oct. 18

- Lecture: Reporting guidance.
- Assignments due: Eighth weekly memo (Local Matters and your reporting progress).
- To-do: Ninth weekly memo; report.

Week 10 - Thursday, Oct. 25

- Lecture: Writing the narrative.
- Assignments due: Ninth weekly memo (Local Matters and your reporting progress).
- To-do: Tenth weekly memo; report, organize, and write

Week 11 - Thursday, Nov. 1

- Lecture: Writing and additional reporting guidance.
- Assignments due: Tenth weekly memo (Local Matters, reporter interview selection, and your reporting progress).
- To-do: Report, organize, and write.

Week 12 - Thursday, Nov. 8

- Lecture: Writing guidance.
- To-do: Report and write story draft.

Week 13 - Thursday, Nov. 15

- Lecture: Fact-checking.
- Assignments due: First draft of final story (Wednesday, Nov. 14 at 6 p.m.).
- To-do: Line up Local Matters interview and review peer's fact check of your work.

Week 14 - Thursday, Nov. 29

- Lecture: Additional reporting and rewriting needs.
- To-do: Additional reporting based on peer and instructor feedback.

Week 15 - Thursday, Dec. 6 (reading day)

- Lecture: None.
- To-do: Complete final rewrite and presentation. Prepare for publication.\

Week 16 - Wednesday, Dec. 12 (5:30 to 7:30 p.m.)

- Lecture: Classmates' presentations and the value of investigative reporting.
- Assignments due: Final draft of final story (Tuesday, Dec. 11 at 6 p.m.).
- To-do: Take the world by storm.