

Fall 2018

# ENG 339-HM1: Practical Journalism

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“I saw stories everywhere. At dinner parties, I would leave with two or three story ideas. Every phone conversation, every movie or play, every walk down the street or trip on the subway brimmed with possibilities. I wrote down every idea that occurred to me, on scraps of paper that I stuffed into my jacket pockets. When I arrived at the office, I would empty my overflowing pockets and sort through the scraps.”

**Arthur Gelb**, former *New York Times* managing editor  
reflecting on his days as deputy metro editor

## English 339: Practical Journalism

Instructor: Miriam Ascarelli

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Office hours: 11:30-1 p.m. Monday and Wednesday or by appointment

### Course description:

This course offers a look into the news eco-system and how journalists practice their craft. Assignments focus on news and feature writing, interviewing, and editing. Students will also learn about how today’s technology is affecting the way news is being delivered and is creating new story-telling techniques. However, while there is no doubt that journalism is changing, its primary purpose still endures. That purpose, as Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write in their book *The Elements of Journalism*, is “to provide citizens with the information they need to be self-governing.” Learning to find and report stories that are relevant to our local audience is at the heart of this course.

One note: This is a journalism class, and by definition, news is not neat and tidy. It is a process of constant learning and adaptation. Expect surprises and be prepared to roll with them.

**Honors credit:** Those taking this course for honors credit will be expected to demonstrate an exemplary level of engagement within the class. In order to derive maximal educational value from the course, students will be expected, for example, to take on leadership roles in class activities, to show initiative in bringing in non-assigned (i.e., extracurricular) materials, and to engage in both independent and collaborative research. Students in Honors courses should also provide evidence of collaboration and engagement with their fellow classmates, whether in person or virtually. **Honors students will also be required to submit at least one story to The Vector, though it will be up to The Vector editors to decide whether or not to publish it.**

**Extra credit opportunity: Participation in the Center for Cooperative Media’s Open Newsroom coverage of the mid-term elections at Montclair State on election night (Tues., Nov. 6).** I’ll keep you posted on the details as they become available, but the event generally runs from about 6 p.m. until all the votes are counted. Historically, participants work with the statewide news site NJSpotlight.com to continuously update election results from all of New Jersey’s 21 counties in order to fill out an election map that is published in real time. It’s always a lot of fun to be in a newsroom on election night!

### Course objectives:

- To deconstruct the work of professional journalists in order to better understand how reporters find stories and verify and collect information;
- To learn how to report and write basic news and feature stories;
- To get an overview of journalism ethics;
- To gain insight into issues facing journalism today, including how the First Amendment impacts today's media.

### Texts:

- Freedman, Samuel G. *Letters to a Young Journalist* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011. A copy of this book will also be available on the reserve shelf at Van Houten Library.
- *The New York Times*; to get a free subscription to *The New York Times* using your NJIT ID, go here: <http://ezmyaccount.nytimes.com.libdb.njit.edu:8888/grouppass>
- The American Press Institute's "Journalism Essentials"  
(<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/>)
- Other readings will be posted on Moodle or handed out by the instructor.

### Grading

Quizzes (there will be 2 or 3): 20 percent

Homework: 20 percent

Original reporting assignments: 50 percent. (There will be three reporting assignments. These assignments include not just the final piece, but also pre-reporting background reports, story pitches, emailed interview requests to sources, and drafts – all of which lay the groundwork for the story.)

Class showcase presentation and reflection piece: 10 percent

**Final Grades:** A = 90 – 100      B+ = 87 – 89      B = 80 – 86      C+ = 77 – 79      C = 70  
– 76      D = 60 – 69      F = 0 – 59

**Attendance policy:** Attendance is critical to your success in this class. Participation in in-class activities, discussions, and workshops will contribute to your knowledge, ability, and performance. Participation cannot be demonstrated by chronic absences or sickness, similar to the professional world. At a minimum, this means showing up on time, being prepared, and contributing to class discussions. Your level of engagement with the material will subsequently impact how much you get from the class.

Four absences or more will result in the automatic lowering of your grade by one letter grade. Seven or more absences will result in automatic failure in the course. Chronic tardiness will result in the lowering of your grade. (Two lates = 1 absence.)

**Homework:** homework will be graded on a 4-point scale; late homework will be automatically be downgraded to a grade of a 2 or lower. You have until the class period after the original due date to turn it in. Anything later will not be accepted.

Late reporting assignments will also be automatically downgraded. **Reporting assignments** that are more than one week late will not be accepted.

**Academic integrity:** Academic integrity and honesty are of paramount importance. Any violations will be brought to the immediate attention of the Dean of Students. This includes plagiarism (representing another's writing as your own.)

**Please keep copies of all assignments (with grades and comments attached, if applicable)**

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### Rubric for grading homework

Grade of 4	Shows insight and is well written (effective vocabulary, varied sentence structure, strong control of grammar and usage); fulfills assignment requirements; turned in on time.
Grade of 3	Written clearly and logically, but there may be some minor lapses in grammar and logic; fulfills assignment requirements; turned in on time.
Grade of 2	Meets minimum requirements; expresses ideas in a manner that can be understood, but there are problems with grammar and usage.
Grade of 1	Does not meet requirements; confusing or unclear writing.
Grade of 0	Failed to turn in assignment

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### **Class schedule**

*Subject to change*

Week 1: Intro: what is journalism? (Reading: American Press Institute's "Journalism Essentials," begin NYT story journal)

Week 2: Misinformation in the news ecosystem: the importance of critical thinking and news literacy (Readings by Claire Wardle & Michael Schudson + library workshop)

Week 3: What is News? Readings: Freedman, pages 1-20 + materials on ledes, reporting and story structure will be provided by instructor; readings on the free press (to be posted on Moodle); start opinion-page journal

Week 4: Opinion-page journal due; in-class small group pre-reporting research (likely on mid-term elections); quiz #1; Freedman ("Temperament," pages 20-47)

Week 5: Writing the basic news story (Rich); Freedman ("Reporting," pages 47-87)

Week 6: Story #1: research, reporting and drafting; Freedman ("Writing," pages, 87-133)

Week 7: Story #1 due; quiz #2

Week 8: Story ideas & brainstorming; story pitch due

Week 9: Background report for story #2

Week 10: Reporting and writing story #2

Week 11-14: Small-group conferences on story #3; *Shattered Glass* (film) assignment

Week 15: Class story showcase; written reflection due

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## A Student Journalist's Code of Ethics

*Note: This document, from the San Francisco State Dept. of Journalism, is an excellent summary of do's and don'ts that are applicable to any journalism student anywhere in the country.*

### What to do:

- **Be professional.** Always represent yourself as a [New Jersey Institute of Technology] journalism student, particularly before an interview. This can be tricky in social situations where conversation is casual. There have been instances when people have revealed things not realizing they were speaking to a journalist. If such a situation occurs and what's revealed to you may be important for a story, tell the person who you are and that you want to use the information in a story, and make sure that person has agreed to an interview. Remember you are representing not only yourself, but also the department. Make us look good.
- **Dress appropriately when on assignment.** A guide to use is dress as your interviewee will dress -- business attire if you're interviewing a business person or public official, more casual clothing in a less formal setting.
- **Always strive for accuracy and fairness.** It is difficult to be completely unbiased, but your safeguard against bias is checking with a variety of sources. Get outside of your circle and make sure you talk to people other than the usually cited experts or sources. Look for the shades of gray, for those are usually the most interesting places to dig into a subject. Go out of your way to check, then check again, then check one more time.
- **Ask, don't assume.** Don't be afraid to ask what may seem to be an "obvious") question. Journalists can sometimes get into trouble because they assume rather than ask. Better to ask than to print or produce the wrong information.
- **Correct your errors.** We all make mistakes, but the best journalists admit to them and correct them publicly. Check with your professor to find out how best to proceed.
- **Expose injustice, and give voice to those who rarely have one.** This is the motto of some of the best journalists in the profession.

- **Be careful about pitching the same story** to multiple publications or classes unless it's clear such a practice is allowed. When in doubt, ask your professor or editor.

#### **What not to do:**

- **Do not fabricate anything.** If you do, ultimately you will be caught and the fall will be mighty and great. If you are caught, you will receive an F on the assignment. But worse than that, such behavior will call suspicion on all of your work and you will be tainted as a liar and a fake. Usually people get themselves in these situations because they are unprepared and deadline pressure weighs on them. Don't corner yourself.
  - **Prepare for interviews ahead of time.** Do your research ahead of time. Locate sources ahead of time. If you have trouble with any of these things, faculty are ready and happy to help.
  - **Do not plagiarize.** This is another self -destructive path because you will get caught. Assignments found to have copied work without citation of the source will receive an F. But again, if you are caught, you have made an unattractive reputation for yourself. People get themselves in this situation for a variety of reasons. Sometimes students) think it's OK to copy and paste from the Internet if it's common knowledge. The best practice to follow: Whenever in doubt, cite the source and if you want some guidance, ask your professor.
  - **Do not cheat.** We expect academic honesty. Check with [me] about what exercises and assignments are for your eyes only.
  - **Avoid conflicts of interest.** These conflicts include but are not limited to preparing journalism assignments on subjects or institutions in which the student has a financial, family, or personal involvement, or a personal stake in the outcome. Do not become part of the story. In some cases the appearance of a conflict is just as problematic as an actual conflict of interest. When in doubt, ask your professor. Disclose all potential conflicts to your professor or editor before you begin your assignment.
  - **Do not engage in conduct unbecoming** of the department during class, while online or while on assignment. Such misconduct includes but is not limited to disruptive behavior, physical or verbal abuse, property damage, theft, lewd or obscene behavior, and discrimination on the basis of race, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation or place of origin.
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