

**Course Title:** Investigative Reporting

**Course Number and Section:** MCOM 4634 Section 01

**Credit Hours:** 3

**Semester/Year:** Fall 2017

**Class location:** Online/Blackboard

**Class Meeting Time:** N/A

**Huntsville Office:** Dan Rather Communications Building, RM 122

**The Woodlands Center Office:** RM 310

**Office hours:** Tuesday (Huntsville) 10:30 a.m. to noon

Friday (TWC) 2 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

By appointment or Blackboard Instant Messenger

**Professor's Contact information:** Robin Johnson, Ph.D. » robin.johnson@shsu.edu » Office phone: 936-294-1499

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Investigative reporting has led to changes in policy, new laws, changes to industry practices, consumer protections, and thrown plenty of people out of power and sometimes into prison. Investigative reporting can be as small as a single story based on a set of files that reveals a misdeed or injustice. It can also be large scale with databases of information, multiple team members and several years of digging, interviewing and writing.

This course is designed to give you the tools, examples and strategies you need to carry out an investigative reporting project of your own. Students will examine case studies of investigative stories and develop an investigative story. You will learn the tips and techniques on how to investigate individuals; the branches of government; law enforcement and the justice system; education; nonprofits and corporations; the environment, entertainment and sports; and dig up primary and secondary sources and documents.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to provide you with:

- The steps necessary to conceive, manage and carry out an investigative reporting project
- Examples of investigative stories from radio, television, print and online and the techniques the journalists used to make them successful
- Ways to protect and interview sources
- Strategies for conducting research online, through databases and through Freedom of Information requests

## REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

Investigative Reporting: From premise to publication, by Marcy Burstiner. Holcomb Hathaway, 2009.

Supplemental readings and audio/video will be available through the course's online Blackboard site. Check the syllabus' calendar for further information.

## REQUIRED RESOURCES

Access to Microsoft Excel or a similar spreadsheet program

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

### *How the class is organized*

The course is broken up into Case Studies, Exercises, Assignments and Lectures (see below for grade weights). Each week of the semester has a course link on Blackboard, and you can access the Case Studies, Exercises, Assignments and Lectures through their individual links or the weekly links.

**There are due dates for each case study, exercise and assignment throughout the semester. Late submissions will have 5 points deducted for each day it is late. The calendar of due dates is at the end of the syllabus and in the schedule link on Blackboard.**

**Assignments 1-4** are designed for you to:

- Assignment 1: Conduct background research for an investigative story
- Assignment 2: Find primary documents and make freedom of information requests for primary documents for the story
- Assignment 3: find people to interview for the story and develop interview questions for the story
- Assignment 4: develop a pitch for a broadcast, print or multimedia story for the story

Lectures, Case Studies and Exercises can be accessed via the Weekly links. The lectures provide practical tips, ideas, web sites and tools about specific areas of interests or supplemental information not covered in the textbook. Lectures are often used to help in completing weekly exercises or providing you with tools and tips to access information for your project assignments.

### **Grading scale**

### **Grade Weight**

A 90% and above	Case Study Responses	10%
B 80-89%	Exercises	10%
C 70-79%	Assignment 1	25%
D 60-69%	Assignment 2	25%
F 59% & below	Assignment 3	15%
	Assignment 4	15%

**E-mail** – You must be able to receive e-mail via your “@shsu.edu” account. You will be responsible for any messages you miss if you do not use this university-assigned address. Class announcements may also be posted on Blackboard.

**Deadlines** – Failure to make assigned deadlines will negatively affect grades, and persistent deadline failures will result in failing the course.

**Academic Honesty** – All students are expected to engage in all academic pursuits in a manner that is above reproach. Students are expected to maintain honesty and integrity in the academic experiences both in and out of the classroom. Any student found guilty of dishonesty in any phase of academic work will be subject to disciplinary action. The University and its official representatives may initiate disciplinary proceedings against a student accused of any form of academic dishonesty including but not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work which is to be submitted, plagiarism, collusion and the abuse of resource materials. For a complete listing of the university policy, see:

[Dean of Student's Office](#)

**Proper Classroom Demeanor/Rules of Conduct:** Students will refrain from behavior in the classroom that disrupts the learning process and, thus, impedes the mission of the university. Please turn off or mute your cellular phone and/or pager before class begins. Students are prohibited from eating in class, using tobacco products, making offensive remarks, reading newspapers, sleeping, talking with each other at inappropriate times, wearing inappropriate clothing, or engaging in any other form of distraction. Inappropriate behavior in the classroom shall result in, minimally, a directive to leave class or being reported to the Dean of Students for disciplinary action in accordance with University policy.

**Student Absences on Religious Holy Days Policy** – Section 51.911(b) of the Texas Education Code requires that an institution of higher education excuse a student from attending classes or other required activities, including examinations, for the observance of a religious holy day, including travel for that purpose. Section 51.911 (a) (2) defines a religious holy day as: “a holy day observed by a religion whose places of worship are exempt from property taxation under Section 11.20....” A student whose absence is excused under this subsection may not be penalized for that absence and shall be allowed to take an examination or complete an assignment from which the student is excused within a reasonable time after the absence. University policy 861001 provides the procedures to be followed by the student and instructor. A student desiring to absent himself/herself from a scheduled class in order to observe (a) religious holy day(s) shall present to each instructor involved a written statement concerning the religious holy day(s). The instructor will complete a form notifying the student of a reasonable timeframe in which the missed assignments and/or examinations are to be completed. For a complete listing of the university policy, see:

[http://www.shsu.edu/~vaf\\_www/aps/documents/861001.pdf](http://www.shsu.edu/~vaf_www/aps/documents/861001.pdf)

## **STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES POLICY**

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance should register with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Lee Drain Annex (telephone 936-294-3512, TDD 936-294-3786, and e-mail [disability@shsu.edu](mailto:disability@shsu.edu)). They should then make arrangements with their individual instructors so that appropriate strategies can be considered and helpful procedures can be developed to ensure that participation and achievement opportunities are not impaired.

SHSU adheres to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and guidelines with respect to providing reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. If you have a disability that may affect adversely your work in this class, then I encourage you to register with the SHSU Services for Students with Disabilities and to talk with me about how I can best help you. All disclosures of disabilities will be kept strictly confidential. NOTE: No accommodation can be made until you register with the Services for Students with Disabilities. For a complete listing of the university policy, see:

<http://www.shsu.edu/dept/academic-affairs/documents/aps/students/811006.pdf>

**Course Calendar begins on the next page.**

## Course Calendar

Week	Topics	Reading & Viewing	Assignments	Exercises
<b>Week 1</b> <b>Aug 23-27</b>	Introduction to the Investigative Reporting Online Course  How the course is organized and contacting the professor	Syllabus		
<b>Week 2</b> <b>Aug 28-Sep 3</b>	Introduction to Investigative Reporting	Burstiner, Chapter 1  Case Study 1: 60 Minutes Television Broadcast – Cleaning up Whitley County		<b>Case Study 1 due this week</b>
<b>Week 3</b> <b>Sep 4-10</b>	How to Find Story Ideas	Burstiner, Chapter 2  Lecture: Finding Story Ideas, Parts 1-5		<b>Finding story ideas exercise due this week</b>
<b>Week 4</b> <b>Sep 11-17</b>	Background Research	Burstiner, Chapter 3  Lecture: Background Research, Parts 1-3		<b>Background research exercise due this week</b>

Week	Topics	Reading & Viewing	Assignments	Exercises
<b>Week 5 Sep 18-24</b>	Background Research	Burstiner, Chapter 5  Case Study 2: This American Life Radio Broadcast – Petty Tyrant		<b>Case Study 2 due this week</b>
<b>Week 6 Sep 25-Oct 1</b>	Background Research	Lecture: Investigating the Executive Branch	<b>Assignment 1 due this week</b>	
<b>Week 7 Oct 2-8</b>	Primary documents	Burstiner, Chapter 4  Lecture: Primary Documents, Parts 1-5  Lecture: Investigating the Judiciary, Parts 1-4		<b>Public Information Exercise: Texas' Open Records Guidebook due this week</b>
<b>Week 8 Oct 9-15</b>	Primary documents	Burstiner, Chapter 8  Case Study 3: The New Yorker Print/Magazine – The Throwaways  Lecture: Investigating Law Enforcement, Parts 1-4		<b>Case Study 3 due this week</b>

Week	Topics	Reading & Viewing	Assignments	Exercises
<b>Week 9</b> <b>Oct 16-22</b>	Primary documents	Lecture: Investigating issues in Education	<b>Assignment 2 due this week</b>	
<b>Week 10</b> <b>Oct 23-29</b>	Using Data for investigations	Burstiner, Chapter 9  Lecture: Investigating the Legislature		<b>Data Exercise due this week</b>
<b>Week 11</b> <b>Oct 30-Nov 5</b>	Using Data for investigations	Burstiner, Chapter 7  Lecture: Investigating Non-profit organizations		<b>IRS Form 990 Non-profit Exercise due this week</b>
<b>Week 12</b> <b>Nov 6-12</b>	Interviewing	Burstiner, Chapter 6		

Week	Topics	Reading & Viewing	Assignments	Exercises
<b>Week 13</b> <b>Nov 13-19</b>	Interviewing	Burstiner, Chapter 13  Lecture: Investigating Sports		<b>Case Study 4 due this week</b>
<b>Week 14</b> <b>Nov 20-22</b>	Interviewing		<b>Assignment 3 due this week</b>	
<b>Week 15</b> <b>Nov 27-Dec 1</b>	Writing or Scripting the Story	Burstiner, Chapters 10-11	<b>Assignment 4 due this week</b>	