

New York University
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Investigative Reporting

G54.1182.05

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Brief Course Description

Be you a blogger, a Tweeter, a UTuber, an aspiring TV talking head, print journalist or some combination thereof, a knowledge of how to ‘go deep’ on a story will make you better at what you do - and a more valuable commodity in any media environment.

This course will seek to give you some of the skills necessary to produce exclusive, hard-edged, original, ground-breaking reporting that matters.

The emphasis will be on fieldwork, combining human sources with first-hand, document-based reporting that results in a semester-long, capstone investigative project worthy of publication..

You will be expected to develop story ideas for your project, find and cultivate sources, pitch and write the story in a clear, compelling and fair fashion while adhering to the highest standards of accuracy and objectivity. You will learn how to mine the records of courthouses, police agencies, property clerks, health agencies, City Hall, campaign finance, tax authorities and other municipal, nonprofit and law enforcement agencies for exclusive content.

The goal is to produce a story that sheds a light on a little-known or little understood topic with important implications for the public and your readers.

Not all “exclusives” or “investigative reports” are worthy of the label. When done properly, there is arguably no higher calling in journalism than a solid piece of investigative reporting that exposes a wrong and seeks to prompt action to correct the problem. When done poorly, there are few other forms of journalism that can, in quick measure, unfairly damage the reputation of a person or an institution. Again, this course will seek to draw distinctions between the good, the bad, the sloppy and the lazy.

Your project ideas must be New York City based and doable in a semester’s time.

We will cover the different types of sources used in a typical investigative project, including human sources, documents and electronic databases. We will discuss where to find such sources, how to utilize them to maximum advantage and how to organize your material.

Overall Assignments

1. **Project** – In order to pass this course, you must report and write at least one major project for possible publication. You and I must agree on the project in advance. You will be required to verbally defend your idea in class to win approval. If groups form around a subject that requires a team approach, you still will be required to write your own part of the story. This project should be in the 3,000 word range. However, a series of substantive, highly crafted main stories and sidebars on one topic could be considered equivalent in lieu of one 3,000 word story.
2. **Grading** - You must submit a project suitable for publication and you must meet the deadlines imposed not only for the final piece but for each reporting memo and draft of the piece during the semester. Failure to adhere to deadlines will negatively impact your grade. There will be **NO EXCEPTIONS** to these deadlines short of a serious illness (**doctor's note required**) or death in your family. If you are unable to complete the project by the end of the semester, you may submit a detailed description of at least 20 pages, double-spaced, explaining the reporting problems you encountered, what you learned, what went wrong, what you would do differently next time and how you might try and complete the reporting. Uncompleted projects will automatically receive a full lower letter grade. Final grades for the project will take into consideration: **Originality of Topic; Difficulty of Topic and Use of Documents & Sources; Story Organization, Writing Quality & Improvement During Rewriting Phase; Execution of Reporting; Overall Impact of Story.** Students who publish the idea during the semester or who receive a written offer to publish the story during the semester will receive extra consideration at grading. **The final project is worth 50 percent of your overall grade.**
3. **Weekly Reporting Memos** – are required in this course. Memos should include a summary of reporting completed each week, including detailed notes and quotes from interviews, human sources contacted, documents reviewed, Internet sites visited and databases examined. Also include reporting roadblocks you encountered and list your **Reporting Goals** for the upcoming week. Be specific, including names, titles and phone numbers of sources. The purpose of the memos is to help you stay focused and organized as you tackle your reporting project and to help me keep track of your progress. Most of the memos will be graded. Producing solid, comprehensive memos each week will make it much easier for you to write a successful final project. **Along with class participation and attendance, the memos will account for the other 50 percent of your final overall grade in the class. EVERY TIME WE MEET IN CLASS, YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO BRIEF ME ON YOUR REPORTING PROGRESS FOR YOUR PROJECT AND YOUR REPORTING PLAN FOR THE UPCOMING WEEK.**

4. **Required Reading** – includes The New York Times and Daily News each day, including weekends, concentrating on local news. Be prepared to discuss current issues, especially those impacting NYC as well as enterprise & investigative pieces that are published in these two outlets during the semester. The primary text for this course is “**The Reporter’s Handbook: An Investigator’s Guide to Documents and Techniques**,” Fifth Edition, written by Steve Weinberg. (St. Martin’s press, under sponsorship of Investigative Reporters & Editors, Inc.) and “**The Secret Man**” by Bob Woodward. High recommended tool is – **The Green Book**, official directory of the City of New York.
5. **Caution** – This is not the type of course in which you can procrastinate and file the final project after pulling an all nighter. Good investigative reporting takes time and unfolds gradually as pieces of a puzzle are assembled over many weeks of sustained effort. This class requires substantial reporting, research and writing effort each week. If you don’t think you have the time to put into the class, it’s best not to sign up for it.
6. **Plagiarizing** – Students caught plagiarizing will immediately fail this course, as will students who fabricate sources, quotes or other information used in weekly memos or stories produced for the class.

Prof. Joe Calderone

NYU Investigative Reporting - Week by Week Outline (Approximate)

Week 1 – Intro – What is Investigative Reporting? Document State of Mind. Your Project Idea (Plus: FBI, CIA)

Week 2 – The Pitch: Your Story Idea & Getting Approval; Minimum/Maximum Rule (Plus: FOIL LAW & HOW TO USE IT; IRE website resources)

Week 3 – The Courthouse – Unlocking Its Secrets; Federal, State, Civil, Criminal (Plus: Smoking Gun)

Week 4 – Human Sources: Finding Them, Care & Handling (Plus: Campaign Finance – Following the Money – NYC, State & Federal)

Week 5 – The Project – Progress – Leads - Possible One on One review (Plus: Dept. of Buildings; private & commercial property records; code violations)

Week 6 – NYC & Real Estate - (Plus: Deeds & Mortgages; how to find them; how to read them) WRITING TIPS; Story Organization

Week 7 – FIRST DRAFTS OF PROJECTS DUE; One on One meetings

Week 8 – Local Government & Business Nexus (Plus: Lobbyists, Money; County Clerks) **MIDTERM GRADE REVIEW**

Week 9 – SECOND DRAFTS DUE; One on One Reviews (Plus: NYC Department of Health records)

Week 10 – Corporations (Plus: Securities & Exchange Commission records – EDGAR)

Week 11 – THIRD DRAFTS DUE – One on One – (Plus: Physicians and other licensed professionals)

Week 12 – Looking at Non Profits (Plus: Guidestar & the 990)

Week 13 – Guest Speaker

Week 14 – **FINAL PROJECTS DUE - Presentations**

Week 15 – Quiz on Readings; Wrap Up; Open Discussion; Evaluations