SYLLABUS

Course: MCOM 203–Basic News Reporting (Writing)–(N.Boustany). Fall 2012.

American University of Beirut, Faculty of Arts and Sciences--Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences

Site: AUB Moodle
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Course Objectives and Format
SOAN 203 Basic News Reporting 3.0: 3 cr.

As Stated in the AUB Catalogue: An Introduction to basic news writing for newspapers and magazines. This course teaches students the fundamental elements of the simple news story such as leads, structure and body. It also covers reporting techniques and processes relevant to the coverage of political, economic, social and cultural developments. Annually.

The craft of journalism is adapting itself to the digital media in this day and age. While the principles and fundamentals remain the same, pressures of editing and deadlines are tougher. This course has been adapted to prepare students for the challenges of web reporting and writing which require precision, speed and accuracy and an abiding respect of language, grammar and the unassailable rules of honest journalism and clean writing.

This version of the course:

- Introduces, coaches and initiates students entering the field of journalism, media relations, communications or broadcasting on the rules of basic reporting and writing. Discerning what makes news and what deserves to go to the top of a news story.

- This is not an opinions or analysis class.

- There are three main pillars to the course:

  a- Clear, concise, active, grammatically correct writing.

  b- Honest, dynamic, varied, multi sourced and observational reporting as well as curious, resourceful and intrepid fact (news) and quote gathering.

  c- Instilling a discipline of writing elegantly and with punch on deadline, rewriting and polishing a draft with little time, checking and counter-checking facts and sources, avoiding
heavy and loaded adjectives, phrases and awkwardly long sentences.

Format

The Lead:

–Good writers are those who fuss over their leads, the first paragraph of their story which has the place, the time, the reason, what the story is about and how it happened. This will be practiced ad infinitum in class.

–The various kinds of leads will be explored, the double barrel lead, the soft lead, the straight forward lead, the complex lead, the anecdotal lead, the narrative lead, but the spot news lead has to be mastered to perfection.

–Class may begin at times with few facts presented randomly at which point students will be asked to write leads and an ensuing nut paragraph or background graph in ten or fifteen minutes once the course gets underway.

–The importance of and techniques for writing arresting yet straightforward nut graphs will be discussed and driven home, an element that is essential in various forms of news writing whether for print, broadcasting or for a public relations press release. Now that we are in the digital age, there is little time for editing and part of your training is to write straight onto the web and competitively. This will decide on whether you will be eligible for a job later on, so the more you practice and the more seriously you take this course the better.

–Developing a story’s theme.

–Tracking sources from more than one side of an issue, checking their validity and legitimacy and securing proper attribution and background on them to be able to inform the reader accurately.
Formulating an outline so the story can proceed in chronological order and in sections will help in the writing and in the comprehension of a story.

Short assignments will be 200 words long. Critical or longer assignments will be 400 words long.

Each class period a list of 25 words, verbs or nouns, will be passed out on a sheet or through Moodle. The following period, anyone may be called to give a definition of the word verbally and asked to make a cohesive sentence or the entire class may be asked to do so in writing of the whole list. Such spot quizzes will be graded and any of the words or a collection of them can appear in a midterm or final exam.

Interviewing techniques and the importance of preparing before an assignment by reading up, using google to research a topic, reading periodicals in the library, or looking up books on the subjects will be tested with actual small assignments involving trips to Jaffet Library and use of other online resources and data portals. Published and online material will be examined critically and authoritative sources with expertise will be asked to evaluate and question findings.

A step by step approach in whittling information down to the bare essentials of what is truth and what is news will be discussed on an assignment by assignment basis.

**Course Learning Outcomes:**

**Or, Targeted Skills.** The skill of fine writing is a lifelong endeavor and the sooner you start and the longer and harder you try the more lustrous the outcome.

Relative proficiency and ease in writing a news story, developing a nose for news and news gathering instincts, the ability to produce a usable press release or a light feature that
may be fit to print or publish in any of the English language publications or online outlets, on campus or in Lebanon.

Reporting prowess and agility that will put you in the running for an advanced reporting class, help out with press releases on various departments on campus or in the AUB media relations office, which will be supervised and edited by superiors, to assist a senior journalist or foreign correspondent as an assistant, or to work as an intern at a news agency in the summer.

**Required Materials and Habits**


**For proper grammar usage and avoiding common pitfalls, your writing coach will be using examples from The Glamour of Grammar, a Guide to the Magic and Mystery of Practical English by Roy Peter Clark, Little Brown and Company. You do not have to purchase.**

**Also for clean writing and for proper punctuation and proper choice of words, syntax, emphasis, descriptive nouns and avoiding run–on sentences etc. and thinking in complete sentences and paragraphs, coach will use examples for coherent and concise writing from When Words Collide, 4th Edition, A Media Writer’s Guide to Grammar and Style by Lauren Kessler and Duncan McDonald. Again, you do not have to purchase.**
- An AP Stylebook, available at the AUB Bookstore, important reference book for punctuation, writing and attribution styles and the reference to officials etc.

- The class meets every Tuesday and Thursday from 12:30 pm–1:45 pm. Attendance, punctuality and turning assignments at the start of the class are factored into the overall grade. Articles will be turned in hard copy or via Moodle or both as required by your instructor.

- A dozen reporters’ notebooks.

- A dozen felt pens or ball point pens, plus two high light markers.

- Small tape recorder (optional). You can use cell phones if you have that capacity but never transcribe in class. Always take copious notes. Rely mostly on accurate notes in case of a technical malfunction.

- An English/English Dictionary and English/Arabic Dictionary (you can use what is available at the library but expect to use them often) Webster’s, Oxford, or whatever is available to you in your home environment or whatever you can afford. I want you to develop a love affair with dictionaries and words until you find the right one. It is like choosing a wife, a boyfriend or the perfect partner.

- Listening to the BBC Radio News every morning or late in the evening and reading The Daily Star, Al Akhbar English on Line, Now Lebanon, The New York Times online are habits you are urged to adopt in this course to hone your ears and minds for journalistic styles and language and to ease into a clear way of producing squeaky clean copy.

- No politics will ever be discussed in class, but do not be startled if I lead questions with ‘what was the first or most important item of news’ on either of these English news outlets. Other reading material will be assigned from British
and American dailies in addition to the chapters that are required reading from the required textbook.

—Full engagement in the course is one of the habits which will be noted to determine the seriousness and commitment with which a student has signed up for Basic News Reporting.

**There will be assigned readings from the textbooks, the STYLEBOOK and selected articles from newspapers and magazines which will be announced in class and through Moodle. You have to come to class having read and comprehended ALL THE READINGS, ready to discuss them and ask or be asked questions or quizzed about them and that includes punctuation rules in the STYLEBOOK.

Course Policies and Ethics

**Academic Honesty:**
Intellectual and academic honesty is fundamental to all activities and principles of a university. You, I and anyone reading what you present must be confident beyond the shadow of a doubt that each student’s work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed and presented.

Academic or Journalistic Misconduct Can Cause a Failing Grade or More Serious Consequences and that could include:

+Fabricating information or quotes in news or feature stories, whether for publication or not.

+Fabricating sources in news or feature stories, whether for publication or not.

+Lack of full disclosure in identifying yourself as a reporter or not seeking permission from your coach, instructor or editor when using controversial reportorial undercover techniques in
a situation which could land you or the institution in harm’s way.

+ Copying from an article or someone else’s published or unpublished material without full citation and attribution. Citations and attributions lend more heft to your work, and if the work you are using happens to be wrong or ill-informed, the onus of error is not on you but on the person quoted, an added bonus for honesty.

+ Lifting a quote from a news agency or a television station, even if quoting a resident. It is forbidden without full attribution and credit.

+ Even when paraphrasing a quote or using it from a briefing from which you can quote, ALWAYS use attribution, which means, tell the reader who told you the original information.

**When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing and using reference materials for background, please check with your instructor rather than risk a failing grade, after reading the definitions available through the links below.

Definitions of plagiarism: http://turnitin.com/research_site/e_home.html

University’s Student Code of Conduct:
http://pnp.aub.aub.edu.lb/general/conductcode/index/index.html

A ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY IS IN EFFECT CONCERNING PLAGIARISM, COPYING, CHEATING OR ANY OF THE ABOVE.

Once you complete this class you must have the highest professional standards so you can concentrate on more sophisticated and advanced aspects of this exciting craft which you can pursue in the media studies program and the masters program. Conform to these principles, it is really worth it.
Assignments:

In the second half of the semester and depending on the established levels of writing and reporting, some shared assignments may be given to students in pairs to facilitate the task and result in richer reporting. You are still expected to each do his and/or her own reporting and writing. You can choose from a pool of topics or “beats” and the task will be divided.

You will work on the lead and nut graf together and split off to work on different sections of the article and join again to write transitions and a strong kicker to the piece.

You will be graded separately for your separate sections and efforts and jointly for your joint efforts and ability to collaborate and work together collegially and as a team.

All assignments must be submitted typed and double spaced in hard copy and through Moodle on the day they are requested and before the class starts. Not a minute later.

- Delays will not be tolerated unless there are extenuating circumstances such as a death in the immediate family, a bed confining illness justified by an infirmary physician's report beyond a mundane cold or sniffle or if you were kidnapped! If it is something such as necessary travel, please let me know ahead of time, so we can discuss and arrange for alternatives.

- News writing Demystified:

News writing is fun and facile, you hear some stories, you check them out and you tell them in written form. You perfect the story telling to impress someone, instead of your parents, your friends, or your girlfriends or your neighbors, it will be
your instructor. You will be graded. You pass, you advance in life. Voila!

**Penalties and Incompletes:**
Your overall grade score will be affected by assignments handed in late. Deadlines are everything in journalism. Further down the production line, you can cost your employers millions of dollars if you miss one and you can lose your job and cost your boss his job, so this is a discipline you have to get used to and it will help you in all areas of life.

If you ever get your hands on the old time classic written by a United Press International veteran titled **DEADLINE EVERY MINUTE**, you should read it for inspiration.

--One point will be slashed for each day your assignment is late. If you happen to have an insurmountable conflict on your radar, please make arrangements with me well before the article or assignment is due.

--Information on incompletes and other grading policies are regulated by AUB and the departmental rules and policies and it is the student’s responsibility to be informed about their details. Any missed or late submission will result in a ZERO. Incompletes are given at the discretion of the instructor and only after he or she has decided that the circumstances or the emergency could not have been avoided. The exam, article or work needed to complete the overall grade, however, must be handed in within a defined time frame set by the university prior to the start of the following semester.

--Tardiness: If you are late for class, the consequences are graver than you think. The fifteen minute quizzes or writing exercise at the beginning of class are graded and will not be delayed for students who come late, nor will you be given extra time to complete what others have begun. I have a
noisy device, which will stop you in your tracks, your grade will suffer.

**Story Top:**
Once you familiarize yourselves with Moodle, we will devise a homogenous way to identify your story with your surname, and a slug, and identify it as news/feature etc. the program will do most of the identification of name, date, etc. for you, but we will also develop a system of our own. This is useful for joint byline stories.

**CELLPHONES ARE TO BE INVISIBLE AND TURNED OFF**, at all times. I do not want to see cell phones in class, nor any electronic contraptions in your hands or attached to your ears, other than the computers you are writing on for class. If you are caught talking into a cell phone, ear piece or texting in class, your cell phone, Blackberry, I–Phone, I–Pad, I–Pod will be confiscated for two weeks. If this happens a second time, five points will be slashed off your overall grade at the end of the semester.

**Expectations:**

When you show up for class, it is as if you are showing up or work. No food or sodas will be allowed. Only water can be brought in. You will be expected to come with alert minds, neatly dressed, clean shaven etc.. Wash or wipe your hands to keep the keyboards and desks neat for students coming after you, and please have an early lunch or a hearty breakfast and come refreshed because the class exercise sessions will be rigorous and will proceed at a fast clip. If you have not read
the assigned chapters you will find it hard to follow the pace of the sessions. They will comprise.

- The Perfect Lead
- Grammar Drills
- Vocabulary Surprise
- On the Spot News Coverage in Class, Inverted Pyramid
- The Nut Graf Rationale
- How to Background and Research Stories, Precision, Online Tools, Archives, Useful or Specialized Websites, Listservs, Social Media, Pitfalls,
- How to Approach Sources and Interviewees
- Attribution, When and How to, Verbs of Attribution and Ground Rules etc..
- Active Use of Dialogue or Voice in a Feature
- How to Streamline a Theme and Outline or Section a Story
- Transitions and the Kicker, when Warranted.
- Rewriting, Rewriting, Rewriting!!

**Course Assignments:**

- Four ARTICLES

The first two will be reported by all and discussed collectively in class as a learning experience to learn about news value, i.e. news instincts or a nose for news and snap reporting decisions and background checks.

A Live Press Conference or Panel Discussion Involving More than One Speaker
Disaster Coverage and its Aftermath and its Elements

The other two can be selected from any of the following areas.

Neighborhood Beat—Any Personality, Business, Artisan, Fixture (Barber, Baker, Tailor, Cobbler, Falafel Stand, Darning Shop, Book Store, Spices or Green Grocer, Newspaper Delivery Boy, Neighborhood Taxi, Pet Store, Butcher, Sweet Shop, Notary Public..Accent on Daily Life)—or a Walkabout Story of a Neighborhood or Street.

Cultural Heritage Issue

An Educational Theme, Traffic, Mental Illness Issues

A Cultural Exhibition or Performance, Theater, Dance, Art, Fashion

Environmental Problem—Sewage, Garbage, Flooding, Seashore, Green Spaces, Urban Sprawl

Local Gender Concerns, Advances and Issues

Parking Meters in Beirut

Gyms/Spas/Sports Trends

Medical Tourism from Neighboring Countries

Sports/Women Sports

**Grading:**

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Points</th>
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<tr>
<td>Participation, Punctuality and Attendance</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dropped Quizzes and Class Exercise Drills</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Two Articles</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm</td>
<td>20</td>
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The Final Grade Will Be Out of the Total Divided by Two to Yield the Average.

Grading Rubric:

Quizzes 10 pts/2 Articles 20 pts F.Exam 35
Writing Rubric: Spelling 2 Quotes & Attribution 4
Grammar 2 Grammar 4
Style 2 Spelling & Punctuation 4
Vocab 2 Style & Vocab 4
Deadline 2 Deadline & Organization 4
Enterprise Bonus Points and Rubric Categories Subject to Change

Midterm 20 pt