

JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding

Spring semester 2020, University of Florida

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

Final (in class): Thursday, April 16 at 1:55 PM

Weimer Hall 3024

Instructor

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Instructor

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OBJECTIVE

Students will learn methods for gathering and analyzing public records used by practicing journalists. They 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 by interviewing people. Students also will leave the course knowing the kinds of records that are critical to traditional news beats. They will get practical experience uncovering those records and using them to generate story ideas. And they will learn how to anticipate when and where records might be available.

During the course, students will apply this knowledge in individual and group exercises and in six short quizzes. Sixty percent of your grade will be determined by your performance on the quizzes. Homework assignments, the final exam and class participation will also factor in.

ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is mandatory and, because there is no text book 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. Arrive on time and ready to learn.

Students with unexcused absences may lose points available for participation and quizzes. Additional absences will result in further penalties at the discretion of the instructors. Absences approved by the instructors in advance, or those due to extreme circumstances, such as illness, may be forgiven at the discretion of the instructors.

Several of our classes will be held via Zoom to facilitate guest speakers elsewhere in the country. When class is held remotely, you can log in from home or our classroom. You must join the meeting on time. Failure to do so may result in your being asked to leave.

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

Every week, students will read a news story and pick out five different types of records that were used in the reporting. Students must also identify one fact each record was used to prove. You'll submit your answers in Canvas. You'll lose points if the sources you identify are not actually public records as defined in class.

GRADE CALCULATION: 1,000 points total

Quizzes: 600 points

Six quizzes will make up the bulk of your grade. The quizzes will be a combination of multiple choice and true/false questions. Each quiz is worth 100 points.

Homework: 100 points

There are 12 homework assignments, worth 10 points each. You can choose to skip two. If you complete them all, you will receive up to 20 extra-credit points. Homework assignments are due at 11:59 p.m. the day before class. You will lose points for sub-par work and late submissions.

Attendance and participation: 100 points

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

Final exam: 200 points

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

Extra-credit points may be awarded for optional extra-credit assignments.

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 REQUIREMENTS

Weekly computer and online exercises will be conducted in the classroom. Students can bring their own laptop or use the computers in the classroom. Laptops and computers are to be used only for classroom assignments. Use for other reasons, including unrelated email or messaging, will result in lost points from a student's class participation score. Lost points will be determined by the instructor based on the infraction and whether a student had been previously warned. The same rules apply for cell phones and other electronic devices.

CLASS SCHEDULE

January 9, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructors: Kat and Neil

Topic: Introductions and class overview. Kat and Neil will explain how they used records and data to get to the bottom of an accident at a Tampa power plant that caused five deaths.

Due next week: Read [Female inmates sterilized in California prisons without approval](#) and [Zombie Campaigns](#)

January 16, 2020

Location: Zoom

Instructors: Kat

Topic: Kat will teach you how to file a public records request in Florida, some of the obstacles you may encounter, and how the state public records law can be your friend. We'll do some roleplaying, too.

Guest speakers: [Corey G. Johnson](#) and [Eli Murray](#), Tampa Bay Times

Due next week: Read [The Untouchables](#)

January 23, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: We will practice writing and submitting a public records request and learn what to do next. Then, Kat will teach you the basic 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: Read [Tilting the Scales](#)

January 30, 2020

Location: Classroom

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 [Florida's Flawed System for Policing the Police](#)

February 6, 2020

Location: Zoom

Topic: [Quiz #2](#)

Guest speaker: [Anthony Cormier](#), BuzzFeed

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

February 13, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will teach you the basics about official records, which include property deeds, marriage licenses, lien filings, court judgments and other tools reporters use every day to gather basic facts about people, places and businesses.

Due next week: Read ['Knowing that it's a lie now, I just feel terrible,' says actress from anti-Whipple ad](#) and [Rep. Capps can't explain why his firm's listed as creator of anti-Whipple fake-ad site](#)

February 20, 2020

Location: Classroom

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: [How Secret Offshore Money Helps Fuel Miami's Luxury Real-Estate Boom](#)

February 27, 2020

Location: Zoom

Topic: Quiz #4

Guest speaker: [Nick Nehamas](#), Miami Herald

Due after Spring Break: Read [Failure Factories](#)

March 5, 2020

No class. Spring break.

Due after Spring Break: Read [Failure Factories](#)

March 12, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: 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](#)

March 19, 2020

Location: Classroom

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 [Beaten, then silenced](#)

March 26, 2020

Location: Zoom

Topic: Quiz #6

Guest speaker: [Lisa Gartner](#), Philadelphia Inquirer

Due next week: Read [Heartbroken](#)

April 2, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will show you how to mine social media to find and background potential sources. She will review how to find records, cops records, official records and education and government records in advance of the final exam.

Due next week: Read [If You're Black](#)

April 9, 2020

Location: Classroom

Instructor: Neil

Topic: Neil will introduce you to the basics of getting records contained in databases and using spreadsheets to organize your reporting and draw conclusions. He also will review court records, business records and regulator records in advance of the final exam.

Due next week: Nothing

April 16, 2020

Final exam in class.

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 instructor when requesting accommodation. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester.

MAKE-UP WORK

Make-up assignments 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.

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.