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## JRNL 494.01: Pollner Seminar - Court Reporting, the Best Seat in the House

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**SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM, UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA**

**FALL 2014 - POLLNER SEMINAR**

**COURT REPORTING: THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE**

**Instructor: Bill Glaberson**

**429 Don Anderson Hall**

**Class schedule: Mondays and Wednesdays 12:10 to 1:30**

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**Office hours: 9:30 to 11:30 Mon. – Thurs., Anytime with an email**

**The Course:**

The courthouse is a standard stop in a reporter's career. It is a mainstay of news, whether delivered by print, broadcast, digital or pigeon. The court beat can be an art, a science, a gusher of big stories and a ton of fun. In this highly participatory seminar, we'll get a taste of all that with an eye on the very practical: how to cover a trial, how to find other court stories, how to decide what the story is, how to file for the web and, most important, how to get a courtroom seat.

We'll read court coverage. We'll talk about why it works or doesn't. You will go to court to find stories and bring back tales of your adventures. In class, we'll deconstruct published stories to consider such topics as "quotes are your friend in court stories" and "sources: how court reporters should be more like comedians." I will tell as many court-reporting tales as I can. My goal is to spark a conversation about news reporting, ethics, and writing.

We'll notice that court reporting is a beat with rich possibilities for every kind of story: news, features, profiles, analysis, investigative stories, trend roundups, data journalism, tweets and who-knows-what that you need to invent. It is a beat that offers the spectrum of life, from the silly to the grisly, which, in journalism, means opportunities for storytelling.

### **The Class:**

I will talk on court-reporting topics. You will describe reporting trips to local courts and court stories you select from newspapers around the country. The point is to encourage reactions and wonder. Everyone should participate in every class with shared journalism experiences, questions, worries, criticism and observations.

There is no textbook. But for some classes I will assign a news article on a court case. When I do, you are also assigned to email me a sentence or two about the article before the class — sometimes a tweet, sometimes a reaction or a question.

In three classes, you will write short news stories on deadline. These will be the kinds of daily assignments you will get on your first courthouse job: the quirky legal story off a news event, a spot story on a judge's ruling, a story based on a trial day.

Trips to court as a reporter are a central part of this class. Four class periods are set aside for court visits. But if I were you, I'd go more often and I'd start soon. You need to come up with three stories: a blog item, a short news story and your final more ambitious story. Plus, court is addictive.

### **Grades:**

Reading assignments, class participation and court reporting will make up 45% of your grade.

Writing, 55%.

Here's how:

**45% reading, court reporting and class participation.** The email for each of eight assigned articles, maximum grade 2 (2x8=16). For your discussion in class about an interesting court article that week, maximum grade 4. Once, you will describe a visit to court as if you were making a story pitch to an editor based on what you saw, maximum grade 5. Class discussion participation for the semester, 20.

**55% writing.** Each of the three in class news stories, maximum grade 5. Two court assignments, maximum grade 10 each. Final story: Sked line and possible lead, maximum grade 5; final story, maximum grade 15.

Do the math. That makes 100, I hope. I may use a slight curve.

## **RULES:**

**Students with disabilities** and/or special needs should notify the instructor to work to make this course accessible to otherwise qualified students and contact Disabilities Services for Students, <http://www.umt.edu/dss/> or x2243.

**Academic Misconduct and the Student Conduct Code:** As you know, students must practice academic honesty. Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code [www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/Index.cfm/page/1321](http://www.umt.edu/SA/VPSA/Index.cfm/page/1321).

**Plagiarism:** All your work must be your own. **Fabrication:** Journalists don't make things up. If you copy other people's work or make up facts or quotes, you could fail this class and face additional punishment from the University.

**Do not reuse work** by submitting any assignment you have used elsewhere, in a prior class or publication. Work must be original.

**Do not miss deadlines.** In journalism, if you miss deadlines you get fired. We are professionals here. I will drop a letter grade for every day an assignment is late.

**Devices:** Turn it off.

**Class schedule:**

Discussion topics might change.

Each student will be scheduled to briefly describe a court visit and to find and discuss an article on current court news.

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|----------------|---|
| Mon., Aug. 25  | Topic: Introduction to the course. Why reporting in court can be the best job in journalism.          |
| Wed., Aug 27   | Topic: Court reporting in seven letters: SBF, D., and DDD.  |
| Mon., Sept. 1  | No class. Labor Day.  |
| Wed., Sept. 3  | Topic: News writing for court stories. When the word “blubberer” can be useful.                       |
| Mon., Sept. 8  | Topic: How to break news on the court beat.   |
| Wed., Sept. 10 | Writing day: Deadline writing in class. The quirky court story assignment.                            |
| Mon., Sept. 15 | Topic: See you in court. What a court reporter’s day might be like.                                   |
| Wed., Sept. 17 | Topic: Covering a trial, part one. After you get there yourself, take the readers or listeners there. |
| Mon., Sept. 22 | COURT REPORTING time  |
| Wed., Sept. 24 | Topic: Covering a trial, part two. A big trial has a moment.  |
| Mon, Sept. 29  | Topic: Quotes are your friend in court stories.   |
| Wed., Oct. 1   | Writing day: Deadline writing in class. Spot story on a judge’s ruling.                               |
| Mon., Oct. 6   | Topic: Covering a verdict. Don’t break a leg.   |

\*Due date: 300-word blog item from court

- Wed., Oct 8 COURT REPORTING time
- Mon., Oct 13 Topic: Where are the court stories? The courts nobody knows.
- Wed., Oct 15 Topic: Writing and overwriting court stories and why reporting matters.
- Mon., Oct. 20 Topic: Court news sources and how reporters should be more like comedians.  
\*Due date: 400-word story from court
- Wed., Oct. 22 Writing day: Deadline writing in class. Spot story from a trial day, a transcript.
- Mon., Oct. 27 COURT REPORTING time
- Wed., Oct. 29 Topic: How to cover the court beat. How reporters think about stories outside the courtroom.
- Mon., Nov. 3 Topic: Writing about the courts as a system, using every reporting tool in the book and then some.
- Wed., Nov. 5 Topic: Editors can be really wrong.
- Mon., Nov. 10 Topic: Tents, planes and secrets: Covering the war courts at Guantanamo.
- Wed., Nov. 12 COURT REPORTING time
- Mon., Nov. 17 Topic: Following a running court story like the death penalty.  
\*Due date: sked line and possible lead paragraphs for final story

Wed., Nov. 19	Topic: How you get a story sometimes.
Mon., Nov. 24	Topic: Using court documents. A legal motion is worth 1000 words.
Wed., Nov. 26	No class scheduled. Thanksgiving break.
Mon., Dec. 1	Topic: Court access and why you might need to make a federal judge cry. *Due date: final story. 800- to 1000-words.
Wed., Dec. 3	Last day of class. Discuss.