

# JOU 3110: Applied Fact Finding

Spring semester 2023, University of Florida

F | Period 4 - 6 (10:40 AM - 1:40 PM)

Final (in class): April 21, 2023 at 10:40 a.m. (in class)

Instructor

Kathleen McGrory (727) 580-4614

[kathleen.mcgrory@gmail.com](mailto:kathleen.mcgrory@gmail.com)

Virtual office hours: By appointment by phone/email

Instructor

Michael Van Sickler (727) 580-9650

[vansickler521334@gmail.com](mailto:vansickler521334@gmail.com)

Virtual office hours: By appointment by phone/email

## OBJECTIVE

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

Over the course of the semester, you will apply this knowledge in a series of six short quizzes. The quizzes will determine 30 percent of your grade. Homework assignments, an in-class assignment, a public records assignment, the final exam and attendance/participation will constitute the rest.

## CLASS FORMAT AND REQUIREMENTS

We are offering Applied Fact Finding this semester as an online course.

Our classes will be held over Zoom. These sessions will be synchronous. They will start promptly at 10:40 a.m. **You are expected to have your camera on during Zoom sessions.** If you turn your camera off 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.

## 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 on time and ready to learn.

Students with unexcused absences may lose points available for participation and quizzes. **All absences approved by the instructors in advance.** Those due to extreme circumstances, such as illness, may be forgiven at the discretion of the instructors.

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>.

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.

## **HOMEWORK**

You will be required to complete 10 homework assignments. Each will entail reading a news story, providing a short critique and reflection on how the reporter used public records. You'll submit each assignment in Canvas. We're looking for between 250 and 500 words total.

## **GRADE CALCULATION: 1,000 points total**

Quizzes: 300 points

Over the course of the semester, you will take six quizzes. They will be a combination of multiple choice and true/false questions. Each quiz will be worth 50 points.

Homework: 200 points

There are 10 homework assignments, worth 20 points each. Assignments must be submitted through Canvas by 11:59 p.m. the day before class. You will lose points for incomplete or sub-par work. Late assignments may be submitted at any point in the semester for half-credit.

Public records request: 40 points

You will request a public record from a government agency during class on Jan. 20. You must obtain the record and submit it to the instructors by April 21.

In-class assignment: 60 points

We will complete an in-class assignment on April 7.

Attendance and participation: 100 points

Final exam: 300 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.

## 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

### **Jan. 13, 2023**

**Instructors:** Kat and Mike

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

**Due next class:** Read [Condo accused Surfside of 'holding up' major repairs three days before collapse, emails show](#) (Miami Herald)

### **Jan. 20, 2023**

**Instructor:** Kat

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

**Due next class:** Read [For Cops, No Limit](#) (South Florida Sun Sentinel)

### **Jan. 27, 2023**

**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.

**Due next class:** ['Storm the Capitol,' Miami Proud Boys' leader Enrique Tarrío urged colleagues, feds say](#) (Miami Herald)

### **Feb. 3, 2023**

**Instructor:** Mike

**Topic:** Quiz #1. Mike 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 touch on the criminal and civil sides of federal court.

**Due next class:** Read [Clear Takeover](#) (Tampa Bay Times)

### **Feb. 10, 2023**

**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 class:** Read ['That's ... ridiculous.' Florida domestic violence chief is paid \\$761,000 a year](#) (Miami Herald)

### **Feb. 17, 2023**

**Instructor:** Mike

**Topic:** Quiz #3. Mike 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 class:** Read [Failure Factories](#) (Tampa Bay Times)

### **Feb. 24, 2023**

**NO CLASS. OFFICE HOURS AVAILABLE BY REQUEST.**

### **March 3, 2023**

**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 class:** [A Florida nursing home lost its Medicare benefits. Residents lost a home.](#)  
(Tampa Bay Times)

**March 10, 2023**

**Instructor:** Mike

**Topic:** [Quiz #5](#). Mike will show you how to use licensing and regulatory records to reveal information about doctors, teachers and other professionals.

**Due next class:** Read [Heartbroken](#) and [methodology](#) (Tampa Bay Times)

**March 17, 2023**

**NO CLASS. SPRING BREAK.**

**March 24, 2023**

**Instructor:** Kat

**Topic:** [Quiz #6](#). Sometimes, the record you are seeking isn't a document but rather a spreadsheet or database. We'll talk about how to request publicly available data and turn it into a revelatory news story.

**Due next class:** Read [How the Pinellas Sheriff's Office boosts its rape stats without solving cases](#) (Tampa Bay Times)

**March 31, 2023**

**Instructor:** Mike

A well-rounded story is more than just records. Mike and guest journalist Allison Ross of the Tampa Bay Times will talk about marrying public records with traditional shoe-leather reporting. They'll take you behind the scenes of Allison's 2020 story examining practices in the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office.

**Due next class:** Read [Bad Boys 4 Life](#) (Miami Herald), [Judge blasts Sun Sentinel for publishing confidential information in Parkland school shooting case](#) (Sun Sentinel)

**April 7, 2023**

**Instructor:** Kat

**Topic:** We'll discuss other types of records we haven't yet covered. We'll talk about ethics. Then, we'll complete an in-class assignment to help get you ready for the final exam.

**Due next week:** Nothing

**April 14, 2023**

**Instructors:** Kat and Mike

**Topic:** Kat and Mike will answer any questions you have about your graded in-class assignments, discuss the final and wrap up the semester.

**Due next class:** Public records request assignment

**April 21, 2023**

We'll all log onto Zoom and do the final during our regularly scheduled class block.

## **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/](http://www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/)) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructors 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, quizzes 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.