WRITING FOR MASS COMM    COMM 200-001    Spring 2009
Monday and Thursday: 8:30-9:45 a.m. (MGC 331)
Instructor: Chris Adams
Office Hours: Before class (email/call early to let me know you’re coming), or by appointment
202-383-6071, work
202-297-4627, cell
301-320-9712, home (no calls after 10 p.m. or before 7 a.m., please)
cadams@mcclatchydc.com and adams@american.edu
http://chrisadams.typepad.com/american

Writing for Mass Communications is designed to teach you to write simply and effectively for a mass audience, whatever the format. The course stresses the proper use of grammar, adherence to accepted newspaper style, accuracy and brevity in all your assignments. The skills you will master are basic to other writing courses offered by the School of Communication. The class will include lectures, discussions and extensive in-class and out-of-class writing assignments. By the end of the semester, you will be able to take a collection of facts and write in four different formats: a newspaper story, a broadcast story, a press release and an online story.

Required reading

Required text: Inside Reporting by Tim Harrower. Bring the textbook to class with you each session. Also, you are required to have access to the Associated Press Stylebook; you can buy the 2007 print edition or use the online version (www.apstylebook.com/american).

Regular reading: If you want to be in the communications field, read! You are required to read a newspaper daily (usually The Washington Post), and to be familiar with radio and television coverage of major news events. Reading and following the news should become part of your daily habit, and will take you 20-30 minutes a day. It is an important part of what you will learn this semester. If you don’t have a daily news habit now, you will for the next 15 weeks.

While reading some papers online is acceptable, it’s also important that most of your daily reading be a print version of the paper. Otherwise, you miss important elements, such as layout and story selection, which can help you understand how news is shaped and presented. To really understand how news is written, you should read the same topic as it is presented in different newspapers.

Special readings: On the course website are RSS feeds for important media writers. Anything there is part of your assigned newspaper reading. Any other special readings will be posted to the website. When we have special guests – prominent working journalists from DC – you’ll be given clips of theirs to read beforehand.
Grades and grading

Grading philosophy: The objective of this class is to teach you to understand a wide range of media platforms, and to fully understand the bedrock principles of journalism: accuracy, speed, fairness and originality. There will be a lot of small assignments, in class and out of class.

The grading is designed to reward both content and your ability to adhere to style and proper punctuation. Sending a sloppy story to an editor is a major no-no, and being required to print a correction for your news story hurts your credibility with readers, sources and your editors. On top of that: Deadlines are important. In the real world, stories that come in late cause newspapers to hit the printing presses late – which substantially adds to the cost of printing the newspaper. In the electronic and real-time world, being the first on the air or the first to post is a measure of success. Minutes matter – so they will matter in this course as well. If an in-class assignment is due at 9:45 a.m., that really means 9:45 a.m. If it comes in at 9:46, it is late and will be docked 10 percent.

Scoring system: A perfect story will get 100 points, but anything less than perfection will cost you:

- Errors in fact, 10 points
- Misspelled names, 10 points
- Missed deadline, 10 points
- Lack of focus, 10 points
- Too long, too short, 10 points
- Missed leads, 5 points
- Unclear writing, 5 points
- Grammatical errors, 3 points
- Misspelled words, 3 points
- Punctuation errors, 3 points
- Style errors, 3 points
- Typos, other, 3 points

More on late assignments: For each 24 hours an assignment is late, you will be docked 10 points. So if something is due on Monday and you don’t get it to me until Thursday, that’s 30 points.

News quizzes: There will be a news/current events quiz each week. It will generally be based on the previous week’s Post, although for several weeks we will use other newspapers or broadcast outlets. Because it’s important for a journalist to have an understanding of all current events, the quizzes will pull information from all sections of the paper. There will also be weekly quizzes on the textbook or other readings.

Turning assignments in: Out-of-class homework assignments are due at the beginning of the class, often by email. I grade on the computer, which allows me to give you more detailed
feedback. But be warned: I will not accept the excuse that “I emailed it – it must have gotten lost in the system.” Be certain you get confirmation from me – either an email or a verbal response – before you consider your story turned in.

**Grading structure:** Your grade will be made up of the following components:
- 25 percent, In-class assignments and exercises
- 15 percent, Out-of-class assignments and exercises
- 10 percent, Grammar tests and exercises
- 15 percent, News and other quizzes on assigned readings
- 5 percent, News story assignment for print
- 5 percent, News story for broadcast
- 5 percent, Press release assignment
- 5 percent, Midterm test
- 15 percent, Final test

**Letter grades:** They will be awarded accordingly (I round up, so 89.5 gets you up to an A-):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Range</th>
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<tr>
<td>A</td>
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<td>A-</td>
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<td>87-89</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<td>C-</td>
<td>70-73</td>
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<td>D</td>
<td>60-69</td>
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<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Less than 60</td>
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If you are a Communication major, you must receive a grade of C or above to earn credit for this course.

**Other important things to know**

**No hand-written stories will be accepted:** You must be able to type 30 words per minute on a computer.

**Keep a file of your work:** If there ever is an issue with a missing grade, you need to have the original work to show me.

**Classroom manners:** No iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones, Game Boys or other electronics while the professor is speaking during class, please (if you are expecting an emergency call, let me know before class). If you want to listen to music during writing sessions, that’s fine. And be to class on time, since quizzes are the first order of business each session.

**Website/Blackboard:** Watch the class website for all scheduling and other information; I’ll be posting to Blackboard only for the grading function.
Attendance:
1. You are expected to be here for each class session. There are four legitimate excuses for missing class:
   a. A university obligation (such as athletics).
   b. A death in your family.
   c. A legitimate illness.
   d. An observed religious holiday.
2. If you are not going to be in class, you must notify me before the class begins.
3. To get the absence excused and make up any work, you must:
   a. Notify me beforehand.
   b. Show me documentation, which can include a note from your university group leader, your academic counselor, your doctor*, or a published obituary. That is an unfortunate, but necessary, request, given the number of students who fib on things like that.
   c. Make up any quiz the next class period, which means coming at 8:10 a.m. to complete it. Make up any assignment within two class periods. So if you miss Monday, you must ask me about the assignment on Thursday and get it turned in on Monday.

* I will give you one doctor’s note/get-out-of-jail free card. Use it wisely. If you are sick and do go to the doctor, get a note so you don’t waste your get-out-of-jail-free card. If you are sick and don’t go to the doctor or otherwise can’t get to class, you can use this note.

Keep this in mind:
I will exert no energy at all chasing you down to get stuff into me. It is ENTIRELY on your shoulders. And I will not accept anything past these due dates – which means I will not scramble the final week of the semester to help you get your assignments in. If you miss a class, check Blackboard or your classmates to find out if there are any new assignments due the following class; they must be turned in on time. Stories or other assignments might be due on official religious holidays; in that case, the deadline remains the same, although missing class on such a holiday will be treated as an excused absence.

In addition to losing the class points for an unexcused absence, each unexcused absence after two freebies (so the penalty kicks in on the third one) will cost you an additional two percentage points off your final grade.

Deadlines: The importance of deadlines cannot be stressed enough. If the deadline for an assignment is 9:45 a.m., that means the copy must be in my hand or my email in-box at 9:45 a.m. You must allow time to print and proof-read your assignments before they are turned in. You should print at least 10 minutes before the deadline. (Remember that 18 people will be printing their assignments at the same time.)

Contacting me: I work as a reporter at the McClatchy Newspapers Washington Bureau downtown, so I am not on campus frequently. However, I live near AU, and so am able to meet with students in early morning or evening hours. I am easily accessible by email: For the quickest response, send an email to both cadams@mcclatchydc.com and adams@american.edu (I check the AU email generally in the early mornings, but am on the McClatchy email constantly). I am usually easy to reach, but I do travel two or three times a month. If I am traveling, I will make
time in the evenings or mornings to respond to email, and will never let more than 24 hours pass without a response.

I am happy to talk with you about your stories and the class, and also about internships or job hunting. I want everybody to do well in this class, and will work with you to make it happen. But you have to ask for help.

**Grading and returning work:** I will return your work by the next class – no excuses on my part. If I can’t get your work graded on time, everybody gets 100.

**Academic Integrity**

**Plagiarism:** All work must be your own, original effort. A single instance of plagiarism will be reported to the proper university officials for appropriate action. Plagiarism consists of such things as taking quotes or other material from another published source without attribution, using notes from another student without permission, having another person conduct your interviews or write your stories. Cases may arise in which you may share notes or documents with fellow students. In these instances, you must disclose in your source list the fact that you did not gather the material yourself, and you will be held responsible for any errors the shared material contains.

**Fabrication:** Under no circumstances can you make up names, events, facts or composite characters; you may not indicate you were at an event you didn’t attend. If I find you have made up a person, event, fact or quote, you will be reported for an academic integrity violation.

In addition, the university administration has asked that this statement be included in all course syllabi:

"Standards of academic conduct are set forth in the University's Academic Integrity Code. By registering, you have acknowledged your awareness of the Academic Integrity Code, and you are obliged to become familiar with your rights and responsibilities as defined by the Code. Violations of the Academic Integrity Code will not be treated lightly, and disciplinary action will be taken should such violations occur. Please see me if you have any questions about the academic violations described in the Code in general or as they relate to particular requirements for this course."
How to succeed in this class

READ THE NEWSPAPER/BE INTERESTED IN NEWS
   News and other quizzes count for 15 percent of your grade. If you pay attention to the Post, spending 20-30 minutes a day reading the front page stories and looking through other sections, you will do fine on these quizzes. Reading the news stories also will help you write vastly better stories of your own. And check how TV and newspapers cover the same story differently.

COME TO CLASS
   Things that happen in class count for most of your grade. If you aren’t in class, and the absence is unexcused, you cannot make those points up. Also, BE ON TIME – quizzes happen early in the class session. And since you’re in class anyway – DON’T WASTE TIME SURFING THE WEB, EMAILING PEOPLE, OR PLAYING GAMES.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE RULES ON THE SYLLABUS
   Pay attention to the attendance rules, and notify me in advance of missed classes, if you want it excused.
   Turn things in on time.
   I will not expend any energy chasing you down for doctors' notes or missing assignments. You must come to me, otherwise the absences will be unexcused, and the assignments will get a zero.

PROOF YOUR STORIES
   If you don't, you will make mistakes, and I will catch them. One factual error or misspelled name drops a perfect paper down an entire letter grade.
Course outline

This foundation-level class, required for all SOC students, is designed to improve students’ writing ability through intensive practice and exercise. Be prepared to write a lot, and to write on deadline. You will learn to write basic news stories for print and broadcast, and to prepare press releases. Emphasis is placed on deadlines, accuracy and grammar.

By the end of the semester, you’ll be able to take the same set of facts and write different stories for different audiences: a press release, a newspaper story, a radio story and a story for a news web site. You’ll learn how to write a hard-news story as well as softer news, and know when each form is appropriate. You’ll understand how to attribute information and quotes, how to use proper grammar and how to use proper Associated Press news writing style. And you’ll learn how to do all of this under very tight deadlines.

SOC expectations of course
Understanding Mass Media Communication and News Judgment
- Follow and understand current events through reading newspapers, listening to radio/TV news and reading Web news sites on a daily basis.
- Understand how different audiences and different media require different approaches to mass media communication.
- Execute the appropriate writing style for each medium and audience.
- Understand the differences between news, features, opinions, and public relations.
- Understand principles of news selection.
- Understand the five Ws and H.
- Understand the basics of AP style, its purpose and use.
- Understand the importance of accuracy.
- Know and follow the rules of grammar.
- Understand the importance of deadlines.

Journalism
- Be able to write a summary news lead for print and broadcast.
- Be able to write three types of print news stories on deadline – inverted pyramids, chronological stories, and speech/meeting stories.
- Be able to write basic radio broadcast news stories on deadline.
- Understand appropriate use of attribution and its importance.
- Understand appropriate use of quotes in print and broadcast stories.
- Be able to write in a journalistic voice – concise, fair, well-structured stories.
- Be able to adapt journalism to writing for the Web.
- Understand the basics of journalism ethics and the First Amendment.

Public Relations
- Understand the role of the public relations practitioner.
- Understand types of public relations – corporate, non-profit, internal, external.
- Understand the elements of a news release.
- Understand how journalistic practices apply to PR professionals.
- Be able to write basic news releases.
**Schedule:** The schedule will change throughout the semester. The schedule will be updated online each week, and we will discuss the following week’s schedule each Thursday.

**Class sessions:**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>NEWS READING</th>
<th>OTHER READING</th>
<th>QUIZ</th>
<th>IN-CLASS WORK</th>
<th>OUT-OF-CLASS WORK DUE</th>
<th>GUEST</th>
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<td>Monday</td>
<td>Intro/How to succeed</td>
<td>wpost</td>
<td>Harrower Ch 1 &amp; Ch 2; 3</td>
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<td>wpost</td>
<td>Accuracy readings</td>
<td>Chapter 3 quiz</td>
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