

Communication 104: Reporting & Writing the News

Winter, 2003

T/Th 3:15-5:05

Room 410, Building 120

Professor Fred Turner
336 McClatchy Hall
(650) 725-2239
fturner@stanford.edu

Office Hours: Wednesday, 3-5, and by appointment.

Course Goals:

This course is a workshop in reporting and writing the news. It aims to sharpen your interviewing, observation and writing skills, as well as your understanding of the journalism business. By the end of ten weeks, you should understand the basics of covering a news story and writing it up and you should be able to produce news stories of publishable quality.

Expectations:

Because the class is a workshop, we'll use the classroom itself like a newsroom. In any given class we'll review the day's news, pitch stories, write and edit our own work, and engage in exercises designed to sharpen your reporting and writing. This means you need to come to class, on time, every time, ready to participate. Like a professional journalist, you'll need to keep up with daily news by reading at least one national or major regional paper every day (in paper format, not just on-line) and other sources as necessary. I especially recommend keeping regular tabs on local papers such as the Stanford Daily and the Palo Alto Daily, since they'll be covering events that you might be covering as well. You'll also need to keep a sharp eye on upcoming assignments: every two weeks, you'll need to pitch potential topics for your own reporting.

In your writing and reporting, you'll need to observe the standards of the profession. That means first and foremost that you'll need to write with care. Your grammar and spelling should be pristine in every story, as should your facts. It can be very helpful to have a classmate look over a draft of your work before you hand it in and we will sometimes edit one another's work in class. At the same time, the work you hand in must always be your own. Finally, in your reporting, you'll need to be careful not to tell sources that your work is "only for class": assume that your work can and will be published.

Required Textbooks:

Melvin Mencher, *News Reporting and Writing*, 9th Edition. McGraw Hill

Norm Goldstein, ed., *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*, Perseus Publishing

Assignments:

We will do a great deal of reporting and writing, both in class and out of class. In class, you will be given individual and team assignments, generally, though not always, to be completed by the end of the class session. You will also be given periodic homework.

In addition to these assignments you will be asked to report and write five major stories:

Assignment One: Cover a Public Meeting. This meeting can take place on- or off-campus. You might cover a City Council or School Board meeting in Palo Alto, or something similar at Stanford. You should choose your meeting based on likely news value and report the news that the meeting generates in standard newspaper pyramid form. Length: 550-600 words.

Assignment Two: Cover a Speech: Straight news assignment, standard pyramid form. Story should show evidence that you did research on the speaker before the event and on the topic afterwards, if necessary. Length: 500-600 words.

Assignment Three: Profile: A story that requires no less than three interviews, one with the subject, the others with associates who know the subject. It has to be a person in authority (not a friend!), such as a City Council member, a professor, or an artist. The story must reflect quotes from subject and two others. Length: 700-800 words. Class discussion of what you encountered. Length: 700-800 words.

Assignment Four: Feature: This will require writing about some event or place, giving the mood, color, atmosphere. It can be a sports event, a political rally, a look at a funky old bookstore, a soup line, etc. Length: 700-800 words

Assignment Five: In-depth news story. This will be an analytical article that digs below the surface, providing background information and outlining future problems. Sound reporting and vivid prose are essential. The project must use multiple sources and types of research and must be approved by instructor. Length: 1500-2000 words.

Please note that I will generally assign the *type* of story you need to write. You will be responsible for identifying potential topics, pitching those topics to me and sometimes, the class. Think of me as your editor – we will decide which topics you pursue together. As your editor, I will also sometimes ask for revisions before I accept a piece.

I strongly encourage you to publish your work where and when appropriate. Getting a by-line is great practice and the clips you generate can help you land more work later. Yet, because the publishing process is outside my control, you will not receive a higher grade if your work is published, nor will you receive a lower one if it isn't.

Deadlines:

I'll announce all deadlines well in advance. As in professional journalism, deadlines will be inflexible. Missing a deadline on a story -- for any reason -- will result in a grade reduction.

Grading:

In-Class Assignments, Quizzes and Exercises: 10%

Note: Many in-class activities will be un-graded. The grades you do receive will be averaged at the end of the term and will make up 10% of your total grade.

Assignment One: 10%

Assignment Two: 15%

Assignment Three: 15%

Assignment Four: 15%

Assignment Five: 25%

Participation: 10%

There will be no mid-term or final exam.

Grading Criteria:

Grading journalism, like practicing it, is necessarily a subjective process. Generally speaking an "A" paper will be virtually ready for print. A "B" story will be solid, but may need further editing or may leave certain questions unanswered. A grade of "C" would go to a story that might be technically perfect, but that lacks imagination and scope, or to one that includes spelling errors. "D's" and "F's" go to stories with errors of spelling, grammar and/or fact and to stories that do not fulfill the assignment.

Whether or not a piece is published will have no effect on your grade.

A Word About Formatting:

We're going to follow standard journalistic – and not academic – conventions. Your assignments must be double-spaced, with standard margins. In the upper left-hand corner of each page, you should put a one-word story description (called a

“slug”) and right beneath it, your last name. Each page should be numbered at the bottom. The last page should have “—30—“ or “###” after the last paragraph to denote the end. When delivered on paper (as opposed to as electronic files), your stories should be stapled in the upper left-hand corner.

In the working press, story lengths are usually assigned in column inches (in which 40 words generally make an inch) or by word count. We’ll use word count. Microsoft Word has a handy word count feature in the “Tools” section, which you can use at first. Gradually, you’ll get a feel for word length and will no longer need to count.

Word limits help mark the conceptual limits of a story. They also help mark how much space in a publication your work is expected to fill. For these reasons, your stories should always fall within the assigned word counts.

Course Schedule:

Note: This is an approximation. Readings, assignments and deadlines listed here can and will shift. Additional readings and exercises will be added as we go along.

Week 1: Course Introductions, What's News?

Readings: Handouts, Mencher, Chapters 2 "What is news?" and Ch. 16 "Speeches, Meetings and News Conferences"

Tu 1/7: Course Introductions

Th 1/9: What's News?

Due: Pitches for Assignment One

Week 2: Leads, Nuts and Pyramids

Readings: Mencher, Ch. 2 "Components of the Story", Ch. 4 "Story Structure"

Tu 1/14: Leads and News Selection

Th 1/16: Comparing Coverage

Due: Assignment One: Meeting Story

Week 3: Objectivity, Attribution and the Layers of Reporting

Readings: Mencher Ch. 10 Digging for Information, Handouts

Tu 1/21 Objectivity and Attribution

Th 1/23: The Layers of Reporting

Due: Pitch for speeches

Week 4: Observation and Background

Readings: Mencher, Ch. 11, Making Sound Observations; Ch. 12, Building and Using Background, Handouts

Tu 1/28: Observation

Th 1/30: Background

Due: Assignment Two: Speech Story

Week 5: Interviewing

HEAD'S UP: BEGIN THINKING ABOUT FINAL PROJECT TOPICS...

Readings: Mencher, Ch. 13, “Finding Sources,” Ch. 14, “Interviewing Principles,” Ch. 15 “Interviewing Practices” and Handouts

Tu 2/4: Interviewing Tactics

Th 2/6: Profiles

Due: Pitches for Assignment Three: Profile

Week 6: Soft Leads and Feature Writing

Readings: Mencher, Ch. 8 “Features” and Handouts

Tu 2/11: Soft Leads

Th 2/13: Features vs. “Hard” News

Due: Assignment Three: Profile

Week 7: Feature Writing, Part 2

Tu 2/18: Types of Features

Tu 2/20: Feature Writing Exercise

Due: Pitches for features

Week 8: Investigative Journalism

Readings: TBA

Tu 2/25: Guest Lecture

Th 2/27: Muckraking 101

Due: Assignment Four Due: Feature

Week 9: Advanced Research Strategies and Ethics

Readings: Mencher, Ch.25 “Reporters and the Law,” Ch. 27 “The Morality of Journalism”, Handouts

Tu 3/4: Project Proposals and Research Strategies

Due: Pitches for final projects

Th 3/6: Research strategies and Ethical Issues

Week 10: Bringing It All Together and The Future of the Industry

Readings: On-line materials, TBA

Tu 3/11: Final Project Workshop Day

Due: Draft of Assignment Five due in class

Th 3/13: Course wrap-up, evaluations

Due: Assignment Five Due: In-Depth, Multi-source News Story