

JOU 4308-1336
Magazine and Feature Writing
Mondays periods 6-8 (12:50 p.m. to 3:50 p.m.), online on Zoom

Professor: Moni Basu (Prof B)

Office: 3327 Weimer Hall

Email: Mbasu@ufl.edu

Phone: 352.273.3529 or 404.217.1235

Chat sessions: Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. – 9 p.m. Need to talk about class? The pandemic? Anything that is bugging you? I will make myself available either by phone or Zoom to meet with you during these hours. Please make an appointment first.

WELCOME!

You've learned the basics of news reporting. Now it's time to get creative and write compelling human-interest stories. Feature writing can be lots of fun and I hope that by the end of the semester, you will have built a few journalistic muscles you may not have used so far.

I love storytelling and am excited to be guiding you this semester as you report and write various types of feature stories for magazines, newspapers and online publications. This is an interactive class and your participation is paramount to your success. Together, we will read and analyze good writing to help you become better storytellers and you will produce stories of various formats, style and lengths. You will meet visiting professional writers and editors who will share their real-life experiences with you. It's my hope that this class functions much like a magazine staff and therefore, critical thinking and collaboration, vital ingredients in newsrooms across America, will be key to your success.

Let me be upfront with you: This class is challenging. Strong feature writing is more difficult to pull off than straight news and requires **solid reporting and writing skills**. The most compelling stories evoke the reader's imagination and emotions. You can only grow as a writer through practice and by reading as much as you can. So, our class time together will be a combination of lectures, discussion, peer editing and writing activities. You must come prepared to class.

Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this class will be held online via Zoom. This is far from ideal and I am truly sorry it has to be this way. I enjoy meeting my students every semester and I wish we could have in-person meetings. But these are circumstances beyond my control and the health and safety of everyone at UF are paramount. I assure you I will try and make this class as engaging as possible even though we will not be physically together. We will discuss some best practices for reporting, given the restrictions we are under due to social distancing. I understand the limitations in these trying times and we will navigate reporting challenges together. I am here to support you in every way.

By the end of the semester, I hope you will be able to produce stories worthy of publishing.

Here are a few things we will focus on:

- How to identify and develop relevant and interesting stories
- Ways to refine and articulate your ideas and pitch them to editors
- Making sure your reporting is fair, balanced and includes diverse voices
- Techniques for conducting detailed reporting and high-yield interviews
- Writing that is clear, concise and vivid

- Developing your own style and voice
- Good story structure and organization
- How to self-edit, receive peer feedback, fact-check and very importantly, meet deadlines

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Please take careful note of this section of the syllabus. These are principles that have always been extremely important to me and given the current climate in the United States, I believe them to be critical.

The UF Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward an intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions. UF journalism courses are expected 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.

One of the topics we will be discussing in this class is how to report stories – **with empathy** -- about people who are vastly different from you or people who have been underrepresented in every segment of society, including in the media. By that I mean not only differences in race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation but also class, age, religion, nationality, disability, culture and other visible and non-visible differences. I consider our differences to be a great asset and this class is intended to realize the greatest potential of that asset. You will be exposed to a diverse array of reading materials and speakers.

I will show the utmost respect for you, no matter your background or perspective, and I expect that you will do the same for me as well as your fellow students. I hope to foster a Zoom classroom environment in which you will feel free to voice your thoughts and opinions without fear, intimidation, embarrassment or shame. Please let me know if you have any thoughts on how to improve inclusivity or if someone or something has made you feel uneasy.

Diversity in journalism is vital, as we have seen from issues that have surfaced over the last few months over police killings and the mass protests in American cities and towns. I expect you to engage in storytelling that is fair, complete and based on information gathered from diverse sources. That means conducting interviews that may feel uncomfortable or daunting even. But that is a fundamental objective of this class and I hope you will lean on me and your classmates to help you navigate the reporting process.

GRADING

There are no shortcuts in this class. You will be judged on the quality of your work. I will discuss the grading structure for each assignment before you begin them. Grades will be posted on Canvas. Your final grade will be determined based on the following points:

Reported essay (800-1,000 words): 100 points

First draft: 40 points

Final draft: 60 points

Profile (1,000-1,200 words): 200 points

First draft and pitch: 100 points
Final draft: 100 points

In-depth feature (1,500 words): 300 points

First draft and pitch: 100 points
Final draft: 150 points

Assignments: 200 points

In-class writing and quizzes. Points delineation TBD

Class participation: 200 points

Magazine presentation: **100 points**
Canvas and in-class discussion: **200 points**

Grading scale:

A	925-1000
A-	900-924
B+	875-899
B	825-874
B-	800-824
C+	775-799
C	725-774
C-	700-724
D+	675-699
D	625-674
D-	600-624
F	623 and below

More information on grades and grading policies is here:
<https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/grades.aspx>

Bonus:

Your final grade for a story assignment will be bumped up by a letter if you succeed in publishing your work in a reputable media outlet. You must clear this with me.

REQUIRED READING

There are no textbooks for this class but plenty of reading assignments. You will be expected to **keep up with the news** and we will be **reading a LOT** of feature stories. You will be quizzed on current events as well as on the reading material. Good writers are voracious readers!

Here is the reading list:

- *Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer*, by Roy Peter Clark (available on Amazon)
- *The Associated Press Stylebook and Manual* (either the online version or print edition available on Amazon).
- One magazine or website of your choice, to read through the semester with another classmate. Together, you will make a presentation of your magazine to the class. Pick from this list:

The New Yorker, New York Times Magazine, New York, Time, Narratively, The Bitter Southerner, The Atavist Magazine, Rolling Stone, Wired, Bustle, The Economist, Sports Illustrated, Garden & Gun, GQ, Esquire, Flamingo, Oxford American, Mother Jones, The Texas Observer, Harper's, The Atlantic, Bon Appetit, Aeon, The Sun, Creative Nonfiction, Virginia Quarterly Review and The Hollywood Reporter.

SUPPLIES

- You will need notebooks and a recording device, if your phone does not have a voice recorder. Of course, you will need good connectivity for Zoom. If you connect with your phone, please make sure you have your laptop with you for class assignments. Please let me know if you are having wi-fi troubles.
- You will also need to create an account on [Medium.com](https://medium.com), if you don't have one already. It's fast and free to sign up.
- And you may need a few strong cups of coffee. I know I will!

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

You will be writing **a personal essay, a profile and an in-depth feature**. Those are in addition to the writing exercises – both in and out of class -- throughout the semester.

You may find in your reporting that an idea is not working out. That's why you will be expected to come up with more than one idea for each story format. You will be asked to discuss or brainstorm these in class.

All your stories except the essay must have at least five to six human sources. At the bottom of each story, you must list their names and their contact information as well as other research materials you used.

You must type all your stories in Microsoft Word with either 1.5 or 2 line spacing. Each file must be named with your last name and the assignment. **Example: SmithProfileDraft**. You will submit all assignments on Canvas. **DO NOT** send me links to OneDrive or Google Drive.

COMMUNICATION

Journalists are in the business of communication and you **MUST** communicate with me in this class. **You must check your UF email and Canvas** regularly for discussions and announcements. I encourage you to download the Canvas app on your phone. If you are having problems with your assignments, you must email me immediately and not wait until class to discuss them. Good communication is extremely important, especially during the pandemic when we will not be able to meet in person.

ACCURACY, FAIRNESS AND STYLE

This is a class in journalism -- not fiction. Your stories are no good if they contain errors and you are the one who will lose credibility as a journalist. While you are encouraged to take creative liberties with your writing, your stories must be factually correct and void of any errors. **You must review your stories and double check every fact.** That includes the names of people, places and organizations. You are expected to have a strong command of spelling and grammar and will lose points (at my discretion) for mistakes. Your copy should be clean and polished when you turn it in. All your assignments must adhere to AP style. You will lose points for every style, spelling and grammar error in your writing assignments.

You are also expected to engage in storytelling that is fair, complete and based on information gathered from diverse sources. A greater understanding of societal differences will help you become reporters who are sensitive, culturally aware and better equipped to write across differences. Please go back and reread the section on diversity and inclusion. The principles stated there apply to your work.

It's always best to conduct interviews in person but this semester you will likely be forced to do many of them via Zoom, Skype, Facetime or phone. We will discuss best practices. Please avoid email interviews.

HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

The media plays a vital role in our democracy. The public depends on journalists for news and a deeper understanding of the world around them. As such, there is nothing more important than our honesty, fairness and credibility.

I cannot stress this enough: **Plagiarism, fabrication and conflicts of interest will not be tolerated, and you will FAIL not just the assignment but the entire class.**

Plagiarism is stealing someone else's ideas or work, including chunks of copy from the Internet. Fabrication is the use of invented information or the falsification of material. Conflicts of interest include writing about your roommate, boyfriend, parents, business partners or others with whom you have close relationships or financial ties without divulging those ties in your story. If you are unsure about whether you are facing a conflict of interest, please discuss with me.

You are expected to abide by the **UF Honor Code**, which you can read here:
<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>

DEADLINES

In the world of professional journalism, **meeting deadlines** is mandatory as it will be in this class. You must meet the deadline (time and date) set for each assignment in Canvas. You will lose points for failing to meet deadlines.

ATTENDANCE, PARTICIPATION AND DEMEANOR

As I mentioned earlier, this class will function much like a magazine staff. And we meet only once a week. As such, your **attendance is mandatory**. I expect you to log into Zoom on time, turn your video on and look and behave in a manner that is professional and respectful to me and your fellow students.

Please consider your wardrobe and hygiene just as you would if we all in the same room, as well as your audio and visual backgrounds. (That means that you do not log into Zoom sitting in bed with your pajamas on.) I encourage you to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you want to protect the privacy of your environment or surroundings. If you go to black screen for a significant amount of time, you will lose points for participation. All classes will be recorded for educational purposes. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance and privacy, please let me know. Let's discuss Zoom protocol on our first day of class.

Your insights and comments should be respectful to all. Participation doesn't just mean speaking a lot; you will be judged on the quality of what you say and how focused you are in class, even when you are not speaking.

Writers learn from one another, so you are expected to come to class each week and come fully prepared to participate in activities and discussions. Because your contribution is important, class participation makes up 200 points of your final grade. Of those, 100 points are for class discussions and exercises. You will lose 25 points for every unexcused absence. Absences for serious illness, family emergencies and other urgent matters will be excused only if you speak with me before class begins. If you need to miss multiple classes, you will be required to provide appropriate documentation of the problem. You will still be responsible for submitting on time all assignments on their due dates and for material covered in class. Instructions for all assignments will be given in class so it's in your best interest to attend each week.

UF STUDENT RESOURCES

If you need a little extra help with writing, organizing and editing your stories, the **UF Writing Studio**, located at 302 Tigert Hall, may be able to help. You can also get online tutoring. For more information, go to: <https://writing.ufl.edu/writing-studio/>

Mental health is extremely important, even more so now amid this pandemic. The **UF Counseling and Wellness Center** is free for all students. Please use this fantastic resource if you are having trouble coping. You can reach a support staff member between 8am-5pm Monday through Friday at [352-392-1575](tel:352-392-1575). The center's address is 3190 Radio Road. You can see all the services the center provides at: <https://counseling.ufl.edu/>

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the **Disability Resource Center** 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. Call 352-392-8565 or go to: www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/

ABOUT ME

If you are an intrepid reporter, you will have Googled me by now. I began my career as a journalist in Tallahassee (home of that "other" university) and have been reporting and editing now for 37 years. I covered presidential elections, hurricanes, earthquakes and the Iraq War since its inception in 2003. On several trips, I was embedded with the U.S. Army and earned the moniker, Evil Reporter Chick -- affectionately, of course. My e-book, *Chaplain Turner's War* (2012, Agate Publishing) grew from a

series of stories on an Army chaplain at war. I'm not a superhero but I was featured in Marvel Comics' "Civil War" series. Most recently, I was a senior writer at CNN. I began teaching at UF in 2018 and earlier this year, I was named the university's Undergraduate Teacher of the Year. I also teach in a low-residency MFA program in narrative media at the University of Georgia.

Most students at UF know me as Prof B. Those who have taken my classes will tell you that I love true stories about ordinary people. I love good writing and am here to help you become better writers. I want you to reach out and ask for help. I will make myself available.

You can find me on:

www. monibasus.com

Twitter: @TheMoniBasu

Instagram: @evilreporterchick

And my journalist **Facebook page: <https://bit.ly/2KCXScI>**

(I'm not doing the **TikTok thing**, though I have an account to see what you are up to.)

EVALUATIONS

I encourage you to fill out the evaluation for this class online via GatorEvals at the end of the semester. You will be notified when the evaluation period opens. I take student evaluations seriously and try to improve the class based on your comments. Please be respectful with your comments.

Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.ua.ufl.edu/public-results/>

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Please bear in mind that this is the first semester I am teaching this class fully online. I have tried my best to make adjustments, but I ask for your patience and understanding if there are any hiccups as we move forward. Some reading assignments are listed below; others will be assigned later as the semester progresses. All assigned readings should be completed by the start of class and assignments on their designated due dates. What follows is **AN ESTIMATION** of how we will proceed this semester and it is **subject to change** depending on guest speakers and other needs of the class.

Week 1, August 31

Introduction to the class.

Personal Introductions: The Real You. Syllabus and discussion of the characteristics of a good feature story (ledes, anecdotes, structure, interviews, details, color). Differences between news and features.

Assignment: Begin thinking about ideas for a personal essay and what magazine you will read this semester.

Reading assignment:

1. Part 1, Writing Tools
2. "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true" by Nikole Hannah-Jones:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>

Week 2, September 7

Labor Day. Woohoo! That means you don't have to labor in class. See you next week.

Reading assignment:

1. "Dumb Kids' Class" by Mark Bowden:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/06/dumb-kids-class/308981/>
2. "The Stories I Will Live By" by Moni Basu: <https://bittersoutherner.com/southern-perspective/2020/the-stories-i-will-live-by-moni-basu>
3. **Podcast:** "Modern Love," New York Times:
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/style/modern-love-podcast-greta-gerwig.html>

Week 3, September 14

Dissecting a feature story. Types of feature stories. What is a reported essay?

Assignment: Ideas for your essay.

In-class assignment: Where I'm From

Discussion of assigned essays

Week 4, September 21

Generating strong ideas. In-class brainstorm: Pitch your essay idea in class.

Guest speaker: Anjali Enjeti

Assignment: You should be reporting your personal essay this week and come to the next class with finessed ideas.

Due: Come to class prepared to speak about your magazine choice and discuss a story you like from that magazine.

Week 5, September 28

Writing clearly and concisely. Developing voice and style.

Due: First draft of essay and pitch. Email them to your assigned peer reviewer ahead of class.

Reading assignment: Part 2, *Writing Tools*

Week 5, October 5

Editing. What to look for in a feature story. And how to write a successful magazine pitch.

In-class assignment: Peer review of essay

Assignment: Begin thinking about who you might want to profile.

Reading assignment:

1. "The Most American Terrorist: The Making of Dylan Roof" by Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah.
<https://www.gq.com/story/dylann-roof-making-of-an-american-terrorist>
2. "Dead Man Walking nun: 'Botched' executions unmask a botched system" by Moni Basu.
<https://www.cnn.com/2014/08/06/us/executions-dead-man-walking-nun/index.html>

Week 6, October 12

Elements of a good profile. Researching and reporting your story and the art of the interview. Proust questionnaire.

Due: Final draft of essay

In-class assignment: Brainstorm profile ideas

Reading assignment: Part 3, *Writing Tools*

Week 7, October 19

Guest speaker: Katoya Fleming

Discussion: Writing Tools, Parts 1-3

Reading assignment: Part 4, *Writing Tools*

Assignment: In the magazine you are reading, find one lede that grabbed you and one you thought was poorly written. Come to the next class prepared to discuss.

Week 8, October 26

How to grab a reader's attention. Writing great ledes and killer kickers.

Due: Profile draft and pitch. E-mail a copy to your assigned peer reviewer ahead of class.

Discussion: Your magazine ledes

Week 9, November 2

Descriptive writing. Using all your senses and details, details, details.

In class activity: Peer review of profile draft.

Reading Assignment: Part 5, *Writing Tools*

Week 10, November 9

Storytelling. What makes a compelling story? Elements of a strong feature story.

Due: Final draft of profile. Ideas for in-depth feature. Be prepared to brainstorm in class.

Reading assignment:

1. "A sliver of Haiti in Boca" by Liz Balmaseda
<https://www.palmbeachpost.com/entertainment/dining/sliver-haiti-boca-raton-the-chef-artistic-dishes-made-him-instagram-star/3KK8WNIgunY2knGdiWjzrN/>
2. "For families of Parkland shooting victims, awful truth came hours after waiting" by Michael Mayo and Megan O'Matz. <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/local/broward/parkland/florida-school-shooting/fl-reg-parkland-shooting-notification-20180300-story.html>
3. "Buying Black, Rebooted" by Anthonia Akitunde.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/25/style/buying-black-rebooted.html>

Week 11, November 16

In-depth feature writing. Build your story. Stay organized. Magazine presentations.

Guest speaker: Valerie Boyd

Due: Come prepared to discuss the three assigned feature stories.

Week 12, November 23

Thanksgiving week. No class. Eat turkey or tofurkey but keep reporting and writing.

Due: Feature story draft and pitch

Week 13, November 30

Individual story conferences. We will use class time to do these. Some of you will be scheduled at other times, depending on class size.

Due: You should have enough reporting for your feature story to discuss it in detail.

Week 14, December 7

Self-editing and rewriting. Questions to ask yourself. Magazine presentations.

Week 15, December 14

No final exam. Open discussion. Magazine presentations.

Due: Feature story final.