

JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding

Fall semester 2020, University of Florida

R | Period 8 - 10 (3:00 PM - 6:00 PM)

Final (in class): December 3 at 3:00 PM

Weimer Hall 1078

Instructor

Kathleen McGrory (727) 893-8330

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Office hours: By appointment by phone/email

Office: 490 1st Ave. S, St. Petersburg, Fla.

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 through interviews. 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.

Over the course of the semester, students will apply this knowledge in a series of six short quizzes. Sixty percent of your grade will be determined by your performance on the quizzes. Homework assignments, an in-class assignment, the final exam and class participation will constitute the rest.

CLASS FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS

In light of the pandemic, we are offering Applied Fact Finding this semester as a hybrid course, meaning it will be a blend of online and face-to-face learning.

Most of our classes will be held over Zoom. These sessions will be synchronous. They will start promptly at 3 p.m. and last between two and three hours. (Don't worry. You will have plenty of breaks.) **You are expected to have your camera on during Zoom sessions.** If you go to black screen for a significant amount of time, points will be deducted from your attendance/participation score at the instructors' discretion. You are encouraged to use virtual backgrounds for Zoom if you

want to protect the privacy of your environment or surroundings. Note that lectures will be recorded for educational purposes. If you have extenuating circumstances or concerns about Zoom attendance, please let us know.

We plan to hold face-to-face classes on October 1 and November 5. These in-person sessions will give you a chance to practice your newly acquired skills and meet your classmates and instructors in person. We will conduct the sessions in shifts in order to keep the number of people in the room to a minimum. Each shift will last 60 minutes. Expect more details soon.

When we meet in the classroom, we'll be doing online research, so please be sure to have your laptop and power cable. 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.

During in-person sessions, we will abide by social distancing rules, meaning we will clean the classroom between shifts and require masks. In addition, everyone in the classroom will maintain a safe distance from one another. If you are uncomfortable attending these classes, let us know in advance. We can make accommodations for you to complete the work independently. We understand the situation is fluid and may make changes along the way. We plan to have an ongoing conversation about our collective comfort level and the best way to proceed.

ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is mandatory and, because there is no textbook 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. Log-in/arrive on time and ready to learn.

Students with unexcused absences may lose points available for participation and quizzes. 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.

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

You will be required to complete 10 homework assignments. Each will entail reading a news story and responding to five writing prompts. You'll submit your responses in Canvas. We're looking for between 250 and 500 words total (NOT per prompt).

The prompts are as follows: What did you like about this story? What didn't you like about this story? How did the journalist use records to uncover information? How did the journalist use human sources? After reading this story, what kind of follow-up stories or other threads would you pursue?

Please note our syllabus contains 11 homework assignments. You may skip one or complete all 11 to learn extra credit.

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 11 homework assignments, worth 10 points each. You are only required to complete 10. 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: 50 points

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

In-class assignment: 50 points

Final exam: 200 points

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

Extra-credit points will be awarded upon successful completion of the public records assignment (50) or the extra homework (10).

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 SCHEDULE

September 3, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructors: Kat and Neil

Topic: We'll spend the first half of the class on introductions and an overview of the semester. Then, Kat and Neil will give you an introduction to public records and explain why Florida is the best state to practice journalism.

Due next week: Read [Out of Balance: How USA Gymnastics failed to report cases](#)

September 10, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructors: Kat and Neil

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

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

September 17, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Kat will teach you the 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](#)

September 24, 2020

Format: Zoom

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: [For Cops, No Limit](#) (only read that story)

October 1, 2020

Format: Classroom

Instructor: Kat and Neil

Topic: We'll practice digging up cops and courts records.

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

October 8, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Quiz #2. Kat will teach you the basics of official records, which include property deeds, marriage licenses, lien filings, court judgments and other tools reporters use daily 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](#)

October 15, 2020

Format: Zoom

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: [Failure Factories](#)

October 22, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: Quiz #4 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: [Suffering in Secret](#)

October 29, 2020

Format: Zoom

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: [Beaten, then Silenced](#)

November 5, 2020

Format: Classroom

Instructor: Kat and Neil

Topic: We'll practice digging into official, business, government, education and regulator records!

Due next week: Read [Heartbroken](#)

November 12, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructor: Kat

Topic: [Quiz #6](#). Kat will lead a discussion about how to obtain and use private and confidential records. She'll also discuss how journalists use social media in their reporting. She'll walk you through how she and Neil showed that the heart surgery program at a prestigious children's hospital had gone from one of the best in the state to the worst.

Due next week: Read [TBA](#)

November 19, 2020

Format: Zoom

Instructor: Neil

Topic: We'll discuss how the nation's top reporters have used public records to report on the pandemic, police abuses and civil unrest. We'll also hear from a practicing journalist on the subject. We'll finish class with an in-class assignment.

Due next week: Nothing

November 26, 2020

No class, Thanksgiving break

December 3, 2020

Format: Zoom

Topic: 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.

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

The University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications Department of Journalism embraces a commitment toward 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 journalism courses 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.

Your instructors are committed to making sure all students feel respected and comfortable in this class. If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official records, please let us know. We also welcome your feedback on ways we can improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.

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.

CONTACTS

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.