

**WRITING THE FEATURE STORY ENW320 SPRING 2008****Instructor:** Jack Cavanaugh**Home Phone:** (203) 210-5284**Class meets:** Monday &

Thursday 930-1045AM

DMH 148

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**Office Hours:** Monday and Thursday 900-930, and 1045- noon in DMH 141. Generally I will only be on campus during class days, but meetings can be arranged on other days if necessary. Also please email or call me whenever you like. I also plan to meet with each student individually for about 15 minutes around mid semester and about two weeks before the end of the semester. Those meetings will be held during the regular class sessions.

**Objectives of the course:** Through lectures and extensive writing, teach students effective techniques involved in writing feature stories for newspapers and magazines and, to a lesser degree, for nonfiction books, while at the same time improving writing skills. Strong focus on story structure, gathering materials for stories, interviewing techniques and effective ways to market stories and to seek employment as feature writers. Instructor will try, best he can, to determine weaknesses on the part of individual students and work with students to try to rectify those weaknesses.

**Prerequisites:** Basic writing skills and understanding of the elementary rules of grammar. Reasonably strong vocabulary and college-level skills in punctuation and grammar. News writing course is a prerequisite although, in some instances the requirement may be waived. Passion for reading, especially of newspapers, magazines and non-fiction books, is also expected of each student.

**Required materials:**

\* *Feature Writing for Newspapers and Magazines*. Fifth Edition. Pearson. Edward Jay Friedlander and John Lee. This is the main text for the course.

- *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*. Perseus Publishing.
- A pocket dictionary
- A thesaurus
- A stenographer's-type notebook, both for in-class note-taking and for taking notes on story assignments.

**\*\*\*Suggested supplementary books:**

- *The Elements of Style*. By William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Macmillan Publishing Co. Excellent and, believe it or not, entertaining, book on

grammar that many writers resort to throughout, and even beyond, their careers. Highly recommended and also inexpensive.

- *On Writing Well*. By William Zinsser Harper Collins Publishers. Regarded as a classic book on nonfiction and which is guaranteed to improve your writing skills.

### **Overview of Course:**

By the end of the semester, you will have learned, hopefully:

- \* How to overcome any fears and apprehensions, such as writer's block' that you may have at the outset of the course.
- \* The main differences between conventional news stories and features.
- \* How to develop story ideas and then turning those ideas into interesting and, when appropriate, entertaining feature articles for newspapers and magazines.
- \* The techniques of writing attention-grabbing leads and then building on those leads into well-structured stories.
- \* How to market your stories.
- \* How to develop effective story narratives by writing crisp and colorful copy that includes a judicious use of good quotes.
- \* That writing -- good writing, that is -- is not easy and, indeed, is hard work.
- \* To use different approaches in writing for specific publications -- e.g., a more formal style of writing for publications such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, the Atlantic Monthly compared with the more breezier and informal style for People, Sports Illustrated and the dramatic narrative style that approximates fiction-style writing which is required by Reader's Digest, Guideposts and some other magazines.
- \* How to market stories as a free-lance writer -- determining the appropriate publications for a story and the most effective means of approaching editors and then following up on your proposals.
- \* Job placement opportunities with newspapers and magazines and how to take advantage of them, either as a prospective staff member or as a free-lance writer, which is often a very effective way of "breaking in" with a publication.
- \* That feature writers are more in demand than ever as newspapers, in particular, devote more and more space to non hard-news stories in order to compete more efficiently with the Internet and radio and television which have a huge advantage in spot news coverage.
- \* Advantages and disadvantages of writing feature stories compared to writing conventional news stories.

**Class format:**

Early lectures will focus heavily on feature writing as a special craft -- a distinctive journalistic genre - and some of the pitfalls, most notably writer's block and, in some cases, lack of confidence on the part of students and ways to overcome that problem. There will be a strong emphasis on the growing need for feature writers because of the ever-growing proliferation of specialized magazines (which by and large have replaced the old traditional general-interest magazines such as Life) and the tendency of newspapers -- even such well known publications as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal - to rely far more heavily on news features in their effort to compete with television. Much of your writing will be done during class sessions.

The various types of specialized writing -- sports, consumer news, humor, entertainment, science, etc. -- will be explored so that, perhaps, students can determine whether they would prefer to focus on a particular type of feature writing rather than write general-interest type features. So, too, will various writing devices such as narrative, summary, question, quotation and situation leads, along with a strong focus on story flow, effective use of transitions and, extremely important in feature writing, compelling endings to your stories.

Students will edit, critique and evaluate each other's feature stories in class, after which those stories will be discussed in class. This procedure enables students to develop editing skills, which are essential to any writer; to improve writing skills through reading well-written papers; and to see what topics classmates are focusing on. During the first half of the semester, students will be given opportunities to rewrite their papers if they receive C's or below on their original drafts, both in the hope of improving their papers and their grades.

Materials in the main text will be discussed in class via a question-and answer format that will affect student grades. So, too, will a number of feature stories from newspapers and magazines, including some of the instructor's from The New York Times, Sports Illustrated, the Reader's Digest and some other publications, which will be distributed to students for required reading. Criticism, or praise, of such articles will be encouraged by students, along with questions about the relevance and interest of the feature stories being displayed.

Several experienced nonfiction writers will be invited to speak to the class and then entertain questions. In advance of those talks, published works by the guest speakers will be distributed to the class. Students will take notes during the talks and, as homework assignments, write roughly 300-word feature story reports on them. Last, but hopefully not least, the instructor, when relevant to the material being discussed in class, will relate some of his own experiences as a feature writer and author of two books and recount how some of his ideas have developed, along with his extensive dealings with editors at The New York Times and other newspaper and a variety of national magazines, plus book agents and book editors. He will also relate some of the frustrations he, and other writers, tend to encounter and his own approach to the writing of feature stories.

### **Outside assignments:**

Apart from reading assigned chapters in the main text, students will be asked to write approximately seven feature stories of varying lengths on a variety of assigned feature genres, including news features, personality profiles, stories on “unforgettable characters, II personal experiences, people with unusual occupations or lifestyles, travel and entertainment. In addition, students will be assigned to write one 1,000-word feature story on a topic of their own choosing as their final assignment, subject to the instructor's approval. In all instances, the instructor will provide a list of prospective story ideas to those uncertain of what to write about. The news features must be based on a campus event or controversy – e.g., the move of the varsity basketball programs from the on-campus Alumni Hall to the Arena at Harbor Yard in Bridgeport. Likewise, the personality profile assignment should be on someone associated with Fairfield University – professor, a coach, another student with an exceptional skill or particularly interesting background or someone else of interest.

It will be imperative that students read a variety of feature stories in newspapers and magazines of their choosing as an aid in developing a strong, colorful style of writing. At the outset of the course, the instructor will recommend a number of outstanding nonfiction writers, from newspapers, magazines and nonfiction books, as a means of enhancing and improving their own feature writing skills. In addition, students will be expected to “keep up” on the news, mainly by reading newspapers. To that end, the professor will occasionally begin each course session by asking students to relate a least one major news story over the past 24 hours. Occasional quizzes based on news events also will be given, announced.

### **Requirements**

1. All assignments must be typed and double-spaced on standard 8-1/2 by 11 inch white copy paper. Do not break up sentences at the bottom of a page, and make sure to write MORE at the bottom of a page when your story is not yet complete and denote the end by typing in #end or your initials (e.g. JC/End.)
2. In editing copy, students are to use standard journalistic copy symbols from the Associated Press style book. On all written projects, students must write on separate lines your name, the course number, the date the assignment is due (and in cases when papers are handed in late, the date the paper is turned in) followed by the “slug” for your story. The slug which should give the essence of your story, should be on every page – e.g., STORM on the first page, then 1st add STORM or STORM/2, etc on succeeding pages.

3. All homework assignments must be submitted at the beginning of class. Late papers will cost students one full grade unless there are mitigating circumstances which are given to the professor no later than 6 o'clock the night before an assignment is due.
4. All work must be clipped together, not stapled.

### **Grading summary**

Class participation	5 points
Seven feature stories (worth from 10 to 15 points)	90 points
Class quizzes	5 points

### **Attendance**

Attendance will be taken at the start of each class. You will be allowed two cuts without penalty. Thereafter, starting with a third cut, you will be penalized 2 points per cut, meaning that with, say, five cuts, you will have accumulated 10 penalty points that will be deducted during the calculation of your final grade. Absences for valid reason - illness, family emergencies, etc. - must be given in advance whenever possible or, at the latest, by 6 p.m. the day of the absence, by either email or telephone. Work missed during the absence or absences must be made up by the following class.

### **PUNCTUALITY**

Students will be expected to arrive for every class on time. Chronic lateness will affect a student's grade and will not be tolerated since latecomers tend to disrupt a class.

### **Outside writing work:**

Students are encouraged to contribute feature stories to the campus paper, The Mirror, and, if possible, to do internships or obtain part time jobs with daily newspapers such as the Connecticut Post or with weekly papers and magazines. Hopefully, some of the feature stories you write in this class will make it in print in some of these publications. If they do, your grade on that particular paper will be raised by half a grade -e.g" a B will become an A-. Quite often, the professor will recommend at the bottom of an assignment that the story be submitted to the Mirror with a byline atop the first page. Published stories, whether in a campus paper or an outside publication, enhances a student's writing resume and can prove to be of immeasurable help in obtaining fulltime jobs after graduation or part-time employment during summer vacation or even during the academic year.

**Instructor's background:**

Newspaper, news agency and radio and television reporter. Most recently, have covered sports for The New York Times while also writing for numerous other sections of the newspaper. Have written scores of articles for magazines such as Sports Illustrated, Reader's Digest, Golf Digest, Tennis magazine, The Sporting News, Venture and the inflight magazines for American, United and Delta airlines. Author of a number of stories in the popular Chicken Soup book series. Spent eight years as an on-air reporter for, first, ABC News and, later, CBS News. Author of two books, *Damn Disabilities: Full Speed Ahead!*, and *Tunney, Boxing's Brainiest Champ*, which was published in 2006 and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in biography. Currently writing book for Random House on the New York Giants football team of the late 1950s and 1960s, which is scheduled to be published in August of 2008.

In addition to feature writing, have also taught courses at Fairfield University in news writing, sports writing and broadcast news. Have also taught writing courses at the Stamford branch of the University of Connecticut and at Quinnipiac University. Graduate of Syracuse University. Inducted in April of 2002 as a member the fourth class of the Stamford (Conn.) High School Hall of Fame.

**Summary:**

The course is intended to prepare you for a possible career as a feature writer for newspapers or magazines or to pursue a career as a writer of nonfiction books. It will primarily be a hands-on course involving the writing of approximately seven feature stories which will be edited, critiqued and graded by the instructor, in addition to being critiqued by your classmates. Even if you decide not to pursue a career in journalism, the course should improve your ability as a writer and, in particular, as a story-teller, since that is the essence of feature writing, and thus aid you in whatever field of endeavor you choose to follow. Adjustments and alterations to the course may be made as we progress during the semester. The instructor encourages suggestions from the students about the course; indeed, in the past some suggestions have been incorporated into the syllabus. I also strongly recommend that students encountering any difficulty during the course meet with me in an effort to resolve whatever the problem might be. I also would urge that any student having any type of writing difficulty – particularly relating to grammar and punctuation – seek help from The Writing Center, which is located on the second floor of Donnarumma Hall. A few brief sessions with writing mentors can be of invaluable assistance, as many of my students have found out in the past.

**Academic Honesty:**

Under no circumstance shall a student pass of someone else's work as their own. That's plagiarism, an extremely serious offense in journalism or any other kind of writing. It is also a violation of the university's Honor Code and will result in an F and a reprimand or suspension from the university. And do not ever submit work that you previously had

written for another course or had had published unless you have the instructor's permission. Plagiarism includes the verbatim use of any material anyone else has written – whether it be another student or a professional writer in a book, a newspaper, magazine or on the Internet. Such usage is also outright dishonest. In a nutshell, plagiarism involves the appropriation of someone else's written work and then submitting it as your own. In effect, it constitutes both theft and deceit. As the Fairfield Student Handbook states, "Any violation of academic integrity wounds the entire (campus) community and undermines the trust upon which the discovery and communication of knowledge depends."

Some examples of academic dishonesty:

- Submitting someone else's writing work as your own. This can include a section from the Internet of a newspaper or magazine or even something written by another student.
- Fabricating an interview or eyewitness account or making up quotes for an interview.
- Libeling an individual.
- Failing to tell a person that you plan to use what they have told you for a class story that may be published.
- Providing assistance to a classmate to the extent that the classmate's work reflects your contributions as much, if not more, than the classmate's.

As already noted, plagiarism can be grounds for suspension or even expulsion from the university, along with a failing grade for both a paper and the course.

## **PREPARATION**

Students should always come prepared to class, both with assignments, notes, a notebook and a pocket dictionary, but also prepared to answer questions about news events or assigned reading materials. All cell phones must be shut off before entering the classroom. Under no circumstances should students use computers during class sessions except when working on story assignments. The professor also prefers that students sit towards the front of the classroom rather than in the rear, as much to savor what the professor says as to enable said professor to hear any questions that may be asked.

## **CONCLUSION**

As stated above, the objective of the class is to make you a better writer and reporter, and, in particular, a good feature writer. However you do will depend largely on the professor and what you, as an individual, put into the course.