Class: Tues., Thurs., 9:05-10 a.m., Reid 111
Lab: Mon., Wed., F & G., Reid 315

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Office hours, open door & by appointment

Schedule

The textbook/lab manual, *The Process of Writing News* by Prof. Brian Richardson (retired from this department a year ago), is online and free. A close reading of this book, as we move through the term, is essential for succeeding in this course. It also contains the exercises that make up about 87 percent of your final grade, with increasing weight (see below). I also use Sakai for this course, mostly the “Resources” folder and your personal Dropbox folder. The Zinsser book, *On Writing Well*, offers a more expansive and stylish definition of nonfiction writing than *Process*; its chapters will fill gaps as you try other kinds of fact-based, publishable writing in the future. You might also want to purchase an up-to-date AP Stylebook, but an online version is also available to you for free with your W&L password, through the library (see link below). For this course, you must read news the way professional communicators do, with critical judgment and a sense of the larger dynamics of public life that news stories illustrate. This will likely be a new experience for you, whatever news sources or media you choose. Current issues of the newspapers listed below can be accessed online and are in the first-floor student lounge in Reid Hall. Under no circumstances should they be taken from that location. Previous issues are in the third-floor reading room in Reid Hall (don’t remove them, either).


*The Roanoke Times*, NPR, local and national network TV news, and CNN.com daily; *The News-Gazette*, The Ring-tum Phi weekly; The Rockbridge Advocate (not online) monthly.

The lab is equipped with Macs, but working on your own laptop in lab works best for most students. All work must be typed and in electronic form (not a printout) on a Word file. You will bring your finished exercises to lab in your H: drive (“Student home” in the Mac), a
jump drive, or an email to yourself as a Word file attachment. In Lab, when I ask for you to turn it in, email it to me. I will edit and grade it and put it in your Sakai Dropbox.

**Purpose and objectives:**

J201 carries some fairly rigorous expectations:

1. Most importantly, you should learn to accept the responsibilities offered to you. You will need to learn to perform consistently under inflexible deadlines. If you don't, you won't be prepared to work as a professional in journalism or strategic communication. Assignments are all found in the online "Class schedule," which I might modify in time as I see fit. So if the textbook assignment is slightly different, do the online assignment, not the part of the assignment from the textbook/lab manual that conflicts with it. You must have all assignments ready no later than the beginning of the class period for which they are due. A late assignment is a missed deadline. That means the assignment gets a 0. Any work submitted will be critiqued and available to you in your Sakai Dropbox, but you will not get credit for late assignments.

J201 is the only opportunity you will have to do this kind of writing under close supervision. In J202, J258 and subsequent courses in either major (journalism or strat comm), as well as for-credit summer internships, you will work largely on your own initiative. You must develop mature work habits and time-management skills in J201 that will enable you to perform later with minimal supervision. The importance of accepting that responsibility cannot be overstressed. The most common reasons students don't succeed in J258 Beat Reporting, for example, are their inability to budget their time and to work without direct supervision.

2. Your attendance is required at every lab meeting. If I have not excused your absence ahead of time, you will not receive credit for that day’s assignment. Your attendance is expected at every class meeting. If you must be absent, you must let me know by phone or email beforehand. If your absence is due to illness, you need to be seen by Student Health Services. (If you’re sick enough to miss class, you should be seen by a medical professional.)

3. Developing the skills, self-awareness and grace-under-pressure of a pro begins in this course. This is important not only if you are going into journalism, but also for careers in advertising or public relations. For many of you, fewer than two years separate your time in J201 and a career (or at least a summer internship) in which you will be serving large and diverse audiences. Young reporters must be prepared to handle themselves with competence and well-placed self-confidence when they deal with the major decision makers in the community. They must also show sensitivity to and understanding of the lives and problems of people who might be quite unlike them. Now is the time, therefore, to develop a sense of professionalism, responsibility and your role as a moral actor.

4. You should learn the basics of information gathering and news writing. By the end of the term, you will be expected to handle routine news assignments with competence and professionalism. In this course, you will become accomplished in the fundamentals of crafting news stories for online, broadcast and print media.
Writing is a craft that can be taught as a process. The process is relatively straightforward, but it is often excruciating. The only way to learn to write is to write, and write, and write. It's never easy, but with practice it becomes easier.

For a number of reasons, it’s often easier to identify what doesn’t work than what does. That means you'll get far more negative than positive feedback at times. “Feedback” is not praise. A thick skin is considered a tool of the trade. You must learn to benefit from your mistakes, make a serious effort to build on your strengths, and work on your weaknesses.

5. The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications identifies several core values and competencies that should be the focus of a journalism and mass communications education. Several will be addressed in this course. Those core values and competencies are that students will:
   • Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications;
   • Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
   • Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
   • Think critically, creatively and independently;
   • Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
   • Critically evaluate your own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
   • Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
   • Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which you will work.

6. You will be expected to know the fundamentals of Associated Press style, a standard of the industry. In Sakai, I have provided a two-page summary (“AP Style Bits”) of the parts of AP style you will be expected to use without needing to check the Stylebook, primarily when and how to abbreviate titles, dates and place words. For other style matters, use the manual. We have the Associated Press Stylebook online, accessible by your W&L password: http://apstylebook.com/washington_lee/

7. We will need to create an atmosphere in class and lab that allows you to focus on your responsibilities. You may use a laptop to take notes, but not to browse the Internet, check e-mail or update your Facebook page. You should be off line while in class. Ringing cell phones distract you, your fellow students, and your instructor. If you bring them to class, please turn them off.

Grading:

You will be graded based on professional standards. That might seem a high expectation of undergraduates in an introductory course, but any lower standard would be unrealistic and unfair. You should rightfully expect to be prepared to enter the professional world with ease and to perform with competence. Employers expect a W&L journalism graduate to contribute to a
media organization from day one. You are capable of doing that. Success in this course means you are prepared to do that.

The most prevalent problem students have with J201 assignments is lack of care. You must learn to be precise in your work. Careless errors, including writing before thinking and continuing to make the same errors after they have been brought to your attention, are the most common. Those errors are usually committed by students who haven’t yet developed a sense of responsibility for their efforts. When you learn to care about and take pride in your work, those errors nearly always disappear. Grammar, spelling and punctuation errors will result in a deduction of one-half letter grade each. Fact errors (such as a misspelled name) will result in an F for the assignment. (A forewarning: The lab manual has some deliberately misspelled names and titles that you must correct before using in an exercise by checking in the City Directory at the end of the lab manual.)

I will edit and grade all assignments before the next lab session. My editing will include some suggestions that are subjective (based on many years of experience as an editor, reporter and reader of news) and some standard copy-editing. You must carefully review each returned assignment, learning from AP Style and fact errors while honing a standard news diction. Frequently, we will use lab time to polish assignments, but it’s essential that you come to lab with the assignment complete. Writing the assignment from scratch during lab time is not an option, unless I have assigned it as a deadline exercise to be done in lab.

There are about 22 graded exercises in this course. Each one is designed to stretch you to learn something new, while demonstrating that you’ve mastered all the skills learned in previous exercises. The exercises in the first half of the course are necessarily minefields for your errors. I am weighting those early exercises to count little; the value of each exercise’s grade increases in weight as we go along. So if errors badly hurt your grades in exercises early on, don’t worry. This can easily be overcome by higher grades in later exercises, which count far more. By the same token, if you don’t learn from your early mistakes, those same kinds of mistakes will hurt much more when they occur later in the term, especially near the end. Most of the exercises are based on facts and news events in a fictional Blue Ridge County. At least three of the exercises will be “real” – covering a speech, covering a meeting of a public body and writing a feature story that you propose to me.

You will also have a final exam, which is intended to allow you to show what you have mastered, or achieved competence in, in this course. As you might expect, part of the final exam comprises a complex deadline-writing assignment.

**Special needs:** Washington and Lee University makes reasonable academic accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. All undergraduate accommodations must be approved through the Office of the Dean of the College. Students requesting accommodations for this course should present an official accommodation letter within the first two weeks of the term and schedule a meeting outside of class time to discuss accommodations. It is the student’s responsibility to present this paperwork in a timely fashion and to follow up about accommodation arrangements. Accommodations for test-taking must be arranged with the professor at least a week before the date of the final exam.