



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
School of Continuing Studies
Journalism

MPJO-795-01: INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

Georgetown University: MPS Journalism

Tuesdays, 5:20 PM to 7:50 PM | FALL 2016

Instructor: Robert Benincasa

- E-mail: rdbenincasa@gmail.com
- Daytime Phone: 202-513-2218

Course Location: Downtown campus, 640 Massachusetts Ave., NW, Room C117

- Office hours are by appointment.

COURSE OVERVIEW

This course is designed to provide students with the essential tools and techniques of investigative reporting and provide a professional framework for practicing such reporting within a news organization. The core learning approach is based on students researching, reporting and writing an investigative story over the course of the semester. Course lectures will focus on investigative reporting techniques, subject areas and ethics.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this course, students should:

1. Understand the basic techniques of investigative reporting and the role of investigative reporting in journalism and its contributions to society and democracy
2. Identify key sources, online and in-person, for public records of government agencies, civil and criminal courts
3. Understand and use a variety of sources and tools for backgrounding individuals and organizations, including property records, financial documents, professional publications, social media platforms and regulatory records
4. Develop an ethical framework for making decisions as an investigative reporter

REQUIRED READING

Title: *The Investigative Reporter's Handbook, Fifth Edition*

Author: Brant Houston

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-58997-4

Publisher: Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.

Year: 2009

Available through the University book store

Also available from IRE

<http://store.ire.org/products/the-investigative-reporters-handbook-5th-edition>



Rentals and e-books available at amazon.com

Daily reading: News sections of *The New York Times*; *The Washington Post*.
Required access to Microsoft Excel, during class if possible
Other material as assigned.

ATTENDANCE

A successful class depends on the active engagement of all students. Students should turn off all cell phones, pagers or other communication devices while in class. Audio or video recording of classes is not permitted without the prior approval of the instructor.

Class discussions should be respectful and considerate of others' views and opinions. Please keep class discussions confidential.

Students are expected to attend every class and arrive on time. Because of the large volume of material in this course, we need to start on time. If you are unable to come to class or if you know will not be there on time, you are responsible for notifying your instructor via email prior to the start of class. There are no excused absences.

As outlined by the university, missing more than two classes will result in a final grade reduction of one level (for example, an A will be converted to an A-). **Absences for classes, beyond the initial two, will result in further reduction of the final grade.** If you are absent for more than four classes, you will be in danger of failing this course.

OTHER GUIDELINES

All sources for your story projects must be on the record. Any exceptions to this rule must be the result of extreme circumstances and must be approved in advance by your instructor. All sources in your story must be disclosed to your instructor and are subject to spot checking. Any use of sources who are personal friends or acquaintances must be disclosed and approved in advance by the instructor.

General resources for the class, including assignments and certain reading material, will be available on Blackboard.

Students MUST pay close attention to the rubrics for each assignment. They are designed to help you understand how you will be evaluated. Failure to adhere to them will result in unsatisfactory grades.

ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to assignments, you will be assessed on your overall process. That includes meeting deadlines, responding to feedback, engaging in the group sessions and staying on track.



Each assignment is due by noon on the assigned day, via email to your instructor at rdbenincasa@gmail.com. Late work may be accepted under unusual circumstances, with the prior agreement of the instructor. A one letter-grade reduction will result.

GRADING

Your course grade will be based on the following:

Story first draft	5 points
Excel assignment	5 points
Story second draft	10 points
Story third draft	15 points
Backgrounding individuals assignment	15 points
Finished story (final)	40 points
Process	10 points
Total:	100 points

Graduate course grades include A, A-, B+, B, B-, C and F. **There are no grades of C+, C- or D.**

A	100-93	B-	82.99-80
A-	92.99-90	C	79.99-70
B+	89.99-88	F	69.99-0
B	87.99-83		

UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

Georgetown offers a variety of support systems for students that can be accessed on main campus or at the downtown location:

- MPS Writing Resource Program
202-687-4246
<http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu/>
- Academic Resource Center
202-687-8354 | arc@georgetown.edu
<http://ldss.georgetown.edu/>
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services
202-687-6985
<http://caps.georgetown.edu/>



STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES POLICY

Students with documented disabilities have the right to specific accommodations that do not fundamentally alter the nature of the course. Students with disabilities should contact the Academic Resource Center (202-687-8354; arc@georgetown.edu; <http://ldss.georgetown.edu/index.cfm>) before the start of classes to allow time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. If accommodations are recommended, you will be given a letter from ARC to share with your professors. You are personally responsible for completing this process officially and in a timely manner. Neither accommodations nor exceptions to policies can be permitted to students who have not completed this process in advance.

GEORGETOWN HONOR SYSTEM

All students are expected to maintain the highest standards of academic and personal integrity in pursuit of their education at Georgetown. Academic dishonesty in any form is a serious offense, and students found in violation are subject to academic penalties that include, but are not limited to, failure of the course, termination from the program, and revocation of degrees already conferred. All students are held to the Honor Code. The Honor Code pledge follows:

In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor, and To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.

PLAGIARISM

Stealing someone else's work is a terminal offense in journalism, and it will wreck your career in academia, too. Students are expected to work with integrity and honesty in all their assignments. The Georgetown University Honor System defines plagiarism as "the act of passing off as one's own the ideas or writings of another." More guidance is available through the Gervase Programs at <http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/system/53377.html>. If you have any doubts about plagiarism, paraphrasing and the need to credit, check out <http://www.plagiarism.org>.

SYLLABUS MODIFICATION

The syllabus may change to accommodate discussion of emerging topics. Also, the schedules of guest speakers may require some shifting of our agenda. The instructor will make every effort to provide as much advance notice as possible for any alterations.



CLASS SCHEDULE

WEEK 1 (TUESDAY, September 6)

Syllabus review

Explanation of class procedures

Overview Of Investigative Reporting

- What makes a story “investigative?”
- How is investigative reporting practiced today?

Reading due prior to class: Houston, Brant. The Future of Investigative Journalism. *Daedalus*, 139.2 (Spring 2010) 45-56, 153 (available on Blackboard)

Assignment given: Story proposal

WEEK 2 (TUESDAY, September 13)

The Story Selection Process

- Ideas vs. Topics
- Getting the most out of your dead ends
- Project Green Light: Minimum/Maximum

Reading due prior to class: Houston book, Chapter 1

WEEK 3 (TUESDAY, September 20)

The Investigative Interview

Guest Speaker: Daniel Zwerdling, Correspondent, NPR

Reading due prior to class: NPR special series: *Injured Nurses*,

At <http://www.npr.org/series/385540559/injured-nurses>

Assignment Due: Story proposal

WEEK 4 (TUESDAY, September 27)

Finding and Backgrounding People On Deadline

- Disaster people: victims, perpetrators, bystanders
- Parties to criminal and civil litigation
- Friends, relatives and associates of those in the news

Assignment given: Backgrounding Individuals

Story assignments and teams finalized

Story conferences

WEEK 5 (TUESDAY, October 4)

Documents and Data

- Using federal and state FOIA laws
- A documents state of mind
- Managing documents and project materials for yourself and collaborators

Reading due prior to class: Houston book, Chapter 3

Assignment due: Backgrounding Individuals

Story conferences



WEEK 6 (TUESDAY, October 11)

Ethics In Investigative Reporting

- Background, Off the Record, On the Record
- Using and protecting confidential Sources
- Healthy, productive source relationships

Reading due prior to class: TBD

Story conferences

WEEK 7 (TUESDAY, October 18)

Introduction to data analysis and visualization

- Excel basics
- Descriptive statistics and aggregations
- Matching data to the visualizations

Assignment due: Story first draft

Assignment given: Excel analysis

Story conferences

WEEK 8 (TUESDAY, October 25)

Landmines: Common biases & sources of error in investigations

- Confirmation bias
- Oversimplification
- An appetite for outrage
- Characters: victims, villains and heroes
- Institutional pressures

Reading due prior to class: TBD

Assignment due: Excel analysis

Story conferences

WEEK 9 (TUESDAY, November 1)

Investigating civil and human rights

Guest speaker: Joseph Shapiro, Correspondent, NPR

Reading assignment due prior to class: NPR Special Series: *Guilty and Charged*, at <http://www.npr.org/series/313986316/guilty-and-charged>

Story conferences

WEEK 10 (Tuesday, November 8)

Follow the money: Backgrounding businesses and nonprofits

- Public Companies: Insider trading and financial metrics
- Private Companies
- Nonprofits: IRS Form 990

Reading due prior to class: TBD

Assignment due: Story second draft

Story conferences



WEEK 11 (TUESDAY, November 15)

Air, Water & Wildlife: Investigating the environment

- Federal and state regulatory structures
- Sources of environmental data

Story conferences

WEEK 12 (TUESDAY, November 22)

Investigating health care

- Hospitals & nursing homes
- Doctors
- Pharmaceutical Industry
- Regulatory regimes, quality & outcome metrics

Reading due prior to class: Online tools at

<https://www.medicare.gov/nursinghomecompare/search.html>

Recommended reading: Houston book, Chapter 16

Assignment due at noon: Story third draft

Story conferences

WEEK 13 (TUESDAY, November 29)

Planes, trains & automobiles: Investigating Transportation

- Tracking incidents & safety
- Regulatory regimes and data sources
- Denominators

Reading due prior to class: Online tools at

http://www.transtats.bts.gov/Fields.asp?Table_ID=236

Recommended Reading: Houston book, Chapter 19

WEEK 14 (TUESDAY, December 6)

Assignment due at noon: Finished Story

Class wrap up

Story presentations