# Feature Writing

**Journalism 4326–Section 001 | Fall 2014**

Tues. & Thurs., 2-3:20 p.m. Room TBA

**Instructor: Dr. Erika Pribanic-Smith**
**Office:** 2114 Fine Arts Building **Cell Phone:** 205-239-5973
**Hours:** TBA **Email:** epsmith@uta.edu

Note: Because of other department and university duties, office hours occasionally will be cancelled. Cancellations will be posted on the office door and, when possible, announced in class and/or via email.

**Prerequisite:** Completion of JOUR 2346 with grade of C (2.0/4.0 scale) or higher.

**Course Description:**
Students will develop and practice the writing and reporting skills required for creating publishable feature stories, such as developing story ideas, targeting audiences and publications, interviewing sources, and using descriptive, narrative and storytelling techniques.

**Learning Goals and Objectives:**

The following learning goals and objectives have been set for students in this class and all classes in the journalism sequence:

- Discuss the concepts, ideas and foundation of freedom of speech and press, including the role media play in today's society.
- Conduct research while using ethical and legal principles to produce quality work.
- Identify the theories and principles of reporting for the media, including the presentation of information via images, graphics, visual communication and the written word.
- Discuss today's news and information disseminated through various local and national media.
- Demonstrate creative, critical and independent thinking to interview sources, conduct research and write unbiased media stories.
- Discuss fundamental numerical and statistical concepts and demonstrate them in the writing and reporting of articles.
- Operate basic communication technology and software.
- Demonstrate correct Associated Press style and grammar when reporting and writing articles, and edit stories utilizing journalistic style, ethics and principles.
- Write quality journalistic stories, specifically news and feature stories, while working under deadlines.
- Critique their own work and the works of others according to the principles of accuracy, fairness, clarity, style and grammatical correctness.

**Textbook and Materials:**

- *Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual* (latest edition)
- Additional readings as assigned and by the instructor (linked on the syllabus schedule)

**Blackboard:**
All course assignments will be submitted on Blackboard (http://elearn.uta.edu). Assignments not posted to the proper slot will not be graded, and late penalties will apply until submitted correctly.

The instructor also will post course Power Points to Blackboard in advance of each class, but students are encouraged to take notes in class as well. All course documents are posted to Blackboard for your reference.

All grades for individual course assignments, including in-class work, will be posted to Blackboard, and course averages will be posted there periodically. Please log in regularly to check grades and announcements. No grade information will be emailed. Students are expected to keep track of their performance throughout the semester on Blackboard and seek guidance if their grade drops below satisfactory levels.

## Course Policies

**Grade Calculation:**

| Assignment | % of grade |
|---|---|
| Out-of-class assignments (Second drafts, 10%; Final, 20%) | 30 |
| In-class activities/attendance | 30 |
| Peer critiques | 20 |
| Editorial meetings | 10 |
| Story pitches | 10 |

**Grading scale**
A – 90-100 percent
B – 80-89 percent
C – 70-79 percent
D – 60-69 percent
F – below 60 percent

***Out-of-class assignments*.** Students will have three story assignments to complete outside of class. The instructor will post on Blackboard assignment sheets and rubrics detailing the specific requirements and assessment structure for each assignment. We will go over them thoroughly in class.

Writing assignments for this course will work much like a freelance assignment at a professional publication. To that end, students will submit THREE drafts of each assignment.

- *First draft*. The instructor will not grade the first draft; instead, fellow students will critique them (see below). All freelance writers should have a fresh pair of eyes examine their work (a friend, family member or colleague) before submitting to an editor for the first time. We will accomplish this step in class (although students are welcome and encouraged to have others read their work even before submitting the first draft for class).

  In addition to having someone check your writing to make sure it meets assignment objectives, the critiques give you an opportunity to explore writing examples that you can learn from (both what to do and what not to do). Although first drafts will not be graded, students who do not submit **COMPLETE** drafts will not be given other students' work to critique, and critiques account for 20 percent of the final grade. Because we will critique in class on the due date, FIRST DRAFTS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED LATE.

- *Second draft*. The instructor will evaluate the second draft for content requirements only. Up to 10 mechanical errors will be pointed out, but no points will be deducted for them on this draft.

  HOWEVER, if the instructor marks 10 spelling, grammar and/or style errors in that draft, the student will be required to visit the AP, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation Lab for assistance with the final draft. When the student submits the final draft, he/she must also submit a form signed and dated by the lab instructor; the assignment will not be graded until the form is submitted, and regular late penalties will apply.

  The second-draft grades will comprise 10 percent of each student's final course average.

- Final drafts will be evaluated both for content and mechanics and will comprise 20 percent of the student's final course average. If students fail to make recommended changes between the second and final drafts, **they should expect their final draft grade to be lower than the second draft grade**.

***In-class activities/attendance*.** This course will be conducted as a seminar/workshop, requiring active participation from all students. A portion of students' learning will occur through their own processing of reading material and discussion of these materials with their peers.

Again, reading other people's work helps us explore feature writing and learn what we like (to emulate) and don't like (to avoid). Discussing these works in class will give students a deeper understanding of the individual stories and of feature-writing concepts. Students are expected to read the stories assigned for discussion (signaled in red type on the schedule) BEFORE class in order to participate. The instructor will post in Blackboard specific questions and concepts to keep in mind while reading.

Participation in these discussions will be evaluated based on asking insightful questions and contributing informed, thoughtful comments. Students who fail to attend class or who arrive late will have points DEDUCTED from this grade at the end of the term. [See attendance policy, below.]

***Peer critiques*.** Another way that students will analyze other people's writing is by critiquing each others' out-of-class story assignments. Specific questions to be answered in each critique will be provided when the student receives the story to be analyzed.

It is important to note that **students who do not submit their own writing assignments will not be given another student's assignment to critique**. Also, **students who arrive more than five minutes late on a critique day will not be given assignments to critique**.

Other arrangements will be made for students who miss a peer critique day due to an excusable absence, if the student strictly follows the procedure for excusing an absence. Students MAY NOT TAKE A FREE UNEXCUSED ABSENCE ON A PEER CRITIQUE DAY. Students who miss a critique class due to an unexcused absence or who are not assigned stories to critique due to their tardiness or failure to submit an assignment will take a 0 on that critique. Peer critiques are worth 20 percent of the student's final grade.

***Editorial meetings.*** The instructor aims to make the feature writing experience similar to the experience of working with an editor at a professional publication as a freelance writer. Therefore, for each out-of-class assignment, each student will have a one-on-one meeting with the instructor to discuss the student's reporting progress, troubleshoot reporting issues, and strategize on writing style/story structure.

Students will sign up for meeting times (which are scheduled during class time) and are expected to arrive on time. Meetings are mandatory. Failure to attend a scheduled editorial meeting, with the exception of excusable reasons outlined below the attendance policy, will result in both an absence and a 0 for the meeting. Students MAY NOT TAKE A FREE UNEXCUSED ABSENCE ON AN EDITORIAL MEETING DAY.

Editorial meetings are worth 10 percent of the student's final grade.

***Story pitches.*** Students will submit formal pitch letters for all out-of-class writing assignments, like they would if proposing a freelance article to a professional publication. Pitch letters must be submitted in proper business letter format. A sample letter is posted on Blackboard for reference, and students will have an opportunity to write a practice pitch in class. Pitches are worth 10 percent of the final grade.

Before crafting the letter, the student must decide on a target PROFESSIONAL publication where the story would be a good fit and identify a specific editor at that publication to whom the letter should be addressed.

Pitch letters must include all of the following components:

a) One paragraph of 2-4 sentences explaining the story idea.
b) An explanation of why the student is the best person to write the proposed story.
c) A discussion of people the student could speak to as sources for the story and why those people would be the best sources for that story.
d) A rough outline of what the story might entail.
e) An explanation of why the target publication would be the best publication for a story on the suggested topic and why the target audience would want to read the story.

***Attendance*:**

Attendance will be taken each day. For each unexcused absence (beyond one freebie for the term), students will have one full percentage point deducted from the in-class assignment/attendance grade (up to a total of 10 percent). STUDENTS MUST PRESENT APPROPRIATE DOCUMENTATION **UPON RETURNING TO CLASS** FOR THEIR ABSENCES TO BE EXCUSED (see below).

Students MAY NOT TAKE A FREE UNEXCUSED ABSENCE ON A PEER CRITIQUE OR EDITORIAL MEETING DAY.

**Keep in mind that an excused absence (or free unexcused absence) does NOT excuse the student from work completed that day**. It is the student's responsibility to check Blackboard for Power Points and in-class assignments completed during the absence. Failure to submit makeup work will result in a 0. Students should consult the instructor upon returning to class to set a deadline for makeup work.

Tardiness will not be tolerated. **STUDENTS WHO ARE MORE THAN FIVE MINUTES TARDY WILL BE COUNTED ABSENT for the attendance grade** but should remain in class to complete that day's work.

***Excused absences*:**

Students may be excused from class with proper documentation for the following reasons:

- ***Religious holidays*.** A memo MUST BE TURNED IN BEFORE the holiday to count as an excused absence.
- ***Documented medical excuses*** (a doctor's note or prescription). This may include a documented medical excuse for a family member or pet.
- ***Documented legal excuses*** such as a jury duty notice or court summons.
- ***Death in the family***. Students must provide a funeral program and the phone number of the funeral home for verification. Unfortunately, a few unscrupulous students in the past have forged these documents, so the instructor has to have the phone number to call and verify.
- ***Car accidents*.** Students must submit a copy of the report filed with the police department.
- ***Course-related activities for other university classes***. Students must provide a dated letter of request from the instructor of the conflicting class BEFORE the absence.
- ***University competitive events*** (athletes, not fans). Students will need to submit a letter from the coach or athletic department BEFORE the absence.
- ***Paid employment excuse***. The student's supervisor must request the absence in a signed letter on business letterhead. Students may have only ONE of these during the semester, and it needs to be cleared BEFORE the absence.
- ***Job/internship interview***. Students must turn in a memo BEFORE the absence. A business card or letter on company letterhead confirming the interview must be turned in as well (this can be submitted after the absence). Students may only have ONE of these during the semester.

**Late work:** Students are expected to adhere to deadlines as posted on the course syllabus, assignment sheets, and Blackboard. An assignment due at 5 p.m. that is submitted between 5:01 p.m. on the due date and 5 p.m. the following day will have 10 percent deducted. Twenty percent will be deducted for assignments submitted between 5:01 p.m. on the second day and 5 p.m. on the third day. **An out-of-class assignment that is more than 48 hours late (including weekends) without prior permission will not be graded, and the student will receive a zero**.

Because we will critique in class on the due date, FIRST DRAFTS WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED LATE. The late work penalty will apply to second drafts, but remember that the instructor has limited time to grade and return second drafts to give students enough time to complete their final drafts. Late second drafts therefore usually result in late final drafts, so please make every effort to submit all work on time.

Because assignments are submitted electronically, students are expected to submit assignments even if they will not attend class on the due date. If **extreme circumstances** prevent a student from completing an assignment on time, the student must request an extension AHEAD OF TIME if at all possible and present documentation as outlined for absences (above).

Note that only **unexpected emergencies (such as a death, grave illness or debilitating injury)** will excuse a student from completing an assignment on time; because of the length of time students are given to complete assignments, they should plan accordingly for religious, personal or professional obligations that may arise around the time that an assignment is due.

Computer and Internet malfunctions will NOT be given consideration for late assignments. Students should give themselves plenty of time to complete assignments so that they may regroup in the wake of a technological snafu.

**Grading procedures:**

Effective media writing requires objectivity, credible sources, and careful attention to spelling, grammar, AP style, and factual accuracy.

On the second and final drafts of each out-of-class writing assignment, the instructor will assign a basic content grade based on requirements spelled out in advance. Each writing assignment handout will include a rubric that explains exactly how the instructor will grade that assignment.

On the final draft only, points for spelling, grammatical, stylistic, and factual errors will be deducted from the content grade as follows:

- Spelling – 1 percentage point per error (2 percent for name misspellings)
- Grammar – 1 percentage point per error
- AP Style – 1/2 percentage point per error
- Fact errors – 5 percentage points per error

Mechanical errors will not be deducted on the second draft, although the instructor will mark up to 10 of them for the student to correct. If the instructor marks 10 errors, the student will be required to visit the AP, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation Lab for assistance with the final draft. When the student submits the final draft, he/she must also submit a form signed and dated by the lab instructor; the assignment will not be graded until the form is submitted, and regular late penalties will apply.

**A note on sources:** Although they may be used for background in stories, the following do NOT count as official sources: information that has been printed in books, newsletters, magazines, newspapers, or the Internet, or information that has been broadcast on television or the radio.

**Work Expectations:** This course is intensive. Students often will be working on several projects and/or homework assignments at the same time in addition to keeping up with readings for class.

Effective communication requires practice, so students can expect to write every week (if not every day) and to complete both out-of-class and in-class assignments. Students will need to begin their projects in advance and not start working on them the night before they are due. If students are struggling with the material or the workload, they should see the instructor during office hours to discuss it.

Students will be provided some class time (noted as “Workshop” in the syllabus schedule) to work on reporting and writing their out-of-class stories, but students also should expect to spend some out-of-class time working on these assignments.

Being that this is a three-hour course, a good rule of thumb is to allot nine hours of time each week to out-of-class preparations for this course. This includes but is not limited to reading in advance of class discussions, completing homework assignments, and reporting and writing stories.

**Behavior expectations:**
Students are expected to remain focused on the task at hand for the duration of class each day.

**Students will be asked to leave the class if they are engaging in any of the following activities:**

- Using cellphones or Smartphones for ANY reason. Keep it silenced and in your pocket/bag for the duration of class.
- Speaking out of turn.
- Studying or working on assignments for other classes.
- Reading any sort of print media (unless required to do so for a lab activity).
- Utilizing the computer for any reason other than in-class assignments.
    - When the class is not working on an assignment, keep the monitor off and mouse upside down.
    - When the class IS working on an assignment, do not use the computer to check email or social media, surf the Web, IM, or anything else unrelated to the assignment.

**Students who are asked to leave will be counted as absent for that day (no freebie allowed) and will not be given an opportunity to make up missed work**.

## Department, College, and University Policies

**Drop Policy:** Students may drop or swap (adding and dropping a class concurrently) classes through self-service in MyMav from the beginning of the registration period through the late registration period. After the late registration period, students must see their academic advisor to drop a class or withdraw. Undeclared students must see an advisor in the University Advising Center. Drops can continue through a point two-thirds of the way through the term or session, as noted in the syllabus schedule. It is the student's responsibility to officially withdraw if they do not plan to attend after registering. **Students will not be automatically dropped for non-attendance**. Repayment of certain types of financial aid administered through the University may be required as the result of dropping classes or withdrawing. For more information, contact the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships (http://wweb.uta.edu/ses/fao).

**Americans with Disabilities Act:** The University of Texas at Arlington is on record as being committed to both the spirit and letter of all federal equal opportunity legislation, including the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)*. All instructors at UT Arlington are required by law to provide "reasonable accommodations" to students with disabilities, so as not to discriminate on the basis of that disability. Any student requiring an accommodation for this course must provide the instructor with official documentation in the form of a letter certified by the staff in the Office for Students with Disabilities, University Hall 102. Only those students who have officially documented a need for an accommodation will have their request honored. Information regarding diagnostic criteria and policies for obtaining disability-based academic accommodations can be found at www.uta.edu/disability or by calling the Office for Students with Disabilities at (817) 272-3364.

**Student Support Services**: UT Arlington provides a variety of resources and programs designed to help students develop academic skills, deal with personal situations, and better understand concepts and information related to their courses. Resources include tutoring, major-based learning centers, developmental education, advising and mentoring, personal counseling, and federally funded programs. For individualized referrals, students may visit the reception desk at University College (Ransom Hall), call the Maverick Resource Hotline at 817-272-6107, send a message to resources@uta.edu, or view the information at www.uta.edu/resources.

**Electronic Communication:** UT Arlington has adopted MavMail as its official means to communicate with students about important deadlines and events, as well as to transact university-related business regarding financial aid, tuition, grades, graduation, etc. All students are assigned a MavMail account and are responsible for checking the inbox regularly. There is no additional charge to students for using this account, which remains active even after graduation. Information about activating and using MavMail is available at http://www.uta.edu/oit/cs/email/mavmail.php.

**Student Feedback Survey:** At the end of each term, students enrolled in classes categorized as lecture, seminar, or laboratory shall be directed to complete a Student Feedback Survey (SFS). Instructions on how to access the SFS for this course will be sent directly to each student through MavMail approximately 10 days before the end of the term. Each student's feedback enters the SFS database anonymously and is aggregated with that of other students enrolled in the course. UT Arlington's effort to solicit, gather, tabulate, and publish student feedback is required by state law; students are strongly urged to participate. For more information, visit http://www.uta.edu/sfs.

**Final Review Week:** A period of five class days prior to the first day of final examinations in the long sessions shall be designated as Final Review Week. The purpose of this week is to allow students sufficient time to prepare for final examinations. During this week, there shall be no scheduled activities such as required field trips or performances; and no instructor shall assign any themes, research problems or exercises of similar scope that have a completion date during or following this week *unless specified in the class syllabus*. During Final Review Week, an instructor shall not give any examinations constituting 10% or more of the final grade, except makeup tests and laboratory examinations. In addition, no instructor shall give any portion of the final examination during Final Review Week. During this week, classes are held as scheduled. In addition, instructors are not required to limit content to topics that have been previously covered; they may introduce new concepts as appropriate.

**Academic Integrity:** All students enrolled in this course are expected to adhere to the UT Arlington Honor Code:

*I pledge, on my honor, to uphold UT Arlington's tradition of academic integrity, a tradition that values hard work and honest effort in the pursuit of academic excellence.*

*I promise that I will submit only work that I personally create or contribute to group collaborations, and I will appropriately reference any work from other sources. I will follow the highest standards of integrity and uphold the spirit of the Honor Code.*

Instructors may employ the Honor Code as they see fit in their courses, including (but not limited to) having students acknowledge the honor code as part of an examination or requiring students to incorporate the honor code into any work submitted. Per UT System *Regents' Rule* 50101, §2.2, suspected violations of university's standards for academic integrity (including the Honor Code) will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. Violators will be disciplined in accordance with University policy, which may result in the student's suspension or expulsion from the University.

Furthermore, students are expected to model the honest and ethical behavior in this course that they would be expected to follow as professional communicators. In addition to examples of cheating, plagiarism and collusion described in the student handbook, the following behaviors in this class also constitute academic dishonesty:

- Making up sources, information or quotes except as explicitly specified for certain class assignments
- Failing to properly attribute quotes and ideas to their sources
- Asking someone to lie about a student interviewing him or her
- Getting other people to write class assignments
- Lying to a source to get information
- Copying a published story or using information from a published news account, Web page, database, research paper or press release without proper attribution
- Turning in a story students already have published or written for another class