

MCOM 1243 – News Writing I

Fall 2007 – 3 credits

Room B 124 Fain Fine Arts Center

Tuesday, Thursday – 9:30 a.m.

Lab: Monday, 1-2:50 p.m.

Dr. Jim Sernoe

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Office Hours: Monday – 9-10 a.m., 11 a.m.-1 p.m.;

Tuesday – 9:30-11 a.m.; Wednesday – 9-10 a.m., 2-4 p.m.;

Thursday – 9:30-11 a.m.; Friday – 9-10 a.m.

Also by appointment

Prerequisites and Conditions

- There are no longer any formal prerequisites for this course, although it is strongly suggested that you take this course after you have had the freshman composition courses.
- You are not permitted to take this course during the same semester that you take MCOM 3313 – Studio Procedures I.

Course Objectives/Description

- This course is designed to give students the skills needed to write and report for the mass media.
- Emphasis will be placed on accuracy, technical ability, fairness, ethics, coherence and speed in writing.
- Students will gain an appreciation for, and a better ability with, the “nuts and bolts” of good writing: spelling, grammar, sentence structure, style, punctuation and clarity.
- Students will gain introductory experience in essential reporting skills such as interviewing, researching, and working with human and non-human sources.
- Students will gain a better understanding of some of the legal and ethical issues they may encounter during their mass communication careers.
- Students will be prepared to move to other writing classes in the major, such as News Writing II (MCOM 3133) and Studio Procedures I (MCOM 3313).

Students should note that this is a writing and reporting class and will involve substantial writing as well as some outside reporting of news. The goal of the course is for students to understand and perform the basic techniques needed to succeed in a mass communication career, which always starts with solid writing ability. As this is a survey course, emphasis will be placed on gaining a broad, general understanding, and it will be

difficult to study specific topics in depth. However, I encourage students to approach me about suggestions for more in-depth readings and/or projects on various topics.

Reading

Required:

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law
Any paperback dictionary

Recommended (strongly):

Strunk and White – The Elements Of Style
Brooks, Pinson and Wilson – Working with Words: A Handbook for Media Writers and Editors
Any thesaurus

An excellent resource on the Internet:

The Grammar Lady Online – www.grammarlady.com

These materials will be supplemented by **numerous** handouts over the course of the semester.

Grading

Final grades will be based on in-class and outside assignments, quizzes and a final project. There will not be any mid-term or final exams. Because journalism is a discipline that lives and dies by the clock, missed deadlines will be **severely** penalized. Details on all assignments will be given as the semester progresses.

In-Class and Outside Assignments – 50%: Assignments will be completed in class almost every day. You will also be given fact sheets to take home, and the articles produced as part of these assignments will count toward this component. Worksheets and lab exercises will also be part of this component. You will also be required to cover two outside stories, such as meetings, speeches and sports events. All outside work must be typed.

Please note that the number of assignments is not set in stone. This means that it is impossible at the outset of the semester to determine how much each individual assignment will be worth.

Editing/Style Quizzes – 25%: There will be three announced quizzes on mechanics such as AP style, grammar, spelling, etc. In addition, if I sense that you are not keeping up with the assignments or attendance is poor, unannounced quizzes will be given and they will count toward your final grade. All unannounced quizzes will be given at the beginning of class, and late students will receive scores of zero unless the late arrival is excused.

Final Project – 25%: You will be required to produce a multi-source, in-depth article suitable for publication. **Final projects are due on Thursday, December 6, 2007, at 9:30 a.m. PLAN AHEAD!** Because you have all semester to prepare these articles, **no late assignments will be accepted.** Proposals and rough drafts will be due at various points during the semester. A separate schedule of due dates will be passed out later in the semester. All outside work must be typed. In lieu of a final exam, we will spend the final exam period discussing and critiquing the final projects.

Attendance: Attendance does not constitute a specific part of your grade, but **perfect** attendance is required. In the absence of a required textbook, attendance is critical, and I will go to great lengths to attain full attendance (see note above re. quizzes, for example). In light of the fact that you will hand in work at the end of almost every class session, being here to do the work is equally critical (see also the Missed Assignments Policy). If you have to miss a class or a deadline for any reason, please contact me IN ADVANCE to let me know. **CONTACTING ME IN ADVANCE DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY EXCUSE AN ABSENCE**, but it is a lot better than calling after the fact. If you fail to contact me before the next class period to explain an absence, it will be very difficult for me to excuse the absence. Please note that work, non-emergency medical and dental appointments, hangovers, intramural games, visitors from out of town, fixing your roommate's computer, fraternity/sorority events, arguments with boyfriends/girlfriends and studying for other classes do **NOT** constitute excused absences.

If you need to miss class due to a religious holiday, please see me as far in advance as possible.

If you need to miss class due to university-sponsored events such as field trips and sports, please see me as far in advance as possible. You will be required to complete the assigned work on or before the due date, and you will be required to submit an official form from the university before your absence.

As one of my former colleagues says, in the "real world," you can not do your job if you are not present to do it. Employers do not generally tolerate such behavior, and employees who offer weak, irritating excuses frequently find themselves unemployed and unemployable. The same rules apply in this course. I don't judge anyone who chooses to make attending classes a secondary (or lower) priority. However, this choice is not without consequences.

If you cannot make it a priority to attend every class session, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot.

IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO SEE ME IF YOU MISS CLASS. I will not chase students around the city.

A related note: You are required to be on time and I have little tolerance for those who are continually late. Constant tardiness will be noted and could lower your final grade. I am not above embarrassing students who walk in late.

Missed Assignments Policy: **If you miss any assignments or quizzes without being excused, you will fail the course.** I reserve the right to determine whether an absence will be excused. In-class assignments may be excused at my discretion; however, all outside assignments must be completed within a reasonable time frame after your absence – no exceptions. In addition, I reserve the right to determine what, exactly, is a “reasonable time frame.” **In sum: This is a zero-tolerance policy. I have no time or patience for those who are not going to take this class seriously; thus, “three strikes and you’re out” does not apply. “ONE strike and you’re out” is more applicable.** Some past students have flunked the course for this reason. In any case, I tend to be cynical about making up missed assignments, but if you have a legitimate problem, alternate arrangements can be made at my discretion.

A related note: You will be required to cover several events outside of class time. If your other commitments will make it impossible for you to do so, please drop this course now. Work, non-emergency medical and dental appointments, hangovers, intramural games, visitors from out of town, fixing your roommate’s computer, fraternity/sorority events, arguments with boyfriends/girlfriends and studying for other classes do **NOT** constitute accepted excuses for missing an outside assignment. See also the Missed Assignments Policy.

If you cannot make it a priority to complete every assignment, on time, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the Missed Assignments Policy.

Attitude: Many of the outside assignments – and all of the ideas for your final project – will be generated by you, which means you will need to take the initiative. In addition, you need to understand that this course serves as

a building-block to many other courses in the mass communication major. It has weeded out many of your predecessors who could not handle the demands placed upon them. This course allows mass communication majors to look at their writing skills in order to make an informed decision about continuing in this major.

I realize this course requires a lot for the three credits you earn, but every assignment is designed so you will move that much further with your writing and reporting skills. This is not the type of course in which you can read a chapter, attend few class sessions, take a test . . . and end up with an A for the semester despite very little effort. Skills courses like News writing require your time, attention and effort. Students who are not insightful enough to value the learning opportunities inherent to this class tend to do poorly. Although there is no set percentage for this component, it will play a big role if you are on the "borderline" at the end of the semester.

If you cannot make it a priority to have a good attitude, please drop now so another student, who is more serious, can have your spot. See also the Missed Assignments Policy.

A related note: Cellular phones, pagers and other similar devices will not be tolerated. In my mind, they are a sign of a bad attitude. I will not tolerate annoying jingles and beeps. If you own such a device, turn it off, put it on vibrate or somehow make sure it doesn't make any noise while I am trying to conduct class – better yet, leave it at home or in your car. If your other commitments are so pressing that they can not wait until the end of the class session, it may be in your best interests to reconsider the priority you place on being here. In any case, I reserve the right to ask you to leave immediately or to embarrass you mercilessly if your beepers/phones/pagers/etc. make noise during class.

Unfortunately, laptop computers, iPhones and other similar equipment will not be allowed in class for note-taking. Although I realize this is a convenient way to take notes, past students have abused the privilege by using the equipment to surf the Internet, send e-mail, and troll Facebook. I will not tolerate this kind of distraction.

Sending and receiving text messages during class will not be tolerated.

I reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she has excessive absences or missed assignments, engages in disruptive behavior, has a poor attitude, or in any other way is clearly not taking the class seriously.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you

are indicating that you understand my expectations for students concerning attendance, attitude and work ethic.

Class Participation: This component is included not because I am a fanatic about class participation, but because being quiet when one has the chance to talk or ask questions is not an asset in any area of journalism. And once

again, there is no set percentage for this component, but it will play a big role if you are on the "borderline" at the end of the semester.

Two final notes on grading: Critics from both within and outside of higher education have accused faculty of engaging in "grade inflation," the idea that grades don't truly reflect quality and instead have been devalued to the point that an A means very good, a B means average, and anything less than a B is failing. I'm not sure whether those people would include me in their criticisms, but I do know I try my best to adhere to the system as I understand it: an A means outstanding, a B means above average, and a C means average. Please remember these interpretations as the semester progresses.

Please remember also that attending every class and completing every assignment do not constitute outstanding quality or guarantee an A for the course. Attending every class and completing every assignment are only prerequisites for achieving a desired grade in the class. Too many students have argued that these are the reasons they deserved an A in the class, and I do not buy into this way of thinking.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the grading policies for the course. If you have questions, you should see me as soon as possible.

Ethics

The MSU Student Honor Creed, written and adopted by the 2002-2003 MSU Student Senate, covers expectations related to cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty. The main statement from this document is:

"As an MSU student, I pledge not to lie, cheat, steal, or help anyone else to do so."

All students in my courses are expected to abide by this student-produced document, as well as all other related university policies. I will provide copies of the MSU Student Honor Creed to any student who requests one. It is also on page 4 of the 2009-2010 MSU Student Handbook (the handbook is also available online at <http://forms.mwsu.edu/uploaded-forms/Student-Handbook-2009-10-20090810-080535.pdf>).

In addition, the university requires faculty to provide this statement to all students:

By enrolling in this course, the student expressly

grants MSU a “limited right” in all intellectual property created by the student for the purpose of this course. The “limited right” shall include but shall not be limited to the right to reproduce the student’s work product in order to verify originality and authenticity, and educational purposes.

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the statement provided above and agree to comply with it.

I require **COMPLETE** honesty in producing your work. Working professionals are often encouraged to confer with their colleagues on strategies and wordings, but there is a difference between advice and blatant plagiarism.

I also realize it will be very easy to confer with colleagues on take-home assignments, but you should realize that instructors can usually identify when students have worked together. I also realize the Internet provides a convenient source of information, but students need to be aware that proper citation will be required.

Past students will tell you I take this issue very seriously and have not hesitated to confront them. A slightly higher grade on an assignment is not worth the extremely unpleasant experience of taking an accusation of academic dishonesty through the university hierarchy. Please don’t force me to do it.

I reserve the right to drop any student with an F if he/she engages in any form of academic dishonesty. I further reserve the right to recommend other sanctions as may be appropriate. Students are also encouraged to consult the following sources for additional discussion of students’ rights and responsibilities regarding cheating, attendance and general conduct:

- **The MSU Student Honor Creed**
- **Pages 22-24, 84-89, 90 and 94-97 of the 2008-2010 MSU Undergraduate Catalog**
- **Pages 4, 35-46, 55-80 of the 2009-2010 MSU Student Handbook (the handbook is also available online at <http://forms.mwsu.edu/uploaded-forms/Student-Handbook-2009-10-20090810-080535.pdf>).**

By accepting this syllabus and remaining enrolled in this course, you are indicating that you understand the seriousness of academic

dishonesty and realize I will impose the harshest sanctions possible if I can prove you have engaged in academic dishonesty. You are also indicating that you understand what constitutes academic dishonesty; I will not tolerate the excuse that the student did not know he/she was engaging in academic dishonesty.

Privacy

Federal privacy law prohibits me from releasing information about students to certain parties outside of the university without the signed consent of the student. Thus, in almost all cases I will not discuss your academic progress or other matters with your parents. Please do not have them call me. Regardless of these important legal considerations, it is my general policy to communicate with the students, not their parents, even when a student has signed a consent form. College students are adults and are expected to behave accordingly.

Materials

Each day you should bring the following to class: the AP Stylebook, your pocket dictionary, your thesaurus, pens and an extra supply of sanity for the days you leave feeling as if you have none left.

Computer Lab

Students are expected to follow all rules posted in the computer lab. All food and beverages must be kept away from the equipment, preferably on the shelves near the door. Any abuse or misuse of equipment will result in expulsion from the lab for the semester and/or assessment of replacement/repair costs. In short, if you break it, you buy it.

In addition, I will not tolerate students using the computers while I am trying to conduct class. Past students have surfed the Internet, read their e-mail, and/or played games while I have been discussing assignments, introducing new material or conducting a class discussion. If I catch a student using the computer at an inappropriate time, he or she will be asked to leave immediately. A second offense will lead to his/her being dropped from the course with an F. See also the section on Attitude.

Special Accommodations

Students with disabilities or who are in need of special arrangements should see me as early as possible in the semester. I will do what I can within reason to accommodate your needs. Please note that in order to qualify for consideration of special accommodations, you must be registered with the MSU Office of Disability Support Services, and I must have a memo on file from that office, along with the Special Accommodations Request form.

Some Advice

1. Attend regularly. This point cannot be stressed enough.
2. Thoroughly understand all grading policies.
3. Note the Missed Assignments Policy and know that it is enforced.
4. Note the Academic Dishonesty Policy and know that it is enforced.
5. Note the Privacy Policy and know that it is followed.
6. If anything in this syllabus is unclear or if you have questions as the course progresses, ask!
7. Keep a log of your errors and pay careful attention to the comments you receive with each assignment. Finding trends in my comments will help you identify and eliminate your errors, thus strengthening your writing.
8. Expect to write quite a bit. My philosophy of writing courses is that students should write and write and write and write – then they should write some more. A student looking back at the semester once said to me, “You made us write our a**es off in there,” and she was write, I mean right. If you’re planning a cakewalk through this course, drop now.

Course Organization and Schedule

Even though the course is technically divided into lecture and lab, we will meet in the computer lab every day, and you should expect to write something nearly every day. I will introduce each new topic with straight lecture, then you will have one or several assignments relating to that topic.

This is the **TENTATIVE** course schedule. Due to storms, last-minute changes, extended class discussions and my frequent inability to stick to the agenda I set at the beginning of the course, this schedule is likely to change. **I reserve the right to change the class schedule if circumstances make it necessary.** Chances are good that you will receive at least one revised schedule before the semester is over. If deadlines, reading assignments or quiz dates change, I will tell you well in advance. Please note that the reading and general workloads vary considerably from week to week.

<u>Date (s)</u>	<u>Topic (s)</u>	<u>Reading</u>
8/27 – Lab, 8/28, 8/30	Introduction; Overview of the Industry; Computers; Word Choice/Language; Sentence Structure; Grammar/Punctuation; AP Style; Copy Editing; Organizing News Articles; Definitions of News	Handouts

<u>Date (s)</u>	<u>Topic (s)</u>	<u>Reading</u>
9/3	Labor Day – Classes Canceled	
9/4, 9/6, 9/10 – Lab	Leads	
9/11, 9/13, 9/17 – Lab, 9/18	Basics of Reporting; More on Organization of News Articles; Short Articles and Obligatories	Handouts
9/20	Quiz #1	
9/20, 9/24 – Lab, 9/25, 9/27, 10/1 – Lab	Quotation and Attribution; Interviewing	Handouts
10/2	Story Memos/Final Project	Handouts
10/2, 10/4, 10/8 – Lab	Finish Quotation and Attribution; Interviewing	
10/9	Story Memos Due at 9:30 a.m.	
10/9, 10/11, 10/15 – Lab	Police/Fire; Obituaries; Futures; Weather	Handouts
10/16, 10/18	Individual Conferences	
10/22 – Lab	Finish Police/Fire; Obituaries; Futures; Weather	Handouts
10/23, 10/25, 10/29 – Lab	Features and Reviews	Handouts
10/30, 11/1	Sports	Handouts
11/1	Update Memo Due at 9:30 a.m.	
11/5 – Lab	Finish Sports	Handouts
11/6	Quiz #2	
11/6	Speeches and Press Conferences	Handouts

<u>Date (s)</u>	<u>Topic (s)</u>	<u>Reading</u>
11/8	Outside Article Due at 9:30 a.m.	
11/8, 11/12 - Lab	Finish Speeches and Press Conferences	
11/13, 11/15	Public Affairs Reporting	Handouts
11/15	Final Project Draft Due at 9:30 a.m.	
11/19	Quiz #3	
11/19 – Lab	Finish Public Affairs Reporting	
11/21, 11/23	Thanksgiving Break – Classes Canceled	
11/26 – Lab, 11/27	Life in Journalism	
11/29, 12/3 – Lab, 12/4, 12/6	Legal and Ethical Problems in Journalism	AP – pp. 338-369 Handouts
12/6	Final Project Due at 9:30 a.m.	
Tuesday, 12/11, 8 a.m.	Final Exam Session	