

Spring 2013 Syllabus...

COMS 104 Basic News Writing

Instructor: **Bob Stepno**, Ph.D.
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Section 104-02, 11 a.m., Tues-Thurs, Whitt 222
Section 104-01, 2 p.m., Tues-Thurs, Young 123
office hours: Mon-Tue-Wed-Thurs 3:30-4:30 p.m.
-- or by appointment

For up-to-date information, check <http://www.radford.edu/rstepno/104> each week
Some assignments will be linked to <http://stepno104.wordpress.com>

Overview

In this course, you will practice clear, accurate, informative, entertaining writing. You will weigh facts, choose words carefully, pay attention to detail, keep your reader in mind, identify your sources, write concisely and meet deadlines. While essential for journalists, those skills benefit any writer, in any number of professions.

The reporter's skills of information gathering and news writing apply to products delivered online, over the airwaves or in print: You must know what news is, where to find it, how to check the facts and how to build a story that interests and informs readers.

In this course you may encounter problems similar to those working journalists face: time and space limitations, missing facts, legal and ethical issues, a sometimes-grouchy editor (one named Bob) – and less salary than you might like.

Whether your goal is to report for a newspaper, magazine, website or television station... to learn more about how stories are written... to become a better "citizen journalist"... or to be a more informed "citizen news consumer," I hope you will discover that news writing is challenging, important... and that it is a lot of fun.

Formal course description:

Basic News Writing (3)

Instruction and practice in the basics of writing for print and electronic media. Includes introduction to writing fundamentals, writing for all types of media, and use of expository, narrative, descriptive and persuasive approaches. (Students cannot receive credit for both MSTD 105 and COMS 104)

Texts, Equipment and News

Required:

- Tim Harrower, *Inside Reporting*, 3rd edition, McGraw-Hill
(See workbook and sample chapters linked to the course home page)
- *The Associated Press Stylebook* (new or recent edition)
Bring the AP Stylebook to class Weeks 3-6 and as assigned
- *Free Wordpress.com account* (You will create: yourRUusername104.wordpress.com)

Recommended free online texts:

- *Journalism 2.0* by Mark Briggs, http://www.kcnn.org/resources/journalism_20/
- *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, 1918, <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>
- *News Writers Handbook*, by Rob Melton, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/8641702/News-Writers-Handbook-by-Rob-Melton?autodown=pdf-document-metadata>

Obvious: Notebook, pencils, pens, earphones for use with lab computers, USB drive for backup of work.

Recommended:

- A digital audio recorder and digital camera to record interviews and scenes.
(Some smartphones may be good enough at recording for note-taking.)
- A good dictionary of American English.
(Webster's *New World Dictionary* is the Associated Press's favorite.)
- Strunk & White *Elements of Style* (any print edition) or any standard English grammar book.

Become a News Addict:

Be prepared for news discussions and news quizzes by reading the news every week, and observe news writing style while you're at it. Make a Twitter account and follow the professor's suggested list of area journalists and news sources: <https://twitter.com/#!/bobstep/nrvi>
Go direct: *The Roanoke Times* (<http://roanoke.com>), *The New York Times* (<http://nytimes.com>), *The Washington Post* (<http://washingtonpost.com>), *USA Today* (<http://usatoday.com>), *The Radford News Journal* (<http://ourvalley.org>), *Southwest Times* (<http://southwesttimes.com>), *The Tartan* (<http://thetartan.com>), *Whim* (<http://ruwhim.com>), *RU Today* (<http://rutoday.radford.edu>), *The Wall Street Journal* (<http://wsj.com>), and *The Collegiate Times* at Virginia Tech (<http://collegiatetimes.com>).

Multimedia news tip: Set your alarm clock to National Public Radio's Morning Edition. I'm a big fan of <http://npr.org> and its affiliates, including <http://www.wvtf.org> and <http://www.radioiq.org>. For a "radio" network, NPR is doing impressive things with print-style news writing on the Web, along with podcasts, streaming audio, blogs, Twitter feeds and more.

Many news sources are aggregated by sites like <http://Yahoo.com> and <http://news.google.com>. You also can subscribe to news feeds in RSS readers like the myru.radford.edu "My Stuff" page, <http://igoogle.com>, Google Reader, <http://my.yahoo.com>, and other sites and programs.

What You Will Learn

Some specific things you will be practicing and learning are:

1. Basic newspaper and Web writing style, standards and techniques, including a variety of ways to lead and structure a story.
2. The importance of accuracy -- accurate facts, but also accurate grammar and spelling.
3. The concept of news itself -- what is newsworthy, and why.
4. Techniques to find and focus story ideas.
5. Reporting skills: listening, observing, interviewing and note taking.
6. Research skills to find and evaluate sources, background the news, put stories in context, and check the facts.
7. The vocabulary and a bit of history of journalism, from "lede" to "30."
8. The foundations of journalism ethics and libel law.
9. Differences in story-telling styles and techniques for print and broadcast news, public relations, and online news sites.

Schedule changes & email

Like the news itself, expect the class to change as we go along. The assignment calendar may be altered to take advantage of special campus events, speakers, breaking news and other opportunities. ***Changes in the schedule will be announced in class, by email, and on the Web. Check your Radford.edu email and my website often.***

If you have questions of any kind, stop in during office hours or send me a note at rstepno@radford.edu. I have other email accounts, but that is the one I use for all course-related mail. I check it several times a day, but rarely after 9 p.m. or before 9 a.m.

I may not be able to respond to all mail individually. If you have an especially good question, I may write back to the entire class or discuss it at our next class meeting.

Email as news writing

Your first "news" writing lesson: Think of each email's "Subject" line as a headline -- an effective summary of the message. Make it informative, not a vague label. Be specific. Put your **name, course number (104-2) and topic** in the "Subject" line. Not: "Hey prof!" or "Help!!!" or "Weekly assignment." Instead: "JBrown, 104-2, darkside story worth Pulitzer?" or "ISmith, 104-02, dog ate my computer."

Being here: Attendance, Assignments and Deadlines

My attendance policy is inspired by professional media organizations: You are expected to come to every class, arrive **on time**, and deliver your work **on deadline**. When you're here, be here: No email, Facebook, texting, online gambling or off-topic Web browsing, please.

I know there are good reasons to miss class, so don't bother with doctor's notes or written apologies. BUT after the second week of class, when add-drop changes are over, **if you have more than three absences** for any reason come see me. Otherwise, your grade for the course may be reduced by one letter for each additional absence and you should consider withdrawing from the class. In the event of a flu outbreak or other emergency that keeps classes from meeting, we will "meet in cyberspace" using online systems and email.

You will have online or on-paper exercises in almost every class. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what they were and do them on your own.

If you know in advance that you will miss a class, see me in person to arrange a catch-up assignment. If you miss a class, check my website and contact a classmate for assignments. I may not have a chance to answer "tell me what I missed" emails on Tuesday or Thursday, but I will attempt to update an "exercises we did in class" list on my Web page. If an assignment was done in class or due as homework the day you were out, submit it electronically and bring a printed copy to the next class you attend for full credit.

Class Cancellations

If class is cancelled because of a winter storm, flu outbreak or other emergency, it is your responsibility to check my course Web page for any assignment and schedule changes – and **do the work**.

Want to know if a class is cancelled?

In addition to local television and radio stations, information about classes being canceled and administrative offices closing due to inclement weather will be available from the university switchboard by calling 831-5000 or on the university's Web page.

If you are confused by conflicting announcements, you may call the switchboard for clarification. The switchboard will update information on the day of the closing by 6 a.m.

More info: <http://www.radford.edu/weatherpolicy.html>

Important Note About Disability Services

If you are seeking classroom accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act, you are required to register with the Disability Resource Office. The DRO is located in Room 32, Tyler Hall, telephone 831-6350. To receive academic accommodations for this class, please obtain the proper DRO forms and meet with me at the beginning of the semester.

The Radford University Honor Code

By accepting admission to Radford University, each student makes a commitment to understand, support, and abide by the University Honor Code without compromise or exception. This class will be conducted in strict observance of the Honor Code, which reads as follows:

I do hereby resolve to uphold the Honor Code of Radford University by refraining from lying, from the stealing or unauthorized possession of property and from violating the Standards of Student Academic Integrity.

Those Standards of Student Academic Integrity are spelled out in the Student Handbook. **McConnell Library** has related material online: <http://lib.radford.edu/tutorial/X/learn.asp>

Another honor code

See the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists at <http://spi.org/ethicscode.asp>

Truth, accuracy and honesty are essential in news writing. Plagiarism, fabrication or dishonesty will result in an F for an assignment and a D or F for the course, depending on the offense. Don't cut corners or make things up because a story is "just for class." Clearly identify the sources of your information. Also be careful with electronic note-taking: Don't let anything you "cut and paste" into a background-notes file land in a story without quote marks and attribution. It will look like plagiarism and you will not be able to prove it was an accident.

Assignments and Grading for COMS 104

- News-reading & text-reading reports, short exercises, quizzes & attendance, 25 percent
- Midterm test (Mostly AP Stylebook, grammar, accuracy), 20 percent
 - Editing a made-up story full of mistakes or a collection of error-filled sentences.
- Assigned stories & enterprise reports (mostly after midterm), 30 percent
 - Five or more "scenario" or role-playing stories, in-class press conferences and live reports.
 - Deadlines and specific assignments to be announced. Rewrites accepted for final grade.
- Final exam, 25 percent
 - Write a story on deadline, in class, from provided information.

The midterm editing test will be based on in-class and online exercises and the "Test Yourself" sections of the textbook's chapters 2 and 3, plus a general familiarity with the *AP Stylebook*. You will be allowed to use the Stylebook during both the midterm and the final exam.

Exactly how many stories and exercises you do will depend on the pace of the class, opportunities for live assignments, guest speakers, etc. Expect to write one or two out-of-class stories that involve attending a meeting or speech and conducting interviews. You should revise longer stories for a final grade.

Homework: News reading and textbook reading assignments

- News-reading is required every week. Written reports will be assigned for some of them.
- Textbook-reading assignments are listed every week. Quizzes will be announced when needed.
- Grammar refresher: *In the first five weeks of class*, do two or more of the textbook's 10 online **grammar quizzes** each week. They are short and self-graded. Grammar topics are covered briefly in Chapter 3 of the textbook and in the *AP Stylebook*. Keep track of the questions you get wrong and ask about them in class, online, or during my office hours. If you score under 70 on more than one grammar quiz, get grammar tutoring at the Learning Assistance Resource Center before the midterm editing test.

Text Preparation & Format

All stories written in this class should be typed, double-spaced, with **your name**, the date submitted and a brief identifying "slug" at the top left corner. "Slug" is news jargon for a short identifier, such as "Floyd fire" or, for one of the reading assignments, "Ch. 2 Report." Save the story in RTF, DOC or DOCX format, and name the file with **your name** and the slug. (RJones-FloydFire.rtf)

To save paper, you will turn in assignments online using email, Desire2Learn or another online service. Procedures for each assignment will be announced in class.

COMS 104 Basic News Writing -- Fall 2012 Schedule

*Class meets Tuesday and Thursday.
Exact topics may vary, but we'll treat the Harrower text chapters in roughly the order listed in the right column, with some backtracking and glancing-ahead. The AP Stylebook will be used in class from Week 3 on.*

Harrower chapters

<i>Week 1</i>	1/22-24	<p>Introductions to the course, the lab and each other, Desire2Learn, our webbed & tweeted lives.</p> <p>Journalism history and defining news Publication types, story types and news values.</p> <p>Create a WordPress site in class. See http://stepno104.wordpress.com for assignment on your "media diet" in the past. Post assignment online in class Tuesday 1/30.</p> <p>Begin taking grammar online quizzes on your own, two or three a week; all 10 by 2/18.</p>	1 & 2
<i>Week 2</i>	1/29-31	<p>Reading news for leads, styles, vocabulary & news values</p> <p>News-reading assignment due in class Tuesday 2/5 using The Roanoke Times, New York Times, Washington Post.</p> <p>Third reading assignment: Visit the Morgue; report on your reading Tuesday 2/12.</p>	2 & preview 8 3
<i>Week 3</i>	2/5-7	<p>Focus on words, sentences and (short) paragraphs.</p> <p>Grammar, AP Stylebook, Spelling & Punctuation (GASP)</p>	3, AP
<i>Week 4</i>	2/12-14	<p>News events & reporter's role</p> <p>In-class event or press conference story (Story #1 TBA)</p>	3, AP
<i>Week 5</i>	2/19-21	<p>Story structure</p> <p>Editing for grammar, spelling, style – and accurate facts!</p>	3, 4, AP
<i>Week 6</i>	2/26-28	<p>Midterm review; editing techniques</p> <p>Midterm exam Thursday (Editing using AP Stylebook)</p>	3, 4, AP
<i>Week 7</i>	3/5-7	<p>Research & reporting</p> <p>Speeches & meetings: Story assignment 2 TBA</p>	4, 5, 7
		SPRING BREAK	
<i>Week 8</i>	3/19-21	<p>Beats & sources</p> <p>Public affairs reporting</p> <p>Story assignment 3 TBA</p>	4,5,10
<i>Week 9</i>	3/26-28	<p>Public affairs reporting</p> <p>Story assignment 4 TBA</p> <p>Story review meetings (tentative)</p>	3,4,5,6

<i>Week 10</i>	4/2-4	Story review meetings (tentative) Features & enterprise stories	5,6,7
<i>Week 11</i>	4/9-11	convergence & broadcast Story assignment 5 TBA	8,9
<i>Week 12</i>	4/16-18	convergence & enterprise civic & citizen j Story assignment 6 TBA	5,6,8,9
<i>Week 13</i>	4/23-25	ethics & law The newest journalism is also the oldest: "Hyper Local"	7, 10
		Story summaries and revisions	8
<i>Week 14</i>	30-5/2	editing, rewrite & follow-up Story revisions Note exam schedule below and mark your calendar.	3,4, AP
	5/6-10	EXAM WEEK Final exam (writing a story in class) See day/time below.	

FINAL EXAM: Usual room

Section 02 (11 a.m. class) exam at 10:15 Thurs May 9 Whitt 222;

Section 01 (2 p.m. class) exam at 2:45 Tues. May 7 Young 123.

If you have an examination conflict or if you are scheduled to have THREE exams on one day, see the instructors to make alternative arrangements.

To double-check the times for this class or other classes: <http://www.radford.edu/~registra/>

Grading scale for story assignments

- A: 90-100 percent. Story assignment approaches professional-quality work (e.g., excellent reporting & writing; almost no errors for the copy desk to catch).
B: 80-89 percent. Above average; almost ready to go, a thorough and balanced report with good use of sources; publishable with minor editing.
C: 70-79 percent. Shows a grasp of basic principles, meets deadline, but needs more reporting or heavy rewriting -- more facts, better grammar, more or better sources and attribution.
D: 60-69 percent. Poor grasp of principles, serious problems with deadlines, grammar, factual errors, etc.
F: Fails to meet basic standards. For example, work is inaccurate, libelous, dishonest or missing.

Time Requirement

Although this is a "lab" class, expect to work on projects outside of the classroom. Some stories may require that you attend meetings or events in the evening or on weekends. If you have a long commute, a job, or other commitments that make fulfilling such requirements difficult, or if you want to substitute an out-of-town weekend assignment, see me well in advance of your deadline.

Digital Media Essentials

- Save documents early and often. They are your responsibility. Always have a backup of your work. Use your Radford network server space ("drive H"), email or a USB memory stick.
- If you need to move back and forth between Macs and Windows computers, or send a document by email, use ".rtf" format to avoid trouble with Microsoft Word's occasional format changes. Apple Pages, Microsoft Works and other programs can read and write .rtf
- Give documents clear, specific **names**, including your own last name, **especially if you email them or submit them online**. (Example: "Romanov-banjo.rtf" NOT "homework" or "story.")
- If you email a Microsoft Word document as an attachment or put it on the server, follow these steps: Save an RTF copy of the document onto your desktop. **Quit Microsoft Word**. Create your email message. Attach the document, making sure to use the version you just saved. Send a copy to yourself. Check to make sure it arrived and opens correctly.
- Be careful with Radford lab equipment and be considerate of other users. Report computer problems as soon as they occur and put a note on the computer to alert the next user.
- Use the computer to take notes in class or look things up, but **do not** drift into Facebook, IM, email, texting, online gambling and unassigned Web browsing.

Your Teacher (this seems to require the third person):

Bob Stepno joined the Radford faculty in fall 2007 after more than 20 years as a writer and editor, then seven years as a teacher. He has worked for the nation's oldest (*print*) newspaper and one of its first *online* "newspapers." Despite the thinning gray hair, he received his doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill so recently (December 2003) that calling him "doctor" still makes him look around for someone wearing a stethoscope.

A note for you

Thank you for choosing this class. If you have questions that aren't addressed in this document—or in any class—come talk about it, or at least send me email (which I usually check several times a day, seven days a week). After all, you're the reason I'm here!

Bob Stepno
rstepno@radford.edu
<http://www.radford.edu/rstepno>

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(which means "the end")