

## JOU 4123: Investigative Reporting, Class No. 20039

Fall semester 2021, University of Florida  
Thursdays 3p to 6p, WEIM 2056

### Description:

Students will learn methods and protocols used by investigative journalists and employ them to produce a significant investigative reporting project on a topic of public interest, subject to pre-approval by the instructors, that would be ready-to-publish by the end of the semester (roughly 13 weeks). Reporting may require a review of previously published news stories about the topic, extensive interviews with human sources, obtaining and reviewing volumes of public or private records and obtaining and analyzing data. You may elect to work with a partner in the class to complete your project, subject to approval by the instructors, and the project may involve working with other UF students elsewhere in the College of Journalism & Communications specializing in other platforms, such as broadcast journalism or data visualization, also subject to approval by instructors. The class meets weekly, but students will be expected to report independently as time permits throughout the week. This is an intense course that requires significant time management; our expectations are high. This is not a course in which you can 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 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. **There is no final exam. The editing process for your final project may extend into finals week after UF's last regular day of the semester.**

### Attendance:

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>. Missed assignments must be submitted promptly upon your return to health or after urgent travel.

### Office hours:

For Prof. Bridis, drop-in office hours will be 10a to 2p Thursdays. You may also connect via Zoom during that time using this link:

<https://ufl.zoom.us/j/98461905258?pwd=a0p4K0pLRXZFTEN2dG8wUGJBSndHQT09>

*Meeting ID: 984 6190 5258*

*Passcode: 271297*

\*Please\* make an appointment in advance, whenever possible, to avoid the virtual waiting room. Bridis is also generally available by appointment on other days. His email is [tbridis@ufl.edu](mailto:tbridis@ufl.edu). He generally responds within 24 hours to emails during weekdays or within 48 hours during weekends.

Office hours for Ethan Magoc are 9 to 9:30 in his office along the western wall of the INC. We will generally respond within 24 hours to email inquiries during weekdays or within 48 hours during weekends.

Grading:

<b>Assignment</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Points</b>
Attendance & Participation	~8	100
Weekly memos (8)	~16	200
Professional interview	~16	200
Peer fact-checking	~8	100
Final story	~33	400
Professionalism	~16	200

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 10 percent of your course grade.

Weekly memos (eight of them): At least 300 words each, these are due at 6 p.m. Wednesdays. They keep your instructors informed about story progress to elicit guidance. Memos should include a summary of reporting completed the previous seven days with detailed notes and quotes from interviews, human sources contacted (be specific — names, titles, phone numbers), documents reviewed, Internet sites visited and data analyzed. Include reporting roadblocks and reporting goals for the week ahead.

Professional interview: You will contact and interview, in person or by phone or by video conference, a professional, experienced investigative reporter working at a medium- to large-size news organization, subject to pre-approval by the instructors, and write and submit a 1,500-word essay about the conversation. The instructors may provide names and contact information for prominent journalists if you need help finding a willing volunteer. The essay must include at least: a concise summary of the reporter's most significant work and specific challenges overcome to complete that reporting; a description of the reporter's daily or weekly workflow; description or advice about how the reporter formulates project ideas; discussion of specific interview techniques with reluctant human sources; description about other, everyday or routine reporting challenges the reporter faces and how to overcome them. Although the essay will be not be due until later in the semester, it will be advantageous to begin earlier to accommodate the professional schedules of your selected journalists and your other reporting obligations for this course.

Peer fact-checking: This will be the linchpin to our story bulletproofing process. You will verify every 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: You will complete by the end of the semester a ready-to-publish investigative reporting project on a significant topic that is subject to pre-approval by the instructors, either a print/online or broadcast version or a mix of platforms. Your audience will be dictated by the subject of your project,

and the instructors as necessary will work to have it published outside north-central Florida if appropriate. The project will necessarily require you to research and read previously published news stories by other news organizations on the subject, and it will almost certainly involve extensive interviews with human sources, obtaining and reviewing volumes of public or private records and obtaining and analyzing data whenever appropriate. You must be mindful of the time constraints of the semester so that you can finish on time, so we will strike a balance between a proposal that is too narrow in scope versus one that may be too ambitious. Ideally, a project will involve elements of accountability: to right a wrong, reveal injustice, or surface previously unknown facts. Consider writing about organizations or institutions that are subject to official regulation, or write about the lack or failure of formal regulation, or about underserved or powerless populations and the particular difficulties they face that may surprise readers. We are *\*not\** interested in localizing a national outlet's investigative reporting, and we are *\*not\** interested in mere explanatory journalism or summarizing other outlets' coverage of a major issue. The instructors may provide project ideas for students who need help. For reporting projects that are particularly ambitious, subject to approval by the instructors, you may elect to work with a partner in the class to complete your project. If you are unable to complete your project before the end of the semester, you will have the option of writing at least 2,500 words describing in detail your efforts, why your project failed and in hindsight what you should have done differently to be successful. Exercising this option will automatically reduce the points available to be awarded for your final story from 400 points to a maximum of 300 points.

For all students, a "professionalism" grade of up to 200 points for the semester, or roughly 16 percent of your grade, will be assigned by instructors. This will reflect a student's ability to demonstrate initiative; meet deadlines; establish priorities; interact professionally with sources, instructors and classmates; deal with unusual reporting challenges and more.

#### Grading scale:

A = 90-100  
B = 80-89  
C = 70-79  
D = 60-69  
F = 59 or below

#### Class requirements:

Most of our class-wide communication, including updates to this syllabus, will arrive via Canvas. **Please install the Canvas app on your smart phone and enable notifications**, and please regularly log in using your laptop.

#### Grading policies:

<https://catalog.ufl.edu/UGRD/academic-regulations/grades-grading-policies/>

#### A word about diversity:

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.

I want to create a learning environment for students that supports a diversity of thoughts, perspectives and experiences, and honors your identities (including race, gender, class, sexuality, religion, ability, etc.) To help accomplish this:

- If you have a name and/or set of pronouns that differ from those that appear in your official records, please let me know.
- If you feel like your performance in the class is being impacted by your experiences outside of class, please do not hesitate to come and talk with me. I want to be a resource for you.
- If you prefer to speak with someone outside of the course, Joanna Hernandez, CJC director of inclusion and diversity, is an excellent resource. You can email her at [jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu](mailto:jhernandez@jou.ufl.edu).
- If something was said in class (by anyone) that made you feel uncomfortable, please talk to me about it.

#### Accommodating students with disabilities:

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, [www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/](http://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.

#### Textbooks:

There are no required textbooks for this course. We encourage you to consider a \$25 annual student membership in Investigative Reporters & Editors and explore its website, especially its tip sheets and related resources.

We also encourage you to subscribe to IRE's free "Local Matters" weekly email newsletter:

[https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/manage/optin?v=001jNS004Ui3007md-9Ryd0WOKdq14U-VfK9aIRH18MLku7VRyaaHESUptkwHw-8FO3X8Dhpw6\\_U4bO-hrpYrlzmYZy\\_m-F01qUfYYiFg0mDpo%3D](https://visitor.r20.constantcontact.com/manage/optin?v=001jNS004Ui3007md-9Ryd0WOKdq14U-VfK9aIRH18MLku7VRyaaHESUptkwHw-8FO3X8Dhpw6_U4bO-hrpYrlzmYZy_m-F01qUfYYiFg0mDpo%3D).

You should also follow or add to a list the @FOIAFeed account on Twitter, run by the Freedom of the Press Foundation. Several times every day, it highlights notable investigative journalism from around the globe.

#### 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. 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://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-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.

Contact information for the Counseling and Wellness Center: <http://www.counseling.ufl.edu/cwc/Default.aspx>, 352-392-1575; and the University Police Department: 392-1111 or 911 for emergencies.

Weekly schedule (subject to adjustments, which I will announce):

Aug. 26, Week One:

Course, instructors and class introductions

Overview of the class, grading, office hours, expectations

No homework

Sept. 2, Week Two:

Classroom discussion: Developing investigation ideas and pitches: where to look, who to ask, how to focus on a subject or target

Submit prospective investigative project ideas

First weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Sept. 1

Sept. 9, Week Three:

Classroom discussion: Investigative reporting ethics, protocols and best practices in modern newsrooms.

Submit prospective investigative project ideas

Second weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Sept. 8

Sept. 16, Week Four:

Classroom discussion: Open records requests and the Freedom of Information Act: legal review, tips, best practices

Deadline to obtain final approval from instructors for your investigative project.

Third weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Sept. 15 (this memo should include discussion of visual needs or opportunities for reporting project)

Sept. 23, Week Five:

Classroom discussion: Sequencing your reporting. When to talk to who, in what order? Working concentric circles to identify prospective sources who might be able to help or have information you need, and how to find them. Using clips, lawsuits, phone directories, social media and more to find sources. The value of talking to former employees. When to break glass without giving the subjects of your investigation ammunition to use against you? How long to wait for fair comment?

Fourth weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Sept. 22

Sept. 30, Week Six:

Classroom discussion: Interview techniques. Scripting your questions, how to talk to reluctant sources, the value of door knocks, using anonymous sources, the value and pitfalls of speaking “off the record” with someone, evaluating the credibility of sources

Fifth weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Sept. 29

Oct. 7, Week Seven:

Classroom discussion: Investigative best practices. Using timelines, indexed notebooks, transcribed interviews, write-as-you-go. Knowing when to write and when to keep reporting. Building an investigation episodically, the value of producing multiple hits to create buzz and momentum.

Sixth weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Oct. 6

Oct. 14, Week Eight:

Classroom discussion: Writing for impact. Using authoritative voice, art of the nut graf, narrative leads, characters, active language

Professional interview assignment is due before class starts

Seventh weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Oct. 13

Oct. 21, Week Nine:

Classroom discussion: Using data. How to interview data, how not to let numbers overpower your narrative

Eighth weekly memo is due by 6 p.m. Oct. 20

Oct. 28, Week 10:

Classroom discussion: Protecting sources. Keeping confidential sources safe and how to survive a leaks investigation

Draft project due by 6 p.m. on Oct. 27

Nov. 4, Week 11:

Classroom discussion: Red-team editing. Employing aggressive fact-checking prior to publication

Peer-review editing begins this week

Nov. 11, Week 12:

UF holiday, no class meeting

Nov. 18, Week 13:

Classroom discussion: Avoiding hoaxes. Learning from the mistakes of victims

Peer-review edits due by start of class

Nov. 25, Week 14:

Thanksgiving break, no class meeting

Dec. 2, Week 15:

Classroom discussion: Anticipating pushback prior to publication and developing your defenses proactively.

Final project due by 6 p.m.

Final editing to take place during week of Dec. 6 and during finals week