

Updated: May 2016

## Investigative Reporting Capstone

JOUR698i/328i Special Topics in News Writing and Reporting; Advanced Public Affairs Reporting  
Phillip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland

*Fearless journalism: The willingness to challenge conventional wisdom,  
the courage to ask tough questions, the skills to expose the truth  
with precision and independence.*

**Instructor:** Deborah Nelson, J.D., associate professor of investigative journalism  
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**About the course:** This course uses a working-hospital approach to teaching investigative journalism. You will learn skills while producing a publishable, in-depth project on an issue with national significance and local impact on people's lives. We will partner with other classes, disciplines and news organizations to prepare you for the collaborative model of investigative reporting used by many professional news organizations. We meet Mondays 1-3:45pm.

**Prerequisite:** JOUR320 or JOUR501; and permission of instructor. In this course, you will learn how to apply and adapt the reporting, writing and presentation skills you learned in those classes to long-form, in-depth, watchdog journalism.

**Outcomes:** You will gain experience in the essentials of accountability reporting, including investigative interviewing, source development, public records acquisition, data collection and analysis, verification, time management, project organization, complex storytelling and fact checking.

### Expectations

You will be pursuing information that is hard to get, and that people will try to prevent you from obtaining. Investigative reporting is the *relentless* and *methodical* pursuit of truth. You will be expected to tackle your assignments with determination and persistence from now until the last day of the semester. I will give you plenty of guidance and encouragement along the way.

This is not a desk or dorm course. In addition to navigating Internet mazes and wading through seas of documents, you will interview people by phone, knock on their doors, visit agencies and go see for yourself. We'll accommodate time and transport challenges through teamwork and good planning. We'll work on your juggling skills. We'll cover how to find time for investigative reporting with a busy beat – or heavy course load.

This course meets the college's capstone requirement. That means you are expected to produce a professional-quality multimedia journalism project.

More specifically: You are expected to do whatever it takes to complete every assignment; meet every deadline; inform the instructor real-time of significant problems or dilemmas; respond to instructor emails as soon as possible and no more than one day after receipt. You must check in with the instructor at least once a week between classes and are encouraged to do so more frequently.

### **Required:**

Student membership in IRE: <http://ire.org/membership/> and Investigative Reporter's Handbook, Brant Houston and IRE <http://store.ire.org/collections/frontpage/products/the-investigative-reporters-handbook-5th-edition>

Texts that will be excerpted as relevant to the chosen project:

Story-based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists, Mark Lee Hunter  
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001930/193078e.pdf>

The Verification Handbook I & II, edited by Craig Silverman <http://verificationhandbook.com/>

Instructor investigative tip sheets [www.investigatewashington.org](http://www.investigatewashington.org)

Precision Journalism: A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods, Philip Meyer

Computer-Assisted Research: Information Strategies and Tools for Journalists, Nora Paul and Kathleen A. Hansen

Raising Hell: A Citizens Guide to the Fine Art of Investigation, Dan Noyes  
<http://cironline.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/RaisingHell.pdf>

### **Grading**

25%: Completion of weekly reporting assignments, memos, preliminary project drafts and homework. Deadlines will be set real-time throughout the semester based on news events, reporting challenges, individual and group progress.

50%: Your contribution to the final project, due by the last class. Each student's individual contribution will be determined by mid-March based on the results of class research and reporting in the first half of the semester. In general, each student will be responsible for producing a 3,000-word footnoted and fact-checked article or the equivalent in video, interactives, photos or a combination of elements.

25%: Your fact-check of a classmate's final project, due by final exam day. This will involve verifying the accuracy of someone else's project by checking footnotes and calling all named sources. I don't penalize for spotting and fixing errors before publication. But I have a zero-error policy for errors that are published -- your own and the one you missed in fact checking. If an

error slips through, 25% percent of your final grade will be an F. We will go over steps you can take to prevent that from happening – in this class and in your career ahead.

### **Rubric**

A = Successful completion of a multi-source report based on exceptionally resourceful, thorough, independent reporting that utilizes documents, data and human sources; 100% accuracy in the final published piece and in the classmate's piece that you fact check; consistent and reliable participation in and completion of newsroom assignments by deadlines, including but not limited to staff meetings, interviews, readings, research, graphics, multimedia and story revisions.

B = Successful completion of a multi-source report based on thorough, independent reporting that utilizes documents, data and human sources; 100% accuracy in the final published piece and in the classmate's piece that you fact check; consistent and reliable participation in and completion of newsroom assignments by deadlines, including but not limited to staff meetings, interviews, readings, research, graphics, multimedia and story revisions.

C = Multi-source report based on independent reporting that utilizes documents, data and human sources; This is the highest grade you will earn if: a) there are any inaccuracies in your piece or the piece that you fact check OR b) you do not reliably and consistently perform newsroom assignments on deadline OR c) you are inconsistent or unreliable in performing newsroom assignments by deadlines OR you don't successfully complete your project.

Depending on the degree to which your work is deficient, you may earn a D.

F Plagiarism, fabrication, gross inaccuracies

### **Academic Integrity**

**Plagiarism and fabrication are capital offenses. You will receive an F for the course and your case will be forwarded for academic discipline.**

**Plagiarism is stealing.** It's using someone else's words without attributing it to the source.

Examples: Copying even a single sentence from a book, cutting and pasting from the Internet, getting someone else to write your paper – unless you cite the source.

**Fabrication is lying.** It's making up facts. Some examples: Making up a quote, saying you were present at an event that you didn't attend.

**Conflicts of interest.** You may not write about friends, relatives, employers or issues on which you advocate without declaring your relationship and getting instructor approval. Failure to do so will result in an F for the course and referra to the dean for academic discipline.

**College policy:** Along with certain rights, students also have the responsibility to behave honorably in an academic environment. Academic dishonesty, including cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty and plagiarism, will not be tolerated. *Adhering to a high ethical standard is of special importance in the world of journalism, where reliability and credibility are the cornerstones of the field.* Therefore, the college has adopted a “**zero tolerance**” policy on

academic dishonesty. Any abridgment of the university's academic integrity standards in a College of Journalism course will be referred directly to the dean. The dean will send all confirmed cases to the university's Office of Judicial Affairs with a **recommendation of expulsion** from the university for any violation of the code. To insure this is understood, all students will be required to sign an academic integrity pledge at the beginning of the semester that will cover all assignments in the course.

**Religious Observances:** By the second class, please advise me, in writing, of absences planned for religious observances. Assignments are due in advance.

**Disabilities:** Staff at the university's Disability Support Service, in the Counseling Center, will determine appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.  
Learning Assistance Service 2202 Shoemaker Building [LAS-CC@umd.edu](mailto:LAS-CC@umd.edu) 301-314-7693  
[www.counseling.umd.edu/LAS/](http://www.counseling.umd.edu/LAS/)

**Students in Need of Assistance:** If you are experiencing personal stress that is interfering with your ability to succeed, please consider contacting the Counseling Center or the Mental Health Service at the University Health Center for an appointment. The Counseling Center also offers online resources on a series of topics.

## SCHEDULE

*As a journalism capstone, this class is organized and managed very closely to the way an in-depth project would be organized and managed in a professional newsroom, except that the course has an absolute deadline for completion of all work – the end of the semester.*

*So, interim assignments and deadlines will be adjusted constantly throughout the semester in response to the information that you gather through your reporting. The dates specific skills are taught will depend on how the reporting progresses; I try to teach each skill at the optimal moment for putting it into practice.*

*With that in mind, here is a sample schedule to give you an idea of what to expect:*

### **Week 1:**

Spring project introductory discussion. *What issue are we investigating and why? What are the expectations and goals?*

Skill development:

- Review of key journalistic ethical standards for the reporting process
- Spreadsheets, shared folders and other organization tools for managing long-term investigative projects.
- Research strategies, advanced Google search techniques; WorldCat; Google Scholar.

Online homework to be completed before classtime:

Introduction to Investigative Reporting, Brant Houston

<https://www.newsu.org/courses/introduction-investigative-reporting>

### **Weeks 2 - 4:**

Skill development:

Pre-reporting (issue backgrounding), project selection, reporting plan development, source selection and development, interviewing, FOI, data gathering.

Journalism text reading:

- Story-based Inquiry, chapters 1-5
- Instructor tip sheets: "Picking and Pursuing Investigative Projects," "FOI: A Reporter's Guide," "Art of the Investigative Interview"

Assignments:

- Conduct topic-specific research to provide background/context for the issues on which students will be reporting. *This includes meetings with experts in class, outside of class or, when available, at conferences; reading assignments that include scholarly articles, scientific studies, government reports; research assignments.*
- File weekly memos. They should include a summary of what you know so far, what you did to get the information and what you plan to do in the week ahead.
- Write a story or script draft based on your research and reporting to date. Update every two weeks throughout the semester.

*By continually updating memos and stories over the semester, you will see how your understanding of an issue changes as you dig deeper and gather more information. As you progress, this also will help you organize your material, spot holes you need to fill and polish your writing.*

### **Weeks 5-7**

Weekly class project meetings for reporting updates, group problem solving and planning.

Skill development:

Verification; time management; specialized interviewing techniques for vulnerable subjects, hostile subjects; other skills that may be important to the semester's topic.

Journalism text reading:

- The Verification Handbook I & II
- Instructor tip sheets: "Art of the Sensitive Interview," "The Hostile Subject," "Verification Tools"

Assignments:

- Report, report, report.
- Create a weekly reporting plan; provide weekly updates at class meetings; update story-quality memos; update story drafts every two weeks.

### **Weeks 8-11**

Review key journalism ethics standards for presenting information.

Skill development:

Techniques for organizing, writing, editing, producing investigative projects; data analysis; fact checking.

Journalism text reading:

- Story-based Inquiry, chapters 6-8
- Instructor tip sheets: Bullet-proofing your story

Assignments:

Report, produce and revise drafts of project assignments every two weeks.

**Weeks 12-15**

- Final project completion and submission
- Fact check of another students' submission
- Revisions for correcting errors and responding to instructor queries.

**Final exam date**

- Class meeting for final fact check, debriefing and celebration.