

**JOUR 4410: Reporting of Public Affairs**  
**Semester: Spring 2010**  
**Class sessions: Tuesday, 6:30pm – 9:20pm**  
**Universities Center of Dallas, 1901 Main St., Dallas, TX**  
**Instructor: Neil Foote**  
**Phone: Office: (940) 369-8088; Cell: (214) 448-3765**  
**E-mail: [foote@unt.edu](mailto:foote@unt.edu)**  
**Office hours: By appointment**

**Course objectives:** Read the newspaper, look at television ... go online. Public affairs reporting is all around you. As a reporter, one of your early assignments will be covering cops, courts, governments, civil servants and politicians. It's what makes villages, towns, cities, states and federal governments tick. Public affairs stories address the most mundane issues, but in the long run the subjects of these stories are directly impacting the lives of every reader and viewer. Many of the most coveted awards in journalism are won by journalists who have gone beyond the ordinary, and dug deep to reveal tremendous inconsistencies, illegal behavior and wrongdoings by those in the centerpiece of public affairs.

This course will help you gain a further appreciation of the importance of public affairs reporting. You will be learning more about how some of these 'institutions' work, then developing story ideas, researching, reporting and writing stories. There's a huge opportunity for you to get stories published in campus and/or local newspapers or websites. You will be challenged to become a more thorough, careful and alert reporter – and editor. You become a more analytical reader of public affairs stories understanding the source and sources behind stories. Classes will integrate and reinforce the basic fundamentals, but also be conducted as a functioning newsroom.

**Reading and Textbook Requirements:** Daily print or online editions of *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. You will receive additional handouts of articles from textbooks and other publications. You are encouraged to bring examples of articles to class on relevant subjects to discuss. You must bring and use your AP Stylebook. The Freedom of Information Act Handbook is optional. You can order it from the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas.

Required: "The Elements of Journalism, What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect," by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel, (Three Rivers Press, 2007, 288 pages) (Revised updated edition)

**Attendance:** You are required – and expected - to attend every class. Your participation is absolutely essential to your personal success, and to completely engage the class in the learning experience. You can not make up missed assignments if you have an unexcused absence. The goal is to treat this class as if it were a newsroom. If you're going to be absent, call me/email me and bring to class the next class meeting immediately following your absence a signed note or letter that supports your absence.

**Class assignments:**

**You will be doing extensive reporting and writing in this class. All of your assignments must have your byline, your email, the date, and must be typewritten, double-spaced and must include a source list. Some assignments may require you to post them online.** The following assignments should be written as if they were being published in print or online. If some of the stories are strong enough, they will be offered to the editors of the NT Daily and NTNewsNet.com.

**Guest speakers:** To help make the class more relevant and interesting, we will have guest speakers – journalists, county officials, attorneys – and others to help you get an up close, in person opportunity to talk to people. **You will be required to write a one-page summary of each speaker that must be posted on the class blog by the beginning of the next class.**

**Grading:**

Meeting article	10%
Civic Leader article	10%
Court case article	15%
Education article	15%
Public records research	10%
Diversity & Media essay	10%
Final Small Group/Public Records Project	25%
In-class exercises, participation, attendance	5%

**Grades:** You will be graded on your ability to turn in your assignments on deadline. They've got to be accurate, clear, use AP style correctly and must be fairly reported. All of the above components will be part of determining your grade.

Semester grades:

A = 90 to 100

B = 80 to 89.9

C = 70 to 79.9

D = 60 to 69.9

F = 59 and below

**Academic dishonesty:** Plagiarism, fabrication and resubmission or double submission of work performed for another class all are considered to be acts of academic dishonesty under the UNT Code of Student Conduct. You should never quote friends or family members in news stories unless you have advance permission from the instructor.

Any of the above violations will result in an automatic failing grade on the assignment and a referral to the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities. The stories you pursue independently outside of class should rely entirely on YOUR OWN reporting. If you must include information reported by another journalistic outlet (and I suggest you do this rarely, because there is almost always a way to find the information yourself), cite the publication. The instructor reserves the right to contact sources listed on your source sheet and will perform spot checks throughout the semester.

**What you'll learn this semester:**

At the end of this class, you will have achieved the following:

- Report and write stories about public institutions
- Learn the organizational structure and basic functionality of key public institutions, such as police departments, the court systems and the school boards/independent school districts
- Learn how to report, research and write short- and long-form investigative stories
- Learn about the depth and breadth of public documents and how to access them
- Understand how to file a Freedom of Information Act letter
- Understand the fundamental role of a free press, the role of the First Amendment and the importance of open government
- Learn the importance of fairness and ethics in covering government institutions and politicians

Additionally, this course addresses each of the ACEJMC core competencies:

1. Understand and apply First Amendment principles and the law appropriate to professional practice;
2. Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications;
3. Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of groups in a global society in relationship to communications;

4. Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information;
5. Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness and diversity;
6. Think critically, creatively and independently;
7. Conduct research and evaluate information by methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work;
8. Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve;
9. Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness;
10. Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts;
11. Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work.

### **Department of Journalism statement on plagiarism**

Plagiarism, in a nutshell, is using other people's written words as your own. Some people consider the use of 7-10 words in a row, copied from another source, as plagiarism. Be sure to include citations when using other people's writing, because plagiarism is a serious offense in any discipline, especially in journalism. It's a firing offense in the professional world. In the Department of Journalism and Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at UNT, students face a range of penalties for plagiarism (depending on the importance of the assignment):

- a grade of "F" on a minor assignment;
- a request that the student drop the class;
- withdrawal of the student from the class, initiated by the professor;
- an "F" in the course
- a referral to the UNT Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities;
- a notation on the student's transcript;
- and expulsion from the university.

A combination of these penalties may also be used. If you need more information or have questions about plagiarism, ask your nearest journalism professor or visit the Center for Student Rights and Responsibilities.

**Saving your work:** You are responsible for making copies of all of your work on CD-RW or thumb drives or by e-mailing finished assignments to yourself. You cannot save material on the computers in the lab. Save all graded copies of your work that have been returned to you, since this is the only way to resolve any potential discrepancy between the grade you are assigned and your own calculation of your grade.

**Disabilities:** The Journalism Department, in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, makes reasonable accommodations for qualified students with disabilities. If you require any such accommodation, please contact the instructor within the first three weeks of class.

**Credit:** Some information in this syllabus was compiled with help from Dr. Tracy Everbach and former UNT instructors Karen Thomas, Jake Batsell and Laura Griffin.

### **Tentative Class Schedule (subject to change)**

**Week One:** Jan. 19

Introduction to class. What is public affairs? How much do you know about your government?

**Homework Assignment Due Jan. 26:** Read "The Elements of Journalism," Chapters 1 – 5. Based on your readings, write a **300-word essay, type-written, double-spaced** on your definition of the role of the journalist. Be prepared to discuss your key points.

**Week Two:** Jan. 26

What makes a journalist? What is civic journalism? Why it matters? Covering meetings / Covering local government.

**ASSIGNMENT: Due Feb 2.**

- **Cover a local city council meeting. Max. 500 words. Typed. Double-spaced. Include source list. A copy of the city council agenda and any other related documents that are relevant to the story.**
- **Also, please review the following website:**  
<http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/index.html>

**Week Three:** Feb. 2

Covering Local Government continued. Mapping your beat. Developing sources. Seven Knowledge keys. Engaging sources. What do you know about the First Amendment? In-class exercise.

- **ASSIGNMENT Due Feb. 9: Based on “Step 3” in the Pew Center for Civic Journalism (<http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/pubs/tcl/step3.html>), find a civic leader, interview him or her about what they do, what has changed and how the media cover them? WRITE a 300 – 500 word, double-spaced, type-written story based on your interview. Be prepared to discuss.**

**Week Four:** Feb 9

Role of civic leaders. Covering law enforcement. Crime beat basics. Key terms. Understanding the arrest process. What makes a good cop story? Understanding crime stats. **In-class exercise.**

**ASSIGNMENT Due Feb 16:**

- **Read the following chapter on the “Covering Crime and Justice” website, [http://www.justicejournalism.org/crimeguide/chapter01/chapter01\\_pg02.html#crimebeatbasics](http://www.justicejournalism.org/crimeguide/chapter01/chapter01_pg02.html#crimebeatbasics)**
- **Be prepared for in-class exercise on key crime terms.**
- **Write a 500-word story police story. The story must include original reporting, interviews and quotes. Include a source list, and if it is based on an actual crime, include a print out of the police report. Be prepared to discuss.**

**Week Five:** Feb. 16

Covering law enforcement. Key terms. Types of courts. Developing sources. Writing compelling cop stories. Guest speaker. In-class exercise.

- **ASSIGNMENT Due Feb 23:** Read: “Covering Courts: The Associated Press Manual for Reporters,” <http://www.ncpress.com/LegalFiles/intro.html> Be prepared for in-class exercise, challenging your knowledge of legal terms and court procedures.

**Week Six:** Feb. 23

Covering courts cont. In-class exercise.

- **ASSIGNMENT Due March 2: Go to the courthouse. Sit in on a trial. Write a 500-word story on the trial. Include the citation for the court case and a source list.**

**Week Seven:** March 2

Covering education. Understanding the core issues. Covering school boards. Brainstorm story ideas. Analyzing a school story in a local newspaper.

- **ASSIGNMENT Due March 9:** Write an education story. 500-words. You may cover a local school board meeting, a current issue or trend.
- Here are some examples: <http://www.coveringeducation.org/schoolstories/>
- Additional resources:

- The Educational Writers Association:  
<http://www.ewa.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources>
- Read the following report on No Child Left Behind ([http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document\\_ext.showDocumentByID&nodeID=1&DocumentID=227](http://www.cep-dc.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=document_ext.showDocumentByID&nodeID=1&DocumentID=227))

**Week Eight:** March 9

Reporting and writing effectively using numbers. Basic business reporting. Tapping into financial records. Understanding basic financial documents.

**ASSIGNMENT – DUE March 23:** Based on the class lecture and readings below, find a public company and write a short story – 300 – 500 words about the company for that firm’s hometown newspaper., e.g. the company’s current financial state; a major announcement on a new product or strategy discussed in the documents.

Read the following articles

- “Beginner’s Guide to Financial Statements”,  
<http://www.sec.gov/investor/pubs/begfinstmtguide.htm>
- “Building the Basics,” by Megan Thomas,  
[http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2009/06/building\\_the\\_basics\\_1/](http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2009/06/building_the_basics_1/)
- “Tips to make Numbers Your Best Friends,” by Curt Hazlett,  
[http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2005/12/tips\\_to\\_make\\_numbers\\_your\\_best/index.html](http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2005/12/tips_to_make_numbers_your_best/index.html)
- “Make Sense of Numbers When Writing About Business,” by Curt Hazlett,  
[http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2005/12/make\\_sense\\_of\\_numbers\\_in\\_writing/index.html](http://www.businessjournalism.org/pages/biz/2005/12/make_sense_of_numbers_in_writing/index.html)
- Websites with financial data:
  - <http://www.sec.gov/edgar.shtml>
  - <http://finance.yahoo.com>
  - <http://smartmoney.com>
- Additional resources: <http://www.businessjournalism.org/>

**Week Nine:** March 16 – No Class – Spring Break

**Week Ten:** March 23

Investigative reporting. Following the paper trail – using documents (print & online) to uncover stories. Discussion of public records. FOIA. Discuss final project. Assign groups.

- **ASSIGNMENT Due March 30:** Familiarize yourself with the website of the Investigative Reporters and Editors (<http://ire.org>)
- Read the following stories:
  - “Making Firm a Newspaper’s Focus on Investigative Reporting,” By David Boardman, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100377>
  - “Investigative Reporting: Keeping It Relevant, Keeping It Local,” By Paul D’Ambrosio, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100448>
  - “The Benefits of Computer-Assisted Reporting,” By Jason Method, <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100454>
  - “Investigative Team, New nonprofit journalism centers aim to fill the gap in state and local investigations.” By Will Skowronski, <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=4693>
  - WRITE a one-page overview of your final project.

**Week Eleven:** March 30

The role and value of investigative reporting. Campaigns & the Press /Elections. In-class exercise.

- **ASSIGNMENT DUE April 6:** Visit OpenSecrets.org, <http://www.opensecrets.org/>. You will assigned a member of Congress and asked to provide a full report on his campaign finances.
- Here are several additional sites that you might find helpful:
  - Federal Elections Commission, <http://fec.gov>
  - Congressional Quarterly Moneyline, <http://moneyline.cq.com/pml/home.do?MBF=NAME>
  - The Cook Political Report, <http://www.cookpolitical.com/>

#### **Week Twelve:** April 6

Follow the money trail. Politicians, lobbyists and special interests. Public v. Private lives.

- **ASSIGNMENT- DUE April 13:**
- Familiarize yourself with the IRE database: IRE Net Tour: <http://www.ire.org/resourcecenter/nettour/index.html>
- Write a 300 word article based on what you find out about yourself using the links on the following website or any others that you find. <http://www.nreisner.com/FindingAlmostAnybody.htm>
- Read the following articles/essays:
  - The Washington Post “Salon” Faux Pas
    - “Washington Post cancels lobbyist event amid uproar,” By MIKE ALLEN & MICHAEL CALDERONE | 7/2/09, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0709/24441.html>
    - “David Bradley defends Atlantic Media's exclusive 'salons',” By Michael Calderone, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0709/24618.html>
    - “Veteran editors offer advice to the Post,” by Andrew Alexander, [http://voices.washingtonpost.com/ombudsman-blog/2009/07/post-salons\\_advice\\_for\\_the\\_pos.html?hpid=opinionsbox1](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/ombudsman-blog/2009/07/post-salons_advice_for_the_pos.html?hpid=opinionsbox1)
    - “City Desk, Washington Post “Salon” Scandal: The Memo Trail,” Posted by Erik Wemple, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/citydesk/2009/07/02/washington-post-salon-scandal-the-memo-trail/>
    - “A Publisher Stumbles Publicly at The Post,” by David Carr, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/04/business/media/04post.html>

#### **Week Thirteen:** April 13

Ethical considerations. Understanding computer assisted reporting. Using Databases.

- **ASSIGNMENT- DUE April 20:** Log onto Poynter Institute’s NewsU.org (<http://newsu.org>), and take the “Handling Race & Ethnicity” online course.

#### **Week Fourteen:** April 20

- Role of ethnic media / Covering Multicultural Issues
- **ASSIGNMENT- DUE April 27:** Read “The Elements of Journalism,” Chapters 6 – 11. Write a 300-500 word essay discussing the role of diversity in the media, and provide some current examples.

#### **Week Fifteen:** April 27 – Final Projects Workshop

#### **Week Sixteen:** May 4 - FINAL PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.