

Database & Public Records Reporting/JOU3121

Summer 2006/Tuesday, 5 p.m. – 9:05 p.m.

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Office Hours: Monday, 9 a.m.–11 a.m., 3:30 p.m. – 5 p.m.
Wednesday, 9:30 a.m. – 11 a.m.
And by appointment.
And whenever I'm around and available.

Required Texts:

- *Computer-Assisted Reporting – A Practical Guide*, Brant Houston, St. Martins Press
- *Florida Public Records Handbook*, Joe Adams, The First Amendment Foundation, Tallahassee, FL
- The Sun-Sentinel, The Miami Herald, The New York Times, NPR, CNN and any other credible news outlets that attract you.

Recommended: “Letters to a Young Journalist,” Samuel G. Freedman, Basic Books, 2006

PURPOSE

This course will focus on a number of journalism topics:

- **Public Records:** Finding and using public records and "quasi" public records to find stories, buttress tips, follow paper trails and background people.
- **Database Reporting aka Computer-Assisted Reporting:** How such analytical tools as spreadsheets and database managers can let journalists turn masses of data into the material for stories that couldn't be done any other way.
- **Research, online and off:** What's available online and what's not. When to Google and when to remember that Google isn't the source of all the universe's wisdom. Sometimes a phone book is better, and paper records are better nearly all the time.

We will learn research and analytical methods and how to make sure what you get is true, we'll review elementary school arithmetic, we'll learn about powerful software and techniques. More than anything else, we will learn a new way of thinking.

Reporters traditionally ask questions and assume that the answers they get are true. This is especially true when they seek information about a complicated subject from any sort of expert. We will learn how to analyze information and base our questions on that analysis, to challenge experts if what they tell us does not appear to comport with what we have already seen.

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More than anything, this class is an initial step in your careers as journalists. Journalists must be professional and I expect you to be the same. Journalists must stay informed and up on news and I expect you do to the same. We'll spend lots of time talking about journalism ethics, journalism practices, the news, the care and feeding of editors and more.

!!IMPORTANT!!

- This is a computer-assisted journalism class and participants are assumed to know how to work with the Windows operating system. Students are responsible for knowing how to create, copy, move, delete and navigate directories and files; how to format and erase disks; how to download files from e-mail and the World Wide Web, and how to compress and/or expand files using such programs as PKZip or WinZip. Students will be responsible for knowing how to handle larger files. Online tutorials on these topics will be available, however individualized instruction will not.
- Participation in this course requires the use of Microsoft Office Pro — Microsoft Access, Excel and Word — and Microsoft Internet Explorer 6. Each student must have access to these programs. Classroom computers are equipped with Office Pro XP. Office Pro 2000 or 97 are also acceptable, however there are compatibility issues among the three. You will be responsible for knowing how to move data from Office XP to other versions should you be working in two different versions of the programs. (Tutorials are available on request.)
- There are, of course, many other programs that accomplish the same tasks and many of them are very good. However, for the sake of consistency, the use of such other programs as **Microsoft Works, Perfect Office, Lotus, Quattro, Paradox, FoxPro** or **Filemaker** is **NOT** acceptable. Any students choosing to use them will need to deal with any file or command incompatibilities on their own.

3121 ONLINE

We will conduct much of our class business via three online venues.

- Professor Reisner's web site, www.nreisner.com. Most likely, you've already been there because that's probably how you got to this document.
- A *listserv*, or Internet mailing list, JOU3121@fiu.edu. A listserv provides an easy way to exchange information via e-mail. Any mail sent to the class listserv will go to Professor Reisner and all students in the class. Use the list to ask questions about class or assignments, to seek assistance if you run into trouble on any technique, to help out your fellow students; use it to continue the conversations we will have in class.
- A Web Log or "blog" where you'll find assignments, articles of interest and other items. There is a link to the blog on the class web page.

COURSE STANDARDS

Consider this class the entrance to your careers as journalists. We'll therefore apply the same standards here as you will find in any newsroom.

- Attendance is mandatory and will comprise 10 percent of your final grade. Students who must be absent due to illness must bring a note from the treating physician. Absences due to traffic, assignments in other classes, interviews, car trouble, cruises, trips home for anything other than verifiable emergencies, will not be excused. Other issues will be considered case-by-case but will not generally be excused
- Courtesy counts. Turn your cell phones off before class starts. Don't talk on the phone or among yourselves, answer e-mail or surf the web when the instructor is teaching.
- Be on time. Arrive late more than twice and your grade will be reduced by one letter, at the professor's discretion.
- Deadlines will be enforced. Grades for assignments turned in after deadline will be reduced by one-half letter per day, at the professor's discretion. Likewise, lengths. Assignments turned in over or under the assignment length will be reduced by one-half letter grade, at the professor's discretion.
- Spelling and grammar count, both in your papers and in your e-mails. So does adherence to AP style. Grades will be reduced for spelling, grammar and AP style errors.
- Format counts. Assignments that do not conform to the required format (see below) will not be accepted.
- There is only one rule regarding plagiarism: Don't. Any student who turns in a plagiarized assignment will fail the class and be subject to university discipline.

ASSIGNMENTS/HOMEWORK

There's a lot of it. The only way to do this kind of journalism is to learn the tools and the only way to learn the tools is to practice. All assignments must be completed according to the following standards and formats:

- You will turn in **two** copies of every assignment unless instructed otherwise. Prof. Reisner will mark one copy and keep the other.
- All assignments must be typed. Handwritten assignments will **not** be accepted.
- All assignments must be stapled.
- Each page of each assignment must be clearly labeled with your name, the assignment, the date, the page number and the total number of pages.
- On assignments for which you conduct interviews, you **must** provide contact information for each person to whom you speak.
- Assignments are due in class..
- You may leave assignments in Professor Reisner's mailbox in the Journalism Program office, but they will be deemed late.
- If you know you are going to be absent, you may leave assignments in Professor Reisner's mailbox in the Journalism Program office before class; assignments left after class will be deemed late
- Assignments will not be accepted via e-mail or fax.

NEWS QUIZZES

- Journalists need to know everything and staying informed is crucial. Students are required to read newspapers and listen/watch broadcast news. News quizzes will be given randomly throughout the semester.

GRADING POLICY

Database reporting/public records-based journalism isn't for everyone, in the same sense that some folks are born cop reporters, some can cover sports and others write features. I also understand that technology isn't for everyone and not everyone has the same ability to turn data into stories.

While that notion informs the way grades are given, grading is on a point basis. I reserve the right, however, to adjust grades up or down, depending on my evaluation of a particular student's work.

To get an **A**, students must show they really get it, that they can do more than the basics with the software, that they can find public records and know how to use them and can take data and present more than the obvious stories.

B students must show they understand the basic concepts and software and can find public records, but have trouble translating what they've done into independent or original analysis that goes beyond the obvious.

To get a **C**, students do all the work, understand basic public records and show a good-faith effort to figure out the software and the concepts.

About the only way to get an **F** is to not show up, not complete the work or to very obviously blow the class off.

Students will be graded on:

- **Attendance/ Participation:** Attendance will be taken. *10 percent.*
- **Exercises:** These are both guided and non-guided assignments and the primary way you will learn database and public record techniques. Some will receive letter grades and some won't, but all are mandatory. *25 percent.*
- **Database/Public Records clips:** Each student will turn in four newspaper clips in which reporters' **own** enterprise with data analysis and/or use of public records make significant contributions. Clips will be pasted on letter-sized paper and will be accompanied by a short memo explaining how reporters' analysis or public records made the story better. *5 percent*
- **News Quizzes:** Unannounced quizzes to encourage you to keep up on the news. *5 percent.*
- **Public Records Quiz:** An evaluation of your knowledge of what public records are and how/where to obtain them. *10 percent.*
- **Public Records Project:** Each student will request and negotiate for a set of public records in electronic format. *15 percent.*
- **Final Project:** A public records, database and spreadsheet assignment intended to show what you've learned. You'll receive a public records issue to investigate. You'll also receive two sets of data, one to analyze in a spreadsheet and one in a database manager. *30 percent.*

Here is how points are awarded:

Homework	
Grade	Points
A+	10
A	9.5
A-	9
B+	8.5
B	8
B-	7.5
C+	7
C	6.5
C-	6
D	5.5
D-	5
Ungraded	1
F	0

Final Grade	
Points	Grade
95 and above	A
90	A-
85	B+
80	B
75	B-
70	C+
65	C
60	C-
55	D
Below 55	F

HOW TO LOWER YOUR GRADE

You can lower your grade any number of ways. Here are some you can try:

- Don't come to class.
- Come late to class.
- Don't turn in work on time or at all.
- Don't turn in work in the proper format.
- Don't turn in two copies of all work.
- Talk in class.
- Send e-mail, surf the web, play online games, answer your phone or send text messages in class.
- Sleep in class.
- Don't participate in class.
- Play online games in class

USB DRIVES

Students are advised to obtain a USB Flash Drive – also known as a “Thumb Drive,” or “Jump Drive.” USB Drives operate at the speed of memory, many times faster than floppy disks. A 128 megabyte USB Drive holds the equivalent of about 120 floppy disks, should cost about \$20 and is available at Target, Best Buy, Office Depot, Office Max, CompUSA, even Walgreen’s. Professor Reisner can direct you to online sources with good prices.

SOME THOUGHTS ON LEARNING & TEACHING

“Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active, reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn.” Loris Malaguzzi (1920–1994), Italian early childhood education specialist.

The transmission of knowledge is collaboration. All I can do is present information, resources and my 25 years of experience to you. It is up to you to avail yourself of them by reading the text, handouts and other resources; by reading newspapers and paying attention to the news; and by spending enough time on all assignments to do them as well as you can.

If you do these things, you will learn. If you don’t, you won’t. And if that’s the case, you should perhaps consider another career choice.