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JRNL 362.50: Feature Writing

Courtney L. Cowgill

University of Montana - Missoula, courtney.cowgill@mso.umt.edu

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J362 Feature Writing: Course Syllabus

Instructor: Courtney Lowery Cowgill

Fall 2015

E-mail: courtney.cowgill@mso.umt.edu

Phone: 406-531-4794 (Personal cell. Urgent or scheduled calls only. E-mail is preferred.)

Office Hours: I am not on campus so will not have physical office hours. But, we can Skype or Google+ Hangout anytime – just schedule something that works for you.

CLASS DATES AND LOCATION:

Class dates and location: This online class runs from Aug. 31 to Dec. 18 and is available through Moodle. Most of the course you'll be able to work around your other schedules and do at your own pace throughout the week but we will have an hour-long meeting via video chat every other Monday at 5 p.m. as well as several to-be-announced times throughout the semester. You are required to attend no fewer than four of these meetings during the course.

SPECIAL WRITING WORKSHOP:

We will have one in-person writing workshop on campus on October 24, from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

BOOKS:

You will need one book for this class: "Telling True Stories: A Nonfiction Writers' Guide from the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University." You can [read it online here](#). Others you should read, but are not required are: "The New Kings of Non-Fiction," by Ira Glass, and "Life Stories: Profiles from The New Yorker," by David Remnick.

TECH RESOURCES:

UMOnline (406) 243-6367, coursewaresupport@umontana.edu, <http://umonline.umt.edu> (Contact Us tab).

IMPORTANT DATES:

Oct. 11: First draft of profile due.

Oct. 24: In-person writing workshop in Missoula.

Nov. 1: Final draft of profile due.

Nov. 15: First draft of narrative due.

Dec. 6: Final draft of narrative due.

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OUTCOMES

Students will learn and improve storytelling skills that include interviewing, reporting, curating and writing integral to feature stories, building on the traditional “hard news” styles they’ve encountered in prior classes. This class will teach the various genres of feature writing, explore how features have changed in the digital landscape and help students develop style and nuance to deepen their foundations and prepare them for working in newsrooms, online operations, and freelancing. There will be a heavy emphasis in this class on narrative storytelling across media. By the end of the course, successful students should be able to demonstrate an understanding of history and role of media, critically evaluate work, and tailor it to the appropriate audience, think critically and creatively about long-form journalism and write correctly and clearly.

PREREQUISITE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Students must have successfully passed J270. Any experience writing feature stories for online or print publications is desirable, but not mandatory.

COURSE PARTICIPATION/COMPLETION CRITERIA

- Complete all course readings, activities, assignments and assessments.
- Participate regularly via the forums – posts should be thorough, thoughtful and timely. Clean copy counts; messy and careless copy counts against. Read over your work for spelling, grammar, missing words, etc., before posting.

GRADING

Feature assignments: Roughly 60 percent of your grade.

Forum discussions and writing exercises: 40 percent of your grade.

Grades will be based on a scale of 100 percent and will use the University of Montana's plus/minus system. Letter grades will not be used in this course, although the final grade (per requirement) will be given as a letter grade. The equivalents are as follows:

90 - 100 percent: A

80 - 89 percent: B

70 - 79 percent: C

60 - 69 percent: D

50 - 59 percent: F

UM's plus/minus system also makes the following distinctions:

A+: 97-100
A: 93-96
A-: 90-92
B+: 87-89
B: 83-86
B-: 80-82
C+: 77-79
C: 73-76
C-: 70-72
D+: 67-69
D: 63-66
D-: 60-62
F: 59 or lower

Please note: Feature writing is a tough skill. Few do it well as beginners. My grading philosophy is based on a professional scale; that means 90 percent and above is reserved for those articles that could, without major revisions, be accepted by working editors at respected publications. Students who expect an easy A in this course should reconsider taking it.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ASSIGNMENTS AND COURSE STRUCTURE

- **Structure:** The first half of the class will be somewhat of a seminar course – structured around small writing assignments, forums and laying the groundwork for the second half of the semester, in which you will write (and rewrite) your pants off.
- **Forums:** With an online class and limited face-to-face engagement, your learning from other students and sharing of ideas will happen primarily in the forums. You will comment in each assigned forum, which will tend to be based on readings and assignments and you should take care in building on the comments from your fellow students. To earn a higher grade on forums, students must respond to each other, checking back throughout the week. Treat the forums as an interactive, engaging classroom, making it a priority to learn and grow as a group. Analytic, creative and courteous responses are required.
- **Feature assignments:** You'll produce two features in this class. The first will be a knock-out personality profile. The first draft of that will be due Oct. 11. The second will be a long-form literary narrative. The first draft of the narrative will be due Nov. 15 but you are expected to start working on it (finding it, pitching it, reporting it, etc.) the first few weeks of class.
- Both assignments will be heavily workshopped, so be ready to share your work with your classmates.

- Also, be ready to rewrite. In this class, we will learn how to make our work better by working with editors (the most important one being yourself) and build on your pieces. That is why there are only two major assignments. You will work on those assignments throughout the semester. This is not a turn-your-piece-in-and-flee class. Features is a long game so this course is a long game. As William Zinsser put it, “rewriting is the essence of writing well—where the game is won or lost.”
- **Late assignments:** I will not accept them.
- **Format:** All assignments, including the features and smaller writing assignments, should be 12-point type, single spaced within paragraphs, double-space to separate paragraphs, one space between sentences. In other words: like the format of this syllabus.

ADDITIONAL COURSE POLICIES

- All assignments, unless otherwise noted in the learning units section of the course site, are due by 5:00 p.m. MST on Sunday of the week listed.
- Discussion board posts are due by 5:00 p.m. on the day of the forum, usually Tuesdays.
- Please use Firefox as your browser (per advice of Moodle tech folks)
- Always check your spelling, punctuation, grammar and syntax. This is a writing course. Students may find it helpful to read their assignments out loud and, thereby, catch awkward phrases. Sloppy copy errors will be reflected in final grades.
- Again: Reread your assignments for spelling, punctuation and grammar before you file your copy to me. Three misspellings or a misspelled name is an automatic F. Consider yourself warned.
- Always fact-check your work. Only misspelled names will drop a grade faster than facts that are misconstrued or downright wrong. Again, consider yourself warned.
- Assignments must be labeled consistently: For example, the first writing assignment would be named like this: YourName_Freeform.doc. Please use an underscore (_) not a dash (-) to separate your name from the name of the assignment or other symbols.
- Be sure to follow AP style.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities and/or special needs should notify the instructor at his or her earliest convenience and contact Disabilities Services for Students, <http://www.umt.edu/dss/> or x2243.

ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT AND THE STUDENT CONDUCT CODE

All 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](#). More on academic honesty is available [here](#).

PLAGIARIASM

Have pride in your work and banish the idea of turning in something written by someone else. I will be checking. Penalties range from failing this class to expulsion from school.

CLASS WORK

You may not submit for this course any assignment that was, or will be concurrently, submitted for another class unless you receive prior approval from the professor for this course. To do so without permission will result in an F for the assignment and could result in an F for the course.

AFTER-HOURS ACCESS

For after-hours access to Don Anderson Hall, complete and submit [this form](#) online: Complete only one request form per semester – be sure to list all courses you are taking. Codes will remain active until the last day of the semester