

JOU 3101: Fact Finding

Fall semester 2015, University of Florida

Instructor

Chris Davis (941) 315-0602

Chrisdavis4444@gmail.com

Office hours: By appointment by phone/email

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

Assistant instructor

Michael LaForgia

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

Michael.laforgia@gmail.com

OBJECTIVE

Students will learn the methods for gathering and analyzing public records used by practicing journalists. We want you to understand the importance of public records for backgrounding people and businesses and for uncovering information that can't always be found by interviewing people. Students 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 a semester-long research project examining one of a variety of health, safety and public interest issues either on the University of Florida campus or in the state at large. Details of the group projects will be developed with students in the first few weeks and agreed upon by week four.

Grades will largely be determined by meeting a series of project tasks throughout the class and by student participation in class discussion. Each student will file journal entries **at least every other week** as noted in the syllabus. Each entry must update in detail the progress you have made on your research, including describing the information you have gathered.

ATTENDANCE AND RULES OF THE ROAD

Class attendance is **mandatory** and will be taken regularly throughout the course. Students with more than one unexcused absence may lose all points available for class participation. Additional absences will result in further penalties at the sole discretion of the instructor. Absences approved by the instructor in advance, or those due to extreme circumstances, such as illness, may be forgiven at the discretion of the instructor.

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>.

JOURNAL ENTRIES

Each student will maintain an electronic journal shared with the instructor via Google Drive. This journal will be crucial in tracking three things: your class participation, completion of homework assignments and progress on your group project. Keeping entries clear and detailed and filing them all on time will ensure a student receives all available points. (In-class participation and a final exam will also factor into grades.)

Late, incomplete or sub-par assignments will result in point deductions as set out in this syllabus. Journal entries and questions should be well-thought-out and original. Summaries that mimic language from stories, or worse that are copied directly, will be considered sub-par.

Entries must be filed by Monday at midnight before the class in which it is due. Each entry should be labeled with the date of the subsequent class. So your first journal entry will be due before the second class session and will be labeled "?????????????????"

Each entry should be dated, with the most recent entry at the top of the journal. File information under the following headings for each journal entry due:

Questions for upcoming class

You will be expected to file three questions you'd like to ask your instructor in advance of each class. These questions can pertain to the stories you read for the week, the homework assignments or to public records questions in general.

Homework/reading assignments

You will record any homework assignments here. In addition, if you have reading assignments, you will be expected to write a brief summary of each of the stories that were assigned.

Describe the main point of the story and the key sources of information used in each story. File each summary under a separate header with the name of the story or homework assignment. There is no length restriction, but concision is important. (100 to 200 words for a description is a good goal) If no assignment was given for a particular week, note that under the proper heading.

Project progress

After projects have been assigned, students will be expected every other week to summarize their INDIVIDUAL progress on the project. Here you will record specific tasks completed, lessons learned and interesting facts you've discovered during your research. You should describe what public records or other information you collected, the exact source of that information and a summary of the take-aways or most interesting pieces of information found. Think of this as a reporting memo to your editor. You don't want to waste his or her time, but you want to show off the progress you're making and the most relevant and interesting information you're uncovering.

GRADE CALCULATION

Group project – 500 points

Your group project will make up the bulk of your grade. Weekly project reports must be filed individually. Each are worth up to 30 points. (estimated maximum score of 390 for the semester) Additional group project points will be awarded at the instructor's discretion for overall effort, quality of work, class presentations and end-of-the-year project results.

Class participation – 300 points

Up 300 points will be awarded for completing homework assignments and filing weekly questions in your journal. Late, missing or sub-par work on either of these two weekly requirements will cost students up to 15 points each.

At his sole discretion, the instructor will add or subtract points based on class participation. Absences and excessive tardiness may be factored into the points a student receives for class participation, as well. Deductions will be at the sole discretion of the instructor.

Final exam – 200 points

CLASS REQUIREMENTS:

Computer needs and behaviors: Weekly computer and online exercises will be conducted in the classroom, so it is strongly encouraged for students to come to class with a laptop. Laptop 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 solely by the instructor based on the infraction and whether a student had been previously warned. The same rules apply for cell phones and all other electronic devices.

WEEKLY SCHEDULE:

Aug. 26, 2015

Fact Finding Introduction

Overview of the class and what it will cover. We'll break into project groups and talk about the basics of how the class research project will work. There will be an in-class research assignment, followed by a class discussion

Due next week:

By Monday, find at least three investigative stories that report on issues that pertain to the state of Florida. You should find stories that relate to an issue you might research for your class project. These stories could involve anything from nursing home abuse, to government mismanagement. They could focus on the criminal justice system (wrongful convictions, racial injustice) Or they could focus on university issues, such as campus crime, student safety or misspending of funds.

The stories don't have to be about Florida specifically. But the subject should be relevant to the state. For example, stories about abuse in state run prisons could apply to any state.

Read each story, identify the key issues reported or uncovered. In your journals, briefly and separately describe each of the stories you found, when and where they were published and what issues were explored. Describe the public records you think were used on the reporting process for each story. **INCLUDE A LINK TO EACH STORY.** Come to class ready to discuss the issues.

Sept. 2, 2015

An overview of how reporters get information with emphasis on using public records. We'll walk through several investigative projects and explore how reporters uncovered the information they used. In addition, group will break out to discuss projects. You'll be choosing your research topic and crafting a reporting plan.

Due next week:

By Monday record your research topic in your journal, along with a description of what interviews you will do, what records you will examine and any other potential sources.

Sept. 9, 2015

Politifact – Fact checking in the modern age

Guest lecturer Katie Sanders from the original fact-checking web site Politifact.com will take students through the process of holding politicians and pundits accountable for their words and claims. Students will learn how working journalists choose statements to check, how they maintain objectivity and key source of information.

By next week:

No journal entries due. Use this week to work on group projects and prepare for next week's journal update.

Sept. 16, 2015

Backgrounding a person or address

Tampa Bay Times Investigative Reporter Michael LaForgia will walk the class through digging up information on a person or address, including the use of Official Records, court dockets, corporate filings, police records and other sources. Project groups will spend class time applying what they have learned by uncovering and recording information about campus personalities – administrators, coaches, athletes etc.

Group work: honing your research project and reporting plans.

Due next week:

By Monday, each student must identify the name and date of birth of one of the University of Florida's top administrators or athletes and complete a background check on them and record the required information in a shared spreadsheet. Each student must also summarize interesting discoveries in his or her journal.

Sept. 23, 2015

On the beat – chasing crime stories.

You will learn the basic records used on criminal justice beats and how reporters use them. Among them: police reports, calls to service, state and federal courts, prison records and Department of Corrections inmate records. We'll discuss how to anticipate where public records are likely to exist.

Due next week:

By next Wednesday, read the stories here <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2014-Local-Reporting> on Tampa's Homeless housing program. In your journal, summarize the series and describe in a few sentences the kinds of public records reporters used to report this story. Come up with

three good questions about the stories, record them in your journal and come to ready to ask them in class.

Sept 30, 2015

Public records and the law

A discussion of public records access laws and how you can make them work for you. We'll discuss how to approach the process of getting records, learn to write an official records request and what to do when you're denied, delayed or told it will cost \$10,000. Students will learn to search Attorney General's opinions and other sources of support for fighting public records battles.

Each group will write a public records request for information about campus activities related to their project.

Due next week:

Each student will file a public records request related to their project. Include a copy of the request and discuss the response you got in your next journal, due the Monday before our Oct. 14 class

Oct. 7, 2015

On the beat – Regulators and businesses

Today we'll cover sources that can provide information about businesses and nonprofits. Students will learn about corporate records and the state web site, Sunbiz, that allows access. We'll also cover professional licensing, non-profit 990s and other strategies for digging up information of entities that aren't required to make their documents public.

Government regulators at every level keep watch on an endless number of activities by people and businesses. Local governments make sure buildings meet code and that property owners don't endanger their neighbors by inviting pests to piles of garbage on the lawn. State officials inspect everything from nail salons to nursing homes to restaurants. You can't get in to these places, but regulators can. You'll learn to follow their trail to bad guys.

These records are crucial for uncovering bad guys doing bad things. But the records also allow reporters to see how the regulators themselves are doing their jobs. Are they letting people get away with bad things time and again? How well are they doing their jobs?

Michael LaForgia will discuss how regulatory records were used to investigate Tampa's Homeless Recovery program.

Due next week:

By Monday at midnight, your first research update in your journal is due. Provide a detailed summary of what sources you obtained, including any interviews, public records, and data, as well as any online sources. Share any pertinent links or records.

Oct. 14, 2015

Using data

How you can use data to make everything you do better. We'll talk about getting into a data state of mind and how data can answer questions that couldn't otherwise be answered. Bring your computers, class will include an introduction to Excel.

By next week:

Identify a database available online that pertains to your research project. Record a link to that data in the homework section of your journal and explain what information is available in the data and how you might use it as a reporting tool in your project.

Use your Excel skills to analyze the database and report on the findings in your next journal entry, due Monday.

Oct. 21, 2015

Project work

We'll have a quick discussion via Skype about progress on your class project. Groups will then have time to work on their research. You'll be expected to update your journal with progress made by the end of class.

By next week:

No journal entries due, however you will have the following homework.

Read several fact check stories on the website Politifact.com or Pundictfact.com and find one that relied on public records. Summarize the story and describe what public records were used by reporters. Include how the information from records was used. If you can't tell what records were used, describe public records that might have been useful to the reporter.

Oct. 28, 2015

Project work

We'll have a quick discussion via Skype about progress on your class project. Groups will then have time to work on their research. You'll be expected to update your journal with progress made by the end of class.

By next week:

Journal entries are due by Monday. Update the progress you've made, including the response you got from the public records request you filed for homework last week.

Nov. 4, 2015

Chasing the story

Students will be handed basic facts from a real news event. During a classroom discussion, you'll be expected to take on the job of reporter and brainstorm what information you need to get next and where you will go to get it.

By next week:

Final journal entries due by Monday. Use these to summarize your research project **Nov. 11, 2015**

Project presentations

Nov. 18, 2015

Project presentations

Nov. 25, 2015

No class. No journals due.

Dec. 2, 2015

Exam review

Due next week: No journals

Dec. 9, 2015

Final exam in class

Due next week: No journals

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.

MAKEUP 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.

GROUP PROJECTS:

This course includes extensive work in groups. Each group is responsible for the content within the final project and to attempt to work out differences among members before alerting the professor. Under extenuating circumstances, grades may be differentiated based on work level. Near the end of the year, each student will file a peer evaluation describing the effort put in by the other group members. This required peer evaluation may impact points awarded for a student's project work.

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 instructor or TAs 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.