

## **NEWS 302, Beat Reporting**

Spring 2009, Section 150

11 a.m. to 12:15 p.m., Tuesdays and Thursdays, Room 228

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### **Course description**

Skills and techniques reporters need to work a beat, including issues, documents and sources for some of the most common beats for print, online and broadcast (news) reporters. Understanding of ethical challenges in journalism and conducting research to inform newsworthy stories.

### **Course prerequisites**

Students enrolled in this class must have:

- Completed with a grade of C or better all of the 100-level journalism classes, plus NEWS 201 and 202
- A GPA of 2.75

### **Required readings**

- A general circulation daily newspaper other than the Daily Nebraskan
- The Associated Press Stylebook
- Clark Hoyt, the New York Times public editor, writes a column in the Sunday edition of that newspaper covering ethics, fairness and other issues that readers have raised. It doesn't run every Sunday, but you will be responsible for checking nytimes.com each week to see if it's there. For all of the Public Editor columns that are not "letters" columns, you must write a one-page reaction paper to the issues covered; this paper will be due on the Tuesday following the column. This will, in most cases, mean you will also need to refer back to the story about which the column is written.
- You will be required to write a report on a book that you choose from a list of journalistic or journalism books that I will provide.

### **Competencies for accreditation**

The college of Journalism and Mass Communications is accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC), which says its mission is "to foster and encourage excellence and high standards in professional education in journalism and mass communications." ACEJMC recommends that all graduates should be aware of certain core values and competencies. This course addresses the following competencies:

- Writing complex news stories correctly and clearly
- Conducting research and
- Demonstrating ethical principles of journalism.

### **Outcomes**

Through a combination of lecture, discussion and hands-on activities, students enrolled in NEWS 302 will have the opportunity to build on the basic reporting skills they learned in NEWS 202 Beginning Reporting and to gain experience in developing a public affairs beat. By the end of the semester, students should be able to show:

- An understanding of ethical challenges journalists face
- An ability to conduct effective, in-depth, face-to-face interviews to develop newsworthy stories on a beat
- An ability to produce clearly and concisely written stories that deal with issues of significance on a beat and that use multiple appropriate human sources and documents

**What we'll cover in this course:**

NEWS 302 is based on the premise that students who have successfully completed NEWS 202 will have learned the basic skills of covering public events and the fundamentals of interviewing. NEWS 302 will build on and reinforce those skills in the context of covering beats. Topics will include:

- Structuring news and feature stories
- Strategies beat reporters use in covering a beat and developing stories with appropriate sources, including public records
- Ethical issues beat reporters face
- Structure and operations of governments and other entities public affairs beat reporters routinely cover, including:
  - Law enforcement/public safety and the courts
  - Education
  - State and local government
  - Budgets and public financing
- Specialized beats, such as business, labor, science, health, environment, agriculture, transportation and religion.

NEWS 302 will give you practical experience in reporting about public affairs in a community and in how to properly develop a beat. You will be required to burrow into the university and greater Lincoln to report on such topics as government, crime, education, health, economics, religion, agriculture and other local matters. You will concentrate on developing a "beat" and you will learn more about telling stories for print, broadcast and online. While digital forms of delivery are now challenging the traditional print and broadcast platforms, the same level of exceptional reporting is fundamental to all media. We will concentrate most on the written platforms, but you will also be asked to think about how audio, video, photographs, charts, graphs and illustrations can enhance stories.

Some class sessions will involve various exercises and discussions about news judgment and ethical issues involving diversity, multiculturalism, sensationalism, taste and conflicts of interest.

This course will give you additional experience in using AP style, correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. It also will strengthen your skills in reporting, note-taking, interviewing and writing. Success in NEWS 302 requires attending all classes, meeting deadlines, reporting thoroughly and writing clearly. You also should expect to spend a substantial amount of time outside of class periods developing your beat and reporting

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stories. Time management is essential in this class; as do all professional reporters, you should be working on more than one story at a time. Plan accordingly.

Class members will share information and experiences developed from their beats with their classmates. You may be asked to discuss your story ideas in class so your fellow students can help you focus and brainstorm story ideas. Plan to take an active role in discussions, including analysis of the day's news locally, nationally and internationally.

### Course Organization

**In-Class:** Each class may include discussion, quizzes, exercises, guest speakers, and individual presentations and other activities. We may occasionally use class time for you to brainstorm ideas with your fellow students, much as a reporter would do in a newsroom setting with colleagues.

**Out-of-Class Stories:** During the semester, you will report and write nine stories.

Regardless of what beat you are assigned:

- One of the stories must be in an **online** format. If your emphasis is on **broadcast**, you may choose to do one of your other stories in broadcast format.
- Four of the nine stories will be:
  - A **localization** of a state, national or international event.
  - A story related to the **economy**.
  - A **state** government or Legislature story.
  - A profile that will be published in the Alumni magazine.

Each story must be thorough and answer the reader's questions. To do that, you will have to talk to a variety of people or sources for each story. The length and number of sources for each story will vary depending on the idea and assignment. As a general guideline, you can assume most stories will be 500 to 750 words (two to three double-spaced pages) or 1:45-2:00 if for broadcast and will include a minimum of three sources. Fewer than three sources will lower your grade substantially on a story. Other news organizations, books or Web sites do not count as sources – they may be useful in terms of background or preparation, but you are responsible for verifying any information you use. Similarly, you are not allowed to do email interviews without prior permission, and that's unlikely to be granted.

During the first week, students will be assigned a specific beat. You will write a detailed beat report early in the semester. This will help familiarize you with your beat, and it will also help you identify sources in the community as well as potential story ideas within your beat.

Your instructor must approve all story ideas in advance. As you begin to develop more expertise on your beat, you may find that you have solid ideas ready to submit prior to the due dates specified on the schedule, which is fine. Your story ideas generally will be due at the beginning of class on Tuesdays. You will be asked to submit a story idea in writing. Your written story idea should be fully developed with a slug, some background and an indication of the news or so-what value. I'll sign off quickly no later than Thursday, and stories generally will be due the following Thursday. Look for original angles and stories; don't duplicate stories that have already been done.

## Story Format

In the upper left-hand corner of each assignment, you should put your name, the date, the story slug, (one or two words identifying the story), your e-mail address and your telephone number. The second (and successive) pages should include the slug, your name and the page number. The final page should include hash marks (###) at the end. The assignment should be stapled. Example:

First page	Second page	Last page
Slug	Slug—2	Slug—3
Your name	Your name	Your name
Your email and phone number		
(text)	(text)	(text)
--more--	--more--	###

When you turn in the stories, clearly indicate at the top of your paper which assignment you are fulfilling (e.g. online, state, localization, economy, state, public records).

Each paper should be double-spaced and typewritten (12 point, Times Roman) and printed on a legible computer printer. Please use a 1-inch margin. You must also attach a source list including names, email address and phone numbers for all people interviewed at the end of each story. Confidential sources will not be accepted. I may verify the accuracy of quotes and information by contacting these sources. Documents used must be fully cited along with the location where they can be examined. Indicate (by boldfacing it) which graf in your story is the nut graf (the so-what or significance graf) when you turn in your stories.

You will be asked to e-mail me the stories before class on the morning the stories are due. You will be expected to turn in one printed copy of each story in the class.

## Choosing beats

Here is a list of potential beats. Think about which one you'd like to cover. You'll be asked to submit your top two choices. If you work for another publication, you must not choose the same beat you cover for the other publication.

Lincoln City Council/city government  
K-12 education and Lincoln Public Schools  
UNL: Regents, student and faculty  
governance, administration, academics  
State government/Legislature  
Economy/business  
Religion  
Health/medicine

Science  
Energy and environment  
Technology  
Transportation  
Courts and law enforcement  
Labor and the workplace  
University research  
Agriculture

## Beat reports

At the beginning of the semester, you will write a beat report tailored to your specific beat. This will consist of a double-spaced, four- to five-page memo that will serve as a useful road map for your beat. The report will include: major trends within the beat. It will also include names, addresses, e-mail addresses and phone numbers of potential sources within that beat. These are people who can tip you off to what people are talking about on your beat and what might make a good news story. As part of your beat report, you should propose at least three detailed story ideas from your beat – though, as the semester progresses and you learn more about your subject, you may decide to shift one or two stories. The memo should explain why the stories are interesting and list names of individuals who potentially will be interviewed. Of course as you report these stories, the sources may change.

### **Classroom blog**

You will be asked to participate in a class blog on Beat Reporting. Bookmark this site: <http://onthebeatunl.wordpress.com/> Blogging gives you another opportunity to practice writing. It also allows me to post supplemental stories or reading material for you to review. Most media companies expect new hires to understand blogging and know how to post to a blog as well as add hyperlinks, photos and video or audio. You will be given assignments for blogging with specific guidelines throughout the semester. As with all assignments in journalism, meeting deadlines will be essential and a critical part of your grade. Although blogs often are written in a conversational tone, you still need to pay attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation rules or you could lose points.

### **Book report**

You will be asked to choose, from a list I will provide of relevant journalism books, one book to read and analyze. I will provide more details about this early in the semester, but your assignment will include a formal presentation to the class and written paper.

### **Attendance and expectations**

Classes will start on time; don't be late. It is rude, and it will be noted. Quizzes and in-class exercises cannot be made up if you are absent or late.

Attend all classes. Part of your grade is based on your attendance in class. If you must miss class, make sure it is a bona fide emergency and notify me in advance. It also is unacceptable to skip class "because that's the only time I can interview a source." Plan your time wisely.

Stories must be turned in by deadline. This class operates like a newsroom. If you miss a deadline, the newspaper is printed or the broadcast airs without your story. You will earn a grade 0 for the assignment if it is late. No late stories will be accepted without prior permission, and such permission will be granted only in cases of dire circumstance.

Come to class prepared to discuss current events and any assigned readings. You may find quiz questions based on current events and classroom readings. Come to class alert, ready to focus on the task at hand and with respect for everyone in the class.

You must turn off cell phones before class. You will use computers in the lab to complete

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certain assignments. However, when we are not doing specifically assigned computer work, the computers should remain idle. Do not check or respond to e-mail, use Facebook or other online sites once class has begun. If you are going to take notes, take them by hand. If I notice that you are using the computer, I won't ask why, but I will note and consider it when grading your participation score.

You must be engaged in this class to learn. I will make this class relevant to you as aspiring journalists. But you need to check any indifference at the door. What does that mean? Think of me as the "source" from whom you are trying to learn from: appear interested and alert, ask questions and participate in the discussion, don't check your text messages and don't nod off.

As student reporters, you also will be interacting with people outside of the classroom. If you look and act like a professional when you are working the beat, sources will be more inclined to engage with you and treat you like a professional.

### **Plagiarism**

**DON'T!** You must do your own work on all assignments. If you cheat, fabricate or plagiarize, you will receive an automatic F and be dismissed from the class. Plagiarism is defined as presenting another person's work or ideas as one's own.

### **Academic Integrity**

Students must adhere to the policy on academic integrity set forth in the UNL Student Code of Conduct, which is printed in full in the Undergraduate Bulletin. Violations will result in automatic failure of the class and referral to the proper university officials. In this class, violations include but aren't limited to:

- Handing in someone else's work as your own.
- Turning in work you've done for another class.
- Using interviews or other research gathered by someone other than yourself without proper credit.
- Absolutely any form of plagiarism.

### **Grading**

Stories are judged on news judgment, news values, accuracy and clarity.

Stories containing fact errors will immediately lower the grade. Grammar, punctuation, spelling and AP style errors also will result in valuable lost points.

All stories must be original and based on your own reporting. The work you do for this class must be original for this class and cannot be a reworked version of something you did for a different class.

Nine original stories	65 percent of grade
Exercises, quizzes & Hoyt papers	15 percent of grade
Beat report	5 percent of grade
Class Participation	5 percent of grade
Blog assignments	5 percent of grade
Book analysis & presentation	5 percent of grade

Pursuant to UNL policy, an Incomplete is available only to students who were unable to complete the requirements of the course because of illness, military service, hardship or death in the immediate family – and only then if the student has substantially completed the major requirements of the course. If such misfortune befalls you, I will set the time limit for you to complete the work – in most cases, this would be no longer than the end of the subsequent semester.

All assignments will be graded by the letters A+ through F. An F is equivalent to a 0. Grades are based on the final product, not the amount of time or effort put into story development. There is no class curve. This journalism class is tough, with initial grades lower than you may expect. Grades often rise naturally by mid-semester or so.

All grading systems involve some element of subjective judgment. When I assign letter grades, I am making evaluations based on my experience as a journalist and teacher. Here are the criteria we will use in making those judgments:

A: The story is newsworthy, reasonably well-written, thorough and error-free. The lead is clear, concise and interesting. It either emphasizes the news or it clearly sets up a nut graf that explains what the story is about and what it is worth reading. The body of the story is well-organized and contains effective transitions, quotations, descriptions and anecdotes. The sourcing is particularly strong or the story is particularly effective in another aspect. The story includes vivid details; it doesn't just "tell;" it "shows." It is balanced and fair, reflecting all pertinent aspects of an issue and contains an appropriate human element.

B: The story is above average but not exceptional. The lede summarizes the story, and the following graf s are reasonably well-organized. However, the story lacks depth, detail, and a good nut graf or thorough sourcing; contains a few minor errors or might be more interesting, cohesive or thorough.

C : The story omits important information or could be published only after extensive editing. The lede may be too wordy or fail to emphasize the news. The story fails to develop the human element, tends to be disorganized and contains several minor errors. Sentences use passive rather than active verbs and may be vague, long or complicated. The sentences may have to be rewritten because they are awkward, wordy or confusing.

D: The story is superficial or confusing or requires extensive rewriting. Or, the story contains an unacceptable number of style, spelling and grammatical errors. The story may also be of questionable newsworthiness.

F: The story could not be published or presented by a news organization nor easily rewritten. It is too confusing, incomplete or inaccurate. It may contain a misspelled name, a libelous statement or a serious factual error.

**Two warnings:**

- You have studied AP Style in previous courses, so there is no reason for style errors. If I find more than three in a story, your grade will be docked one full letter grade.
- Any story with an incorrect spelling of a proper name will automatically earn an F regardless of how good the rest of the story is.

**Rewrites:** You may rewrite up to three stories and resubmit them for re-grading. A rewrite MUST reflect additional reporting such as new sources or more information, not merely correction of spelling, grammar and style mistakes. It also may require story restructuring and rethinking. A rewritten story must be a true rewrite with noticeable and substantive improvement beyond fixing mechanics to be accepted. Grades on the original and rewritten stories will be averaged to determine the final grade on that assignment.

Rewrites MUST be turned in no later than one week after the original is returned, with the original attached to the rewrite. You must write one or two single-spaced paragraphs at the top that summarizes the improvements in the new version and attach the rewrite to the original.

Note: You likely will be asked to rewrite the alumni news profile. This will not count against the three rewrites you are allowed otherwise.

The key to success in this class is **time management**. That's also the key to success for beat reporters. They learn how to work on more than one story at a time. They know they can't wait until Tuesday to start working on a story due Thursday, unless it's covering a live news event. They also know that some sources have busy schedules and require appointments more than a week in advance. The best reporters learn that they can't just call one source and wait for a call back. They keep trying to track down information, and they make multiple calls. They also learn to juggle ideas. They may be working on one story, but they are constantly thinking about what they want to do next. They plan ahead.

The bottom line: This is a class that requires a considerable amount of out of class time to succeed. If you are enrolled in several highly demanding classes, have an inflexible schedule because of other commitments, you may want to consider whether this is the right semester to enroll in beat reporting.

**Students with disabilities**

Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact the instructor for a confidential discussion of their individual needs for academic accommodation. It is the policy of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to provide flexible and individualized accommodation to students with documented disabilities that may affect their ability to fully participate in course activities or meet course requirements. To receive accommodation services, students must be registered with the Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office, 132 Canfield Administration, 472-3787 voice or TTY.

## Schedule

Here are some topics we'll cover as well as important due dates. This list is a guide and not an exact blueprint for the course's structure. Additional assignments and changes in this schedule may occur at any time as the semester progresses.

### **Block 1: Weeks 1-3**

1. Course organization and expectations
2. Public affairs reporting
2. News story qualities, values
3. Review of AP style
4. Beat assignments and beat reports
5. Finding story ideas
6. Accuracy, fairness and balance
7. Diversity of sources
8. Plagiarism and fabrication
9. Localizing stories

Tuesday, Jan. 27

- Beat report due
- Story 1 (localization) proposal due

### **Block 2: Weeks 4-6:**

1. Developing a beat
2. Developing sources
3. Interviewing skills
4. Covering meetings
5. Public affairs beats – covering cops, schools, government and courts

Tuesday, Feb. 3

- Story 2 proposal due – economy

Thursday, Feb. 5

- Story 1 due—localization

Tuesday, Feb. 10

- Legislature – This story will be due March 12.

Thursday, Feb. 12

- Story 2 due --economy

Tuesday, Feb. 17

- Story 3 proposal due – beat
- Story 4 (legislative) story proposal due

### **Block 3: Weeks 7-9**

1. Understanding multimedia reporting
2. Thinking about visuals
3. Writing for online
4. Writing for broadcast

Thursday, Feb. 26

- Story 3 (beat) due

Tuesday, March 3

- Story 5 proposal due -- online

Tuesday, March 10

- Book reports & presentations due

Thursday, March 12

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Last due date for Story #4 (legislature)  
Story 5 (online) due

**Spring Break March 17 & March 19**

Block 4: Weeks 10-12

1. Improving your writing - leads, tight writing etc.
2. Story focus/organization
3. Eliminating jargon.
4. Profile writing.
5. Polls and surveys --pitfalls

Tuesday, March 24

Story 6 proposal due  
Alumni profiles (story #7) are assigned no later than today  
Beat conferences

Thursday, March 26

Beat conferences

Tuesday, April 7

You should be working on alumni profiles by now

Thursday, April 9

Story 6 due

**Block 5: Weeks 13-15**

1. Understanding budgets
2. Public records and database reporting.
3. Specialty and topical beats

Tuesday, April 14

Story 8 proposal due

Thursday, April 16

Alumni profiles (story no. 7) due

Tuesday, April 21

Story 9 proposal due

Thursday, April 23

Story 8 due

Thursday, April 30

Story 9 due (no rewrite permitted)