

## JO 210 – Reporting in Depth

**Boston University**

**Semester Year**

**Instructor:**

**Section:**

**Days/Time:**

**Room:**

### Syllabus

#### **Catalog course description:**

Students advance their reporting skills by learning to cover a city neighborhood or a community beat. Students branch out across the city and suburbs to cover courts, crime, education, local and state politics, and other essentials of community reporting. Students develop their own sources and story ideas with the goal of professional publication in the Boston University News Service or another news site. The purpose is to hone reporting skills, develop sources, and build both competence and confidence. Students produce stories, photos, audio and video for the Web. The class is run like a newsroom, and students are encouraged to show enterprise.

**Essential course question:** What is the media’s role in society? We’ll consider this together throughout the semester.

**Guiding course quote:** “Obviously, a man’s judgment cannot be better than the information on which he has based it. Give him the truth and he may still go wrong when he has the chance to be right, but give him no news or present him only with distorted or incomplete data, with ignorant, sloppy or biased reporting, with propaganda and deliberate falsehoods, and you destroy his whole reasoning processes, and make him something less than a man.” – Arthur Hays Sulzberger, New York State Publishers Association, 1948

#### **Learning objectives/acquired skills:**

Students will learn how to:

- carve out a geographic and topic beat;
- identify and develop story ideas and anticipate news;
- identify and develop diverse sources;
- hone interview skills;
- identify, request and mine public documents and data;
- use deadline-oriented online search techniques;
- craft and pitch a compelling news story in multiple styles;
- incorporate multimedia, including photos, videos, hyperlinks, GIFs and graphics; and
- write for multiple platforms.

### **Course execution:**

Beat reporting allows journalists to specialize in a geographic or topic area. They amass a body of knowledge through research, interviews and experience that allows them to follow more exactly and to anticipate more accurately the developments of the beat. They are astute and discerning. They are the formidable Fourth Estate, which functions outside of society's established circles of power and holds them accountable.

We will work together to develop the advanced skills needed for beat reporting from breaking in the beat to anticipating its news. You will learn how to research, develop sources, plan your coverage, spark enterprise ideas and write clear, informative articles in multiple styles that will inform your readers and enable them to make sound decisions.

### **Classroom standards:**

We emulate a newsroom environment in this class. Successful reporters are informed about the world, curious to learn more and diligent in their research and work. For this reason, students are expected to:

- attend every class and participate in discussion;
- meet all deadlines; and
- use correct English and follow AP style in all writing.

News is a fast-paced environment with few second chances. Students prepare for this by producing their best work and by meeting classroom deadlines and assignment due dates. **There are no make-ups for missed quizzes or in-class writing assignments unless you are excused for religious observances or have a documented medical emergency.**

### **Attendance expectations:**

College prepares you for the working world, where punctuality, diligence, and clear communication will go miles toward helping you to build a strong rapport with your supervisor and within your organization. Part of my job is to prepare you for this working world, so I hold you to those standards in the classroom (see Attendance Policy for details).

### **Classroom (and common) courtesy:**

The news business—reporting, writing and producing—hinges on reasoned people working together to make sound decisions. We'll mirror that iron-sharpening-iron atmosphere with roundtable discussions in class. All questions and comments in the bounds of civility and good taste are welcome. I look forward to hearing your unique perspective.

***Strict policy: No phone, tablet or laptop use in class. We will use classroom computers.***

### **Content caution:**

The world of news sometimes contains startling content. Video footage, police records, eyewitness accounts, courtroom testimony and other sources can produce images and descriptions that range from surprising, such as a crooked sheriff selling confiscated drugs, to deeply offensive, such as war brutalities, rape and child abuse. You will hear and see some of this content in class. It is understandable—normal—to have a reaction. As journalists, we take a minute, feel the emotion, then take a deep breath and channel that energy into producing the best possible story. The citizens of the world count on us to tell the unflinching truth, so they can make the best possible decisions.

### **Grading:**

- 1,000 points from writing, quizzes, AP test and class participation (see Grading Policy for details)

Quizzes (typically administered weekly) contain questions on:

- Any and all textbook or assigned reading since the previous quiz;
  - Any and all lecture material since the previous quiz (take notes during class); and
  - General knowledge of news events since the previous quiz (read the front page articles and associated story jumps of *The New York Times* and *The Boston Globe*).
- Submit your assignments on time (I excuse deadline tardiness only with a medical note or religious observance).

Deadlines are critical in journalism. News websites can't publish white space. TV news stations can't broadcast tape of reporters standing by silently, and radio stations can't go on with dead air. **Any assignments submitted late will be marked down immediately 25 percent.**

- Please follow the required format for all written assignments (see Submitting Work for details).

*This course has neither a mid-term nor a final exam.*

## **Communication:**

- **Office hours:**
  - **Office location:**
- **Email:**
- **Instructor conferences:** We will meet one-on-one during the semester to discuss your classroom goals and progress.

## **Required reading:**

- Field Guide to Covering Local News, by Fred Bayles
- On Writing Well, by William Zinsser
- The Associated Press Stylebook – 2017 (spiral-bound hard copy)

## **Plagiarism and fabrication:**

**“Plagiarism is the act of representing someone else’s creative and/or academic work as your own, in full or in part. It can be an act of commission, in which one intentionally appropriates the words, pictures or ideas of another, or it can be an act of omission, in which one fails to acknowledge/document/give credit to the source, creative and/or copyright owner of those works, pictures or ideas. Any fabrication of materials, quotes or sources, other than that created in a work of fiction, is also plagiarism. Plagiarism is the most serious academic offense that you can commit and can result in probation, suspension or expulsion.”**

-- Boston University College of Communication Academic Conduct Code

## **What does the above mean in concrete terms?**

- You cannot pull information from another news story and plug that information into your own copy (by duplication, changing several words or paraphrasing) without attribution. That is plagiarism.
- You cannot invent any portion of your article. That is fabrication.

**As a student, these actions will lead to an academic investigation. As a journalist, these actions are job-ending (and sometimes career-ending) offenses.**

## **Weekly classroom topic and assignment schedule:**

The following topics and assignments may vary as class time and unforeseen events (such as breaking news) dictate. *Please note: Additional readings and writing will be assigned periodically.*

### **Week 1 – Jan. 18: Welcome, introduction to beat reporting and dossiers**

Media history – role and impact  
Beat reporting – form and function  
Dossiers – form and function

### **Week 2 – Jan. 23-25: Carving out the beat, story ideas and sources**

Tips for breaking in a beat – dossier, shoe leather  
Developing solid sources – trust and trustworthiness  
Mining the beat for story ideas – research, history, ongoing and future issues

Due Jan. 23:           Dossier, Part I (names and numbers, demographics)  
                              Read Bayles, chapters 1 and 2  
                              Read handout, “How to Break in a Beat”

Due Jan. 25:           Read AP Guide to Newswriting, chapters 1 and 2  
                              Read Zinsser, chapters 1 to 3  
                              Read handout, “Sources – How to Cultivate”

### **Week 3 – Jan. 30 - Feb. 1: Story pitches and development; research**

Developing and pitching story ideas (advancing the story)  
Research – public documents, online search techniques, mining data  
AP style test

Due Jan. 30:           Dossier, Part II (three ongoing issues)  
                              Read Zinsser, chapters 4 and 5  
                              Read handout, “Qualities of a Good Story”

Due Feb. 1:           (none, AP style test today)

#### **Week 4 – Feb. 6-8: Interviews - Prepare, Conduct, Distill**

Qualities of a successful interview – prepare, approach, listen, capture the essence

- Due Feb. 6:           Read Bayles, chapters 3 and 4  
                          Read Zinsser, chapters 6 and 7  
                          Read handout, “Interviewing Principles”
- Due Feb. 8:           Conversation summaries (three people on your beat)

#### **Week 5 – Feb. 13-15: Writing**

Writing a compelling news story – leads, kickers, the body, quotes

- Due Feb. 13:           Read Zinsser, chapters 8 and 9  
                          Read AP Guide to Newswriting, chapter 3  
                          Read AP Punctuation Guide (in the AP Stylebook)
- Due Feb. 15:           Story pitches (three beat story ideas, two profile ideas)

#### **Week 6 – Feb. 20-22: Features and Profiles, Part I**

*(No class Tuesday, Feb. 20 due to the Monday class substitution schedule.)*

- Due Feb. 22:           Beat story (350-400 words)  
                          Confirm three disparate sources for profile story

#### **Week 7 – Feb. 27 – March 1: Features and Profiles, Part II**

Feature writing – the storytelling craft

Profiles –

Background checks

- Due Feb. 27:           Read Zinsser, chapters 11 and 12  
                          Handout, “How to write a profile feature article” (NYT)
- Due March 1:           First interview for profile story

**Week 8 – March 6-8: Spring break**

*(no class – no office hours)*

**Week 9 – March 13-15: Police and breaking news reporting**

Breaking news reporting and related research

Crime scene reporting and related research

Due March 13:        Read Bayles, chapter 5  
                              Read Zinsser, chapter 10

Due March 15:        Second and third interviews for profile story  
                              Outline for profile story (ID structure & quotes; write opening & closing)

**Week 10 – March 20-22: Fires / emergencies**

Extreme weather and disasters

Fire scene reporting and related research

Due March 20:        Obtain activity report from police station  
                              Police story (150- 250 words)  
                              Read Bayles, chapter 6

Due March 22:        Profile story (500 words)  
                              Select a municipal meeting to attend

- obtain agenda for meeting
- set up interview with committee member

**Week 11 – March 27-29: Courts**

American judicial system

Criminal court records

Due March 27:        Fire story (100 words)  
                              Read Bayles, chapter 7

Due March 29:        Visit Boston courthouse (cover an arraignment)  
                              Background for municipal meeting

- interview committee member
- five-sentence summary of issue

## **Week 12 – April 3-5: Government**

Covering public meetings

Searching public records – finding sources, reading budgets

Due April 3: Arraignment story (100-150 words)  
Read Bayles, chapter 8  
Handout, “Covering Government”

**Due April 6 (Fri.):** Attend municipal meeting  
Municipal meeting story (400-500 words, file immediately)

## **Week 13 – April 10-12: Enterprise / Issue Reporting, Part I**

Forms, facets and functions of enterprise / issue reporting

Research (quantify the issue, show newsworthiness), identifying sources

Due April 10: Identify topic for enterprise or issue story  
Read Zinsser, chapters 20 to 22

Due April 12: Research on enterprise or issue topic (background and/or quantify)  
First interview for enterprise or issue story

## **Week 14 – April 17-19: Enterprise / Issue Reporting, Part II**

Due April 17: Second and third interviews for enterprise or issue story

Due April 19: First draft of enterprise or issue story (750 words)  
Read Zinsser, chapter 23

## **Week 15 – April 24-26: We rise and fall together**

Journalism today and tomorrow (looming threats, promising safeguards)

Panama Papers

Due April 24: (none)

Due April 26: Read Zinsser, chapter 25  
Final draft of enterprise or issue story (750 words)

**Week 16 – May 1-3: Review**

Due May 1: “\$#\*%&y Draft” handout

*(Last class Tuesday, May 1.)*